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## **Make Poverty History**

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Today I am going to try to cover a lot of ground that relates to addressing poverty in our community. In particular I am going to speak about

- some of the changes we are experiencing at a high level from governments,
- the changing nature of poverty in our community,
- what Bissell Centre is doing to help people overcome barriers to a better future, and
- I will attempt to offer some suggestions or guidance about the roles and work that can be undertaken by the faith community to address poverty and homelessness.

Before I do that, I want to speak for a bit about the type of leadership we need in order to change things for the better in our community.

I have written a lot on leadership and in fact I am working on a book called Leadership in Complex Times.

In that manuscript I share four key messages that my friend and colleague, Mark Cabaj, mentioned at a conference in 2010 about leadership. He said...

- We need leadership that acknowledges the complexity and chaos of the world in which we live.*

In order to make progress together, we have to stop ourselves from seeking simple solutions to complex problems. And we need to work together to accept and cope with the uncertainties we face in a chaotic world.

- We need leadership that is rooted in the sometimes grim reality of our day to day world, yet concurrently is able to fuel our highest aspirations and embolden us to great change.*

Dee Hock said “Time is too short and things are too bad for pessimism.” What I take from that is that we must not let the problems we face defeat us; rather we must see what is wrong in the world and muster our inspiration and courage to act on our goodness and desire to make our communities a better place for all of us.

- ☑ *We need leadership that is authentically inclusive; recognizes multiple truths in the world; and taps into our shared wisdom.*

No matter our faith or what we believe, we know there are others whose beliefs and spirituality differ from ours. Christians, Jews, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhists, Agnostics, and Atheists do share one fundamental truth: all of us our human beings with feelings, interests, ethics, values, and for the most part, we love and care and want life to be good.

Inclusive leadership means more than bringing different faiths together or ensuring we have many colours of skin gathered together. It means we must know each other, and be assertive in our desire to understand both our similarities and differences. Inclusive leadership calls to us to be prepared to learn from those who oppose our views and positions. Wisdom comes from welcoming divergent thinking in order to find a convergence of our aspirations.

- ☑ *We need leadership that is adaptive and flexible and embraces risk-taking, change and failure as opportunities for learning.*

What we did yesterday may not work today. How we identified our roles in the past may need to change if we are going to have impact in the future. In order to make transformative change in our communities, we all need to be leaders and we all need to accept that we must risk failure to succeed and hope that when we do fail, we fail forward.

I believe that each of one of us is a leader. Some of us may hold positions of leadership; most of us, however, express leadership at work, at our place of worship, among family and friends, and so forth. We do not have time to wait for the one charismatic leader to show up and mobilize our love and caring for one another. All of us, each one of you, are called to do that.

With all of this in mind, let me move on now and talk about my read on what is happening systemically in our community.

Before raising my next few points about the Alberta Government, let me say that in my life time only one person I have voted for won an election. That tells you something about my politics, but how I have voted or how I will vote in the future does not mean I should not view political actions with balance.

First let me begin with what I believe is good news. For most of my career I was among many voices that advocated to the Province to recognize poverty as a major issue, if not THE major issue facing its citizens. After so many years of frustration, former Premier Ed Stelmach led the way to initiate what became the government's ten year plan to end homelessness. We are in the fourth year of that I believe and there has been significant funding to do just that across the province, with increased resources allocated in this current budget. Premier Redford announced last fall that she is committed to reducing poverty and to eliminating child poverty. Before the budget came out I heard her speak and was pleased that she recommitted herself to all of this work.

While many of my colleagues are very critical of the budget, I want to point out the following highlights:

- AISH benefits are maintained, with a 4.4-per-cent increase in program funding to address caseload growth. This comes on the heels of a significant increase in the benefit to recipients a year or so earlier.
- The Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD) program will receive a \$5.5-million increase as part of a transition to a new service delivery system.
- Child Intervention will see an increase of nearly \$16 million, including a \$7 million increase for foster care support that will fund more than 5,400 foster child placements.
- Child care subsidies for lower-income families will be maintained with a \$6.7 million increase, as will family support for children with disabilities with a \$6 million increase reflecting caseload growth.
- Funding for homelessness support is \$111 million, an increase of \$1.2 million, which will help house about 1,800 homeless Albertans this year, and fund more than 3,200 spaces in emergency and transition shelters.
- Initiatives for early intervention and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder will receive \$89 million
- Budget 2013 provides an additional \$67.7 million in ongoing funding to contracted agencies to attract and retain qualified staff. As part of this strategy, funding will be provided to support salary increases for contracted agency workers.
- Human Services also anticipates saving through the use of generic drugs related to the health benefits portion of income supports and the AISH program.
- New funding of \$10 million per year will be invested in Métis settlements

- The government is maintaining funding for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, Community Initiative and Community Facility Enhancement grants and other programs that have consistently had a strong impact on Alberta communities.

