

“Addressing Poverty in Calgary: Issues, Challenges, Strategies”
Chair of Christian Thought Iwaasa Lecture on Urban Theology
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Introduction

My name is Darrell Howard and I was both thrilled and terrified when asked to speak tonight. Thrilled because it's a real privilege to have this opportunity. I have 20 minutes to share some thoughts with you. For the students in the room, that equates to a 2500 word paper, or 10 pages double-spaced. Yes, I am also a student! I'm hoping I can turn in this speech for my next assignment!

This is also terrifying. With less than 2 years under my belt at Vibrant Communities Calgary, I'm no expert on poverty. My personal experience of poverty is pretty mild when I think of all the people I've met through the years. None the less I'm excited for the opportunity!

I Work with Vibrant Communities Calgary; which is now shepherding The Calgary Poverty Reduction Initiative's "enough for all strategy;" a strategy masterfully constructed under the leadership of Derek Cook. I'll only lightly touch on my work at VCC as poverty has been a central theme throughout my career and in my personal life. That's what I'd like to talk about.

PART 1

There were four words I heard a lot of as a kid: **“we can't afford it,” it seemed like the answer to EVERYTHING!** So as a kid, I paper-routed, babysat and bottle-picked my way to the things I wanted- a fish tank, a bike and as a teenager, a trip to France.

My family emigrated from England in 1975 when I was six. My parents were not educated; my mom made to grade 8, my dad, less than that. Dad was a bricklayer in England, but that wasn't a sought-after skill here in Alberta. My parents found work, albeit relatively low-paying jobs, bought a mobile home and the six of us (I have three older brothers) settled into Canadian life.

While my brothers remember never having enough food, we always had three meals a day. We didn't have fancy cloths. In fact I was quite indigent about wearing the neighbour's hand-me-down underwear. Two of my older brothers constantly in trouble- I remember my dad warning them “they'll send us back to England.” Perhaps that's why I was such a good kid!

We had two dogs. We went camping and I learned to skate- it was the Canadian thing to do! Through the years, my parents chased the great Canadian life and in doing so, racked up a lot of debt. “We can't afford it had a second part- “but we have credit.” At 75 and 86, they're still in debt- and frankly, it's the kind of they'll only resolve by selling their home or dying.

When I think of my childhood, I can't help but to think of families who are homeless today here in Calgary. I imagine they're a lot like mine, yet the threat of homelessness was never a thought for us, nor the acute need to use a food bank. I don't if there was any back then.

We had enough to meet our basic needs. Even later, when my dad lost his job and my mom's work hours reduced, we could get by; safety nets and other favourable conditions kept us afloat. The biggest wound of my childhood? Being called **“trailer trash.”** Trust me, I have never watched an episode of Trailer Park Boys! **What's the stigma of a kid whose home includes a shelter?**

Doug asked me to suggest what's been successful in fighting poverty and so let's look at the conditions that existed for my parents those many years ago.

First, from about 1977 thru to the mid 90's, income inequality rates in Canada were much lower than they are today. It's likely that Low income earners had enough to make ends meet. Since the 1970s, the average income of the poor has only grown marginally.

If you look at the stagnation of income for the poorest members of our community and compare that to our present day cost of living, you can see why some families struggle.

My parents were able to meet our family's basic needs because they earned enough, they weren't burdened by school fees, I had three older brothers who babysat me, we grew some of our own food, and we had numerous connections to our community. For years, friends have supplied by dad with firewood to heat their home over winter- those connections have always helped.

So what about the family at “Inn from the Cold?” What might prevent them for ever needing to access that service in the first place?

Let's start by ensuring people earn at least a living wage; a wage that means low-income wage earners make enough to meet their basic needs in Calgary (Shelter, food, clothing, transportation, childcare, school fees). That's not a lot to ask for!

Calgary's living wage is \$17.29 an hour. Alberta's minimum wage would need to increase by approximately 69% to be a living wage.

If you're an employer, please strive towards paying your staff at least a living wage. If you do, sign up for VCC's living wage leader program. It provides your organization some exposure and helps us advocate for wages that truly enables people meet their basic needs.

When VCC and the United Way calculated Calgary's living wage, we discovered that a family with two children could spend as much as 27% of their income on childcare. Many families can't utilize Alberta's child care subsidy because there aren't enough registered childcare spaces. A recent Herald article describes a 200 person waiting list for one registered centre and these lists include unborn children. We need to tackle childcare in Alberta. What would accessible, affordable, public childcare look like? What could we learn from other provinces?

I can't help but wonder what might have happened if my family arrived in 2015 instead of 1975. Would our housing be insecure and would our food be supplied through the charity of others?

I'm not sure, but I do know there are many things we can do to ensure that low-income families can meet their basic needs and have the ability to be a part of community life. A living income and access to affordable basic needs are essential; financial empowerment is vital.

I've said before, our family had enough to meet our basic needs, but our little bit more came at cost. It's a life time of debt that still hangs around my parent's neck today. Having financial literacy skills and being able to build financial assets would have made a huge difference to my parents. Today, instead of struggling to pay down debt, my dad could fly home to England and visit his ailing sister, he could replace the dilapidated truck he's been driving since 1989. They wouldn't be at risk of losing their home when the next big bump in the road hits. Financial empowerment has real power to prevent and reduce poverty.

