

**It's about having enough money to  
live on,  
a place to live and feel safe  
and the ability to look after our  
children.  
You could call it freedom.**

Urban Ministry Panel  
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Faculty of Divinity at Trinity College  
University of Toronto

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Cathy Crowe, Street Nurse

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Thanks so much for this invitation. I had the pleasure to hear Canon Sabune last night and I sure feel better about the long title I gave my remarks after hearing his reflections, which mirrored what I hope to convey today.

I recently spent a day in reflection at an outreach and networking conference sponsored by the Anglican diocese. I left with a better understanding that the “church” is challenged on at least three fronts

- how to nurture spirituality outside of the church walls and involve people who have had limited access to the church,
- how to lobby and convince politicians on questions that involve spending money and,
- how to resolve the dilemma of being torn between the necessity to do downstream work, or charitable work with the needs for bricks and mortar work upstream.

My remarks are really to engage you in our work for a national housing campaign. That will involve all three of the above challenges.

## **The homeless disaster and the campaign**

It might surprise you to know that, in fact we have a higher homeless population per capita than New York City. Many of you will know that in 1998 we formed a group called the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee. We declared homelessness a National Disaster and began a national campaign which called for 2 solutions.

The first solution we called for was emergency relief to be channeled into the inner cities where the crisis was severe. Second, we called for a national housing programme and the 1% solution – a reinvestment of an additional 1% - the average amount all levels of governments used to commit to social housing when they were building it. We did get some of the first, and in yesterday's throne speech very vague promises of the second.

I want to talk about disasters, like hurricanes.

Hurricanes such as the recent ones in Florida and Haiti leave very obvious destruction and homelessness. They are also situations that beg for politicians to be leaders, to witness the damage and to come up with immediate solutions.

Hurricanes of another sort, like Hurricane Hazel McCallion (as she is known), the Mayor of Mississauga. I saw her interviewed on TVO the other night. She came to fame for doing what a politician should do in a disaster. During the Mississauga train derailment, the largest evacuation in Canadian history, she toured the site, she witnessed the damage and worked to ensure people were safe and rehoused as soon as possible.

**This expectation should also apply to spiritual leaders.** It certainly applies to Canon Sabune. He sounds like a Hurricane everywhere he goes, witnessing and fixing problems even if it takes 10 years, like making sure a school is nowhere near a highway.

Homelessness in our country wasn't caused by a hurricane, it was and continues to be a man made problem, a structural problem and we should expect it to be dealt with.

Most recently, I took Toronto Mayor David Miller on a tour at night to meet people sleeping outside and to visit several emergency shelters. I believe that first hand witnessing can make a huge impact and I'm happy to say that this year, for the first time ever, our city is planning ahead for winter and has promised to open an additional emergency shelter.

You are each witnesses and each have a role to play in urban ministry and social justice and change.

### **Work on the ground**

My first priority is to stay connected to the people and to the issues. This is equally important for each of you.

Let me give you some examples of the issues I am working on: I call them the hotspots. Each of these hotspots overlaps tremendously with urban ministry.

- 1) Shelter conditions – our shelters are by and large overcrowded, under funded, long-term congregate living situations for people. In some cases emergency shelters, including the Out of the Cold programme, do not meet the UN standards for refugee camps. This is a pattern repeating itself across the country. It's only logical, as homelessness increases, shelter needs increase. There are huge stresses on this system and the people in them.
- 2) Outdoor sleeping – people are now sleeping in parks, ravines, tents, cars, subway grates, in front of city halls, in abandoned buildings, squats, tent cities. Tent Cities and squats are new forms of survival and they are occurring everywhere, from Halifax to Vancouver.

- 3) Reliance on the third sector – for example, the Out of the Cold program. I want to mention this program again because it is faith based, charity based and municipal governments have allowed this third sector to replace adequate shelter. SARS must change our thinking and I'll come back to this.
  
- 4) Plagues – congregate living situations (nursing homes, jails, camps, shelters) all lead to serious health risks. As Florence Nightingale used to say “nurse the room” – well when you have hundreds of people using the same room, whether it's a day time drop-in, a soup kitchen or a shelter you face special problems. Conditions which stress the immune system (such as cancer, diabetes, lack of sleep, hepatitis) increase the risk of contracting other illness and heighten the risk for tuberculosis and other infections. Every year a new menace occurs. We saw the impact of the Norwalk virus on shelter users who did not have adequate access to toilets. We saw the impact of a TB outbreak that killed several homeless men. We now see the impact of a massive bedbug infestation in our shelter system. I remain astonished at what we have not learned yet from SARS. As a nurse colleague of mine, Barb Craig, has said – what would have happened if the first case of SARS had walked into a downtown hospital like St. Michael's Hospital? What if homeless people were exposed or contracted SARS, what if they slept one night in a Salvation Army shelter, the next day used a soup kitchen, in the afternoon went to a drop-in centre, in the evening had dinner and slept at an Out of the Cold – which the next day is closed necessitating them to go to the next Out of the Cold!

- 5) Dying and deaths – there are now huge palliative care needs for this population. Many years ago I knew I was going to way too many funerals for a community health nurse. Today, I now know that we need to deal with a shameless gap in palliative care needs of homeless men and women. Each month now we add between six and eight names to the monthly homeless memorial at the Church of the Holy Trinity beside the Eaton Centre. I was however shocked to learn that the death rate in communities like Sudbury and Ottawa is comparable to Toronto's. As my colleague Beric German has said "homelessness is a national disaster, but the number of homeless deaths is a national scandal".

Homeless people need **freedom** from this disaster, and that means they need housing and income levels that you can live on and hope.

**Our challenge is to bring these principles of social justice to life in our day-to-day work.**

***The powers that be try to make these issues so complex. But really it's about housing the homeless, taking care of our children and, making sure people have enough money to live on.***

How can we bring these social determinants of health to life? Are our schools teaching this material or are our students only getting a few hours on homelessness and it's about the so called 'mental patient' who goes off his drugs and becomes violent? **We** must not just talk the talk, **we** must walk the walk.

Perhaps most important is the role you can play to move the political logjam. Making housing happen.

This is usually what people really want to know. Are we getting closer to winning a comprehensive national housing and homelessness strategy? Everywhere I go groups are lining up wanting to do housing in their community. So now what can you do?

- Sign on to the TDRC list serve for regular info. [www.tdrc.net](http://www.tdrc.net)
- Before the end of November create a delegation to meet with your MP and MPP and tell them as graphically as you can what you witness. If you do one thing, this is the most important.
- Can you participate on National Housing Day (this is the day that the Big City Mayors signed on to the declaration that homelessness is a national disaster)? We're doing a 2-night sleep out Nov. 21 and 22 and will need bodies, tents, sleeping bags, food.
- Maybe your church can sponsor the Homeless Vigil at the Church of the Holy Trinity. Monies are always useful for the meal, for flowers or candles.
- Can you support a local housing project?

***In closing, I'm grateful to be here speaking with you. I believe you have the potential and the power to make great inroads in this province, at this time. I look forward to seeing the power of your prayers and your political influence in truly making a difference in our world.***