Yes, there are things in the budget that cause me concern, such as the cuts to education, freezing teacher's salaries, and an insufficient increase to health care. However, what concerns me about those who lambast the government's budget is that too often there is no recognition of the positive hard choices that have been made and that citizens should, I suggest, recognize.

I should mention that I am encouraged by the Government's launch of its Social Policy Framework and my sense that it is serious about implementing it.

However, as a professional who made his living for years helping nonprofits anticipate trends and craft change within their organizations, here is what I see that concerns me.

A declining participation in the workforce and the aging of the population will significantly impact the government's ability to generate tax revenue while being faced with escalating costs of health care and support services for seniors.

I believe that government funding of the non-profit sector will start to flatten and likely decline over the next 10 to 15 years, which will impact many smaller organizations who are totally dependent on government support. If there is not a change in this direction, many small organizations will close. We should be wary of thinking that small, niche organizations, are not needed in our lives.

In order to strengthen the workforce and the economy, our province will have to increase immigration. Given that the majority of immigrants today are visible minorities and often have language barriers and cultural realities that challenge their participation, we will face challenges of racism and prejudice unless more resource are invested in supporting immigration.

While I applaud the government's current support to end homelessness and address poverty, its efforts to prevent such personal and community problems is at best small and ultimately having insufficient effect.

Half of Canadians are living pay check to pay check. This suggests that we have a significant population of economically vulnerable citizens, the majority of whom do not yet show up as living below the poverty line. The question is: when will we experience the tipping point?

This vulnerability is due to dramatic increases in the cost of living accompanied by very small gains in income.

Here are some examples for Edmonton:

Between 2000 and 2010, a nutritious food basket for a family of four increased \$69.99 per week, rising to \$196.02 per week.

From 2000 to 2011, average rents increased as follows:

- Bachelor Suite - from \$421 to \$731, (+ 73.6%)
- 1 – Bedroom - from \$489 to \$842 (+72.2%)
- 2- Bedrooms - from \$601 to \$1,029 (+71.2%)
- 3- Bedrooms- from \$670 to \$1,224 (+82.7%)

One in six children in Edmonton is poor. That's five kids in a classroom of 30 and many more are living in families on the edge of being poor or homeless.

*Poverty means a genuine deprivation of life's basic necessities. It means that people cannot obtain a nutritious diet, warm, dry and safe housing, clean clothing appropriate to climate, sufficient personal hygiene items and health care. The absence of one or more of these "necessities" compromises long term physical well-being.*

The above quote from Christopher Sarlo explains poverty from a "needs" point of view. It suggests, and I agree, there is a basic level of need that people must have met in order to live healthy lives.

However, there is more to poverty than the absence of fulfilling food, clothing, and shelter needs. Poverty also impacts people's ability and capacity to participate in community life – socially and economically.

Living in poverty is typically an exhausting, full-time endeavor of survival. Most spend each day seeking out food and a safe place to stay. Those who have housing struggle to keep it. Their kids go without. Spouses struggle with the stress of balancing their bills.

Often those who are employed subsist on low wages earned from insecure employment or from part-time work. If a car breaks down, if a child becomes ill, or some other crisis occurs that means taking off from work, that day's income is lost or worse, the job itself.

People living with poverty do not have an influential voice. They are not organized. They are not asked to sit on government or community committees and task forces looking into the economy or the minimum wage, or even what society might do about poverty.

They are not invited to tables of influence and if they were, their capacity to participate would be thwarted by lack of transportation or child care or their own sense of “not belonging.”

We know that poverty costs society billions of dollars. There are many reports about this. In fact we seem to be studying this over and over while poverty continues to escalate as a problem.

When Bissell Centre houses a chronically homeless person in our Housing First program, it costs society one-third of what it costs to support a homeless person on the street. That’s about \$70,000 in annual savings. This year we will house 260 such individuals, with a cost savings in excess of 18 million dollars.

But here’s the sad part of that success. At Bissell Centre, we turn away more people than we are funded to house in this program. Despite our progress at Bissell Centre and those who also deliver Housing First programs, we can’t keep up.

Bob McKeon asked me to talk about the changing faces of poverty. In some ways it hasn’t changed much at all.

- 40% of single parents are poor
- As mentioned previously, one in six children are poor in Edmonton, higher than the provincial average.
- 40% of disabled people living in poverty
- It’s the same percentage for newcomers to Canada.
- Unemployment rates for the disabled, newcomers, Aboriginal people, and young people are typically in double digits.

What will this picture look like down the road?

Likely more senior citizens will join the ranks of the poor, although this has been curtailed somewhat because of benefits available to senior citizens. The number of working poor will increase as will the poverty rates for newcomers...if we don’t make significant changes.

Bob also asked me to touch on what Bissell Centre is doing. Here’s some of that.

- We are working hard to house more homeless people. Last year we housed 80; this year 240 in our Housing First programs. But we need to do more, especially for those who do not qualify for Housing First assistance.
- We are trying to put more people to work. This year we will do 14,000 casual labour placements and every dollar paid by the employers in wages will go to the workers.

Truth is, however, that more people line up every day for work than we can accommodate.

