

Blame the Queen.

It was Her Majesty's motorcade last month that deflected me onto Hastings Street so that I drove past the old Woodward's building. I'd read about it, but this was my first encounter with the Woodward's Squat. I stopped at a store, bought all their muffins, and parked at the corner of Hastings and Abbott, which is the kitchen, "office" and heart of the impromptu tent-city. I soon realized my gift would provide less than a bite for some 150 persons camped on the sidewalk -- there to protest the sale of Woodward's with no guarantee of social housing, there to demonstrate for the increasing numbers of homeless people in our province, there because the overnight shelters are already full.

Several years ago a friend and I agreed we couldn't each carry all the burdens of the world ! :-)
She agreed to take on social housing if I would look after the residential schools and land issues. But now I was face-to-face with real homeless persons, and I couldn't just deliver muffins and walk away. Over the past six weeks I've learned names, heard some stories, and shared hugs and tears. I've never felt threatened or impeded on the sidewalk along East Hastings.

I appealed to churches when there was a crisis over portatoilets -- and you came through with \$1518 to provide sanitation needs. But you've done more to show you care: Deborah Henderson and her crew provided Thanksgiving dinner complete with roasted turkeys and potatoes, salad, cranberry sauce and gravy. Jane Shumka made a food run last week to provide hot soup makings now that the weather has turned nasty - and was thanked with a kiss on her cheek. Several VST students have held vigil with candles and song; others stop to express support.

Yesterday MP Libby Davies, whose Bill C-416 to provide adequate, accessible and affordable housing for all Canadians was defeated last spring, facilitated a meeting of squatters at First United Church. For two hours the stories came:

Williams (names changed) said "I don't see no OK down here. Used to be East Enders looked after one another. Money and greed's taking over the whole city."

Brad urged the group to use the recycling boxes he'd provided, "so Joe Average will respect and support us more."

A member of the Anti-Poverty Committee made an impassioned speech about "the class war between us and them. Don't sit down to negotiate with the enemy! APC is here to help you organize and we'll fight tooth and #%* nail!" He admitted to not being homeless himself.

Betty responded, "Don't ask us to form #%* committees; it's all we can do to #%* survive."

Claude shifted his wheelchair forwards: "I'm willing to fight politically, but it's more important to stay alive. Everybody's using us as puppets. We're human: we feel, we suffer. Help us get the medicine and food and warmth we need."

But as in numerous meetings before, nothing was finally solved. An ad hoc team will try to form a manageable agenda for next week's meeting, but Betty has a point: two months sleeping on the street, inadequate food and health care, anxiety about the police, and now cold and rain piled onto underlying problems of unemployment, addiction, mental illness and hopelessness is making survival, much less cooperation, precarious.

The squatters have, through their own suffering, brought the problems of homelessness to our attention. Current provincial cutbacks are adding to their numbers daily. The issue is not restricted to Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Canada is the only industrialized country in the world without a national housing strategy. There are those in power who say the squatters have made their point and should fold up their tents. The sign that they have been heard will be when affordable housing is made available to every homeless person.

WHAT HAS THIS GOT TO DO WITH BC CONFERENCE?

I've been asked that by someone who seemed to feel this is essentially one member's personal crusade, not a matter for Conference, and certainly not something for the Conference President to flag!

In September your executive adopted a policy on Faithful Public Witness. It projects a vision of

witness that is:

- practised by congregations, presbyteries, conference, leaders and members;
- grounded in the scriptural and theological basis of public witness and action;
- grounded in prayer and spiritual discipline;
- empowered and able to act;
- well-informed about the major social and cultural issues facing the church and world.

Conference and coalition-based educational and advocacy initiatives in the areas of:

- right relationships with First Nations brothers and sisters, including just treaty negotiations and residential school resolution;
- provincial government issues;
- HIV/AIDS

The values driving this vision are:

- act with integrity, ensuring our faith and actions are congruent;
- respect diversity, consulting with others, honouring the views of others;
- collaborate with others in the church and community;
- be pro-active, initiating action and willing to take risks;
- be prophetic, offering challenge to injustice, comfort to the afflicted.

“Offering challenge to injustice.”

You can do this by writing letters, sending e-mails, phoning your MLAs and MPs. Especially at this time of municipal elections, you can ask tough questions of candidates for office and let them know your vote depends on their commitment to resolving the inequity between the entitled rich and the marginalised poor. Work with the coalitions in your area who address poverty and injustice.

“Comfort to the afflicted.”

The Woodward’s Squatters are not the only faces of affliction these days. This face is worn by men laid off in sawmills and shipping terminals around Prince Rupert. It is seen in the faces of teachers and children in overcrowded schools in the Fraser Valley. It is seen in the creased face of 87 year old Kitsy who, with home assistance cut to one hour a week, now struggles to keep her floors and laundry clean and shopping done. It is seen in the increasing numbers of single parents who appear at food banks in Victoria and Kelowna and Nelson.

The face behind these faces is that of One who long ago said, “Whenever you failed to help one of these least important ones, you failed to help me.” (Mt 25:45)

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BC Conference
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