PART 2

When I was young, a classmate went on a rant about how immigrants were taking over; taking Canadian jobs, destroying the country, blah, blah, blah. I responded, "I'm an immigrant, is that how you feel about me?" "Oh no, I don't mean you, you're like us!" That was one of my earliest understandings of discrimination; of racism and of my own privilege. I am white immigrant. I speak fluent English and my accent gives little evidence that I've arrived from somewhere else.

If we really want to reduce poverty in our city, in our province, we need to be brave enough to tackle systemic barriers that can cause poverty- racism, classism, ableism, ageism, and homophobia; you get the picture!

My friend Syed, who emigrated with his family from Pakistan roughly 15 years ago has had a very different immigration experience than mine, even though he has done all he can to chase what Mayor Nenshi calls the great Canadian life.

He started volunteering with me when I worked at the City to gain Canadian experience; he readily took low-paying jobs to make ends meet. He took English upgrading courses. When employers told him they couldn't hire him because his foreign credentials, he went and got a Canadian degree. Where did that get him? He's still working at low-paying job and he's still trying to chase down a job suited to his education; work that will sustain him and his family. None of his efforts are yet to pay off.

He's even had to lodge a human rights complaint against a former employer. He also swears that when employers see his resume, they assume he's Muslim and trash it. **How resilient must he be?** What is our role in changing Syed's experience? I think we have one! How can he realize a great Canadian life through the merits of his hard work; without unnecessary barriers? My immigrant family had it so much easier than Syed's.

Two summers ago, before I started working for VCC, I agreed to help a friend of mine with his job search. Because my friend has a developmental disability, we took a bit of a different approach. We were upfront with potential employers about David's special needs and how supportive employment works for both David's and the employer. Many businesses gave David's resume thoughtful consideration, but they couldn't offer him a position. But two stood out for their blatant discrimination; a small business and a highly regarded retailer with a superior reputation as being a good corporate citizen. It was devastating telling David's mom, also a good friend of mine, what was said about her son- a man with many gifts.

Last summer and fall, I had the privilege of working with Poverty Talks on the WeACT project- a project aimed at building connections and capacity amongst people living in poverty, and their allies, to tackle poverty-related issues in our community. From the many involved with the project, 13 people presented at the We ACT powered by Pecha Kucha event on International Day to Eradicate Poverty (October 17th).

Pam Beebe, was one of those presenters. She spoke about what racism means to her. If you have a chance, check it out on VCC's blog page, it's powerful!

The day after I saw Pam's presentation I was amongst a group of people who were asked an important question: "**what breaks your heart?**" Knowing that Pam has faced racism in every phase of her life breaks my heart! Knowing that systemic discrimination is one of the root causes of poverty should break all of our hearts and call us to action. Pam's closing remarks were "recognize your own biases, racist thoughts and stereotypes and please, please be kind to each other; no matter what!" Preventing poverty is within all of us

If we want to make radical change; if there is enough for all and if our neighbor's strength is our strength then **we** need to ensure no one **gets pushed to margins; no one is pushed to poverty** simply because of who they are born, the place they were born, the color of their skin, their health or disability status, who they love, the gender they become, or the place they worship.

It is easier to do than you think. David happens to be surrounded by a network of friends who share his love of the outdoors (I'm one of them). I happen have friends in the activist community. When my one of my activist friends caught wind of how David had been treated at the small business, she sprang into action. She started by writing a letter. When the letter went unanswered, she went into the store to talk with the owner. When the owner responded with more discrimination, she vowed to never shop there again- and to tell her many, many, many friends about David's experience.

She also reflected on her own needs. She had a garden that she couldn't keep up with any more and David's a guy that enjoys physical work. So what did she do? She hired David and he spent one day a week doing her gardening. We'd be out there even on rainy days; he was committed!

I was also extremely upset with how David had been treated by the large retailer, so I wrote a letter to its corporate Board of Directors. Before sending it off, I shared it with David's mom. She shared it with David's outdoor community and **IT WAS ON!** People wrote their own letters; they posted them on the company's Facebook page and likely went to the store to give them a piece of their mind. David's community shared his hurt and **they did not allow him to be pushed to the margin.**

Marg and David got an official apology letter from the corporate board of directors, I got a meeting with the store manager. We got a commitment from the company to implement its own policy around inclusive employment practices....Marg and David they were done, never went back.

Several months later, someone from David's outdoor community called Marg; there was a possible job opening at her company- a terrific match for David. The story has a happy ending!

When Bev, the nun who I used to work with, defended my right to marriage, **she would not allow me to be pushed to the margins.** When I look out the window from work and see the rainbow flag flying over the Hillhurst United Church; or when I walk into the Unitarian Church and see my brothers and sisters from the LBGT community, I know I have a spiritual home if I want or ever need one. **If the family of the next kid who comes out belongs to an affirming church, then perhaps he or she will find a home in faith rather than on the streets. That is powerful poverty prevention in action!**

Being an ally and walking beside our friends and neighbors, people like Syed, David, Pam or myself are incredibly powerful acts and we are **all** able to make them! It doesn't require special skills or a lot of time. It only requires us to be human, to act with respect, empathy, justice and in Pam's words, kindness.

Despite what we hear about the economy, there has been no better time to end poverty in Calgary than now. We have a local poverty reduction strategy with people, organizations, businesses, local government and the faith community all working towards a common vision; a vision where all **ALL CALGARIANS** are able to meet their basic needs; able to be a part of community life. We have evenings like tonight and some many other ways that we are coming together to create change in our community.

To me, we are creating a Calgary where **no one is pushed to the margins, no one is pushed to poverty!** A place where we all can share in the great Calgarian life

Thank you.

References:

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