- We are feeding the hungry (110,000 meals) and providing low cost or free clothing to more than 50,000 people.
- We have workers on the street around the clock every day of the year trying to help the homeless and ward off inappropriate involvement of the police and other emergency services.
- We take care of more than 1,400 children a year in our accredited, free day care program
- We help street kids get off the street through our partnership with Boyle Street and E4C called Inner City Youth Housing Project.
- We give about 3,000 presentations a year about poverty, homelessness, and fetal alcohol syndrome.
- We partner with Boyle Street to provide services to inner city victims of violent crimes.
- We offer mental health services, public health nurses, help accessing government programs and so on.
- We are exploring innovations that will create self-sustaining programs, that will help people bridge through crises and ward off evictions, and that will increase food security for the poor and disadvantaged.

To do all of this and more, we partner with governments, corporations, foundations, funders, schools, the police, health services, and faith communities, among many others. And in addition to delivering services under contract with the government, we will attempt to raise \$2 million in donations and additional grants this year to deliver our services.

We are operating with a theory of change that is not about the government fixing poverty, but about the community taking charge of the problem itself and making the changes necessary for us to take care of one another.

So... what can you do?

First of all, take care of yourself and your loved ones. Families and friends should be there for one another.

After that, what you can do individually or in groups depends on your personal assets of time, money, knowledge, skills, connections, and your passion. Let's remember that each of us has different assets and abilities and let's be good with that. We all can't do the same things to the same degree.

Rather our power to effect change will depend on our collective actions, on our collective leveraging of our strengths and assets to achieve change.

Here are some concrete ideas...

For the Inner City Pastoral Ministry, first I am glad you are here with us at Bissell Centre. I told Rick recently that Bissell's plans are to open the drop-in until 7 o'clock in the evening 7 days a week and that we should talk with ICPM about if and how they might wish to participate.

I have had discussions with a few faith community representatives about repurposing churches that have a declining membership or that are closing down. Instead of selling off such properties, I wonder if such facilities could be used as neighborhood centres, as community food centres, as places where people can be trained to work, or helped with their children.

Our communities need more housing, especially supportive housing. For those individuals with the means to do so, include organizations like Bissell Centre in your wills, whether it be to support our direct work with money or to create a legacy that houses people in your home.

In your various church groups or congregations, consider the impact you could have by focusing your support on fewer rather than many organizations. I know that's hard to do, but it is also true that when funders and donors spread their giving too thinly, the impact you might have can thin out too.

Give away things you don't need, but give away things in good condition. Clothing in particular, but also there are places that will share your unneeded furniture and household items with those who need them.

Please continue to have food drives and do what you can to feed the poor. Such giving is important because it is impossible to help lift someone out of poverty if they spend all their time trying to find food and shelter.

If you have time, seek out volunteer opportunities. At Bissell Centre we are now trying to keep our Community Closet open through volunteerism. Groups like us need your talents and time to operate. If not at Bissell Centre, volunteer somewhere else. Volunteerism is citizenship in action.

Personally, think of ways you can increase your financial contributions to organizations you wish to help – throw your change in a jar and donate it, cut your Starbucks habit in half and donate the savings, forego a luxury once in a while and share what you would have spent with someone less fortunate.

But there is more... talk with others... at work, at church, your friends and family, in service clubs, at political forums... talk with others whenever you can about poverty and why it is

wrong and hurtful to all of us. Learn about the challenges the poor face. For example do you know that an individual on Alberta Works gets about \$350 a month?

Often when I speak to groups I offer a simple invitation to those in attendance to “walk with us” toward a better place. The image of us walking together is drawn from the days of the civil right movement in the States when so many people of all colors and backgrounds marched in the streets to raise their voices in unison about the changes required to ensure civil rights.

Those who marched lifted their voices against racism and intolerance. And many focused their energies on changing systems and long-held practices of racism.

It is true that Bissell Centre and others like us look to people and groups like you to support us financially and through other means like in-kind donations and volunteerism. This year, as stated earlier, we must raise \$2 million dollars ourselves to meet our commitments to the poor and the homeless... but I will be honest, we need more than that.

We need more than your generosity of time and treasure. We need you to walk with us, to lift your voices together about the social injustice of poverty and the structural realities that keep people poor. We need you to do whatever you can do to help us and to help one another make the difference we want to make, not just for those who are poor now but those who will be unless we act.

I often talk about “movements.” Movements change the world. Think of civil rights, of a woman’s right to vote... think of the advances we have made in treating HIV... think about why we all wear seat belts or why people can’t smoke on airplanes anymore.... Think about how serious society has become about drinking and driving.... All of these are the effects of movements... of people walking together toward a better place.

I believe that the only way we will end poverty in our community is when the community is engaged in a movement to do so. No government program will do it. Bissell Centre won’t do it. The faith community won’t do it. None of us will do it alone.

But a community wide movement that says poverty is wrong and that calls out for all of us to make the changes we must to end poverty – that can work.

Thank you for allowing me to speak with you.

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