

NO room in the Inn

This is the message that more and more homeless people have been receiving as they seek shelter from the unusually cold weather which has been gripping Vancouver and Lower Main Land this winter.

Canada is no longer the best place to live – at least not if you are homeless. Miloon Kothari, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, visited five Canadian cities and several Aboriginal communities in October of last year. On his visit to Vancouver, he observed: “It's quite clear that there's a major housing crisis here in Vancouver ... Much more needs to be done, both as an emergency response and a longer- term response – more housing options for people, including more transitional housing and social housing.” Kothari also said that he finds it almost unbelievable that a rich country like Canada would have homeless people. “What is striking to me is the fact that you have such incredible wealth and prosperity that's just a few blocks away from so much poverty and social problems... I think it's really something that I'm trying to understand.”¹

As a follower of Christ I find it unacceptable that anyone, especially here in Canada, should be without adequate shelter. The love of God, which has been poured out for us in Jesus Christ, compels us to be advocates for the homeless and all vulnerable people.

The Apostle John reminds us: “*We know love by this, that he (Jesus) laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*” (1 John 3:16-18)

What can we do? Most immediately we need to consider opening more of our churches to shelter the homeless especially when the weather dips below freezing.

In the B.C. Synod we give thanks to God for the Lutheran Urban Mission Society (LUMS) and for the Surrey Urban Mission Society (SUMS) and their ministry to the homeless, disenfranchised, and marginalized of our society. For example, SUMS supplies 30 of the 100 shelter beds in the city of Surrey which are available for the homeless during inclement weather.

The volunteer executive director of SUMS, Jonquil Hallgate, states that she: “*Never was a fan of that 'no room in the inn' story.*” On January 31st she reported that SUMS had provided shelter for between 27 to 37 people each night for 11 consecutive days of extreme cold weather. She further observed, “We are open again tonight.”

Who are these homeless people? Almost half leave between 5 and 6:30 each morning to go to work. By eight o'clock most have left the facilities. Several stay to help clean up and put everything away.

Shelter for the night consists of a hot evening meal, coffee and goodies, a mat to sleep on, and a hot breakfast and a bag lunch. It may not seem like much, yet one of the men who usually finds shelter at SUMS has said: “the Mission is a palace in comparison to what else is offered in the area for people.”

Providing temporary shelter for the homeless is important. However we can do much more! We can begin by learning more about poverty and homelessness in Canada. A good place to start is to engage in the study entitled: “No Place Like Home;” it is available from our ELW national office in Winnipeg. We can also express our concern to the federal government. A sample letter to your Member of Parliament can be found on the national ELW web page, www.elw.ca/Homelessness.aspx.

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¹www.straight.com/article-114473/un-examines-homelessness

