

# People We Hold in Our Hearts

by Barry Reider

In speaking about the work of community ministries, I am reluctant to share the bad news stories of the people with whom we work. When I do this, in some ways I feel that I am “pimping” them to justify our own existence. Simply focusing on their negative situation does not portray accurately who these people are and the blessed privilege it is to work with them. They are wonderful people with a caring spirit, a deep sense of community, and a willingness to share what little they have. However, it would be equally wrong for me to avoid describing their pain and brokenness.

They are the people who do not have enough food in their cupboards, and who have to stand in line at a local food bank to receive a small bag of groceries once a month. They are the people who do not have cupboards and have to panhandle in the streets for something to eat. They are the people who will die early in life because they do not have proper nutrition. They are the people who cannot afford medication.

One in five Canadian children live below the poverty line. They are the one in three children in some large urban centres who go to bed hungry at least once a month. These children struggle in school because they are too hungry to concentrate. They are excluded from class trips because their parents cannot afford them. They are the latchkey kids whose parents cannot afford childcare. Subsidized childcare does not even exist for them.

Poor families live with the stigma of living in public housing, paying up to 80 percent of their income on housing costs. Small apartments house two or three families. “Will we pay the rent or feed the kids?” is often the dilemma.”<sup>1</sup> Parents sometimes have to give their children up to Children’s Aid because they have been evicted from their homes. Squatting on contaminated land, living in abandoned buildings, or surviving on the street because of overcrowded shelters: This makes the fear of violence become necessary. Poor families experience “poor on poor violence.” Sometimes, the final outcome is death.

Who are these people?

- They are the people who received meagre social assistance, only to see that cut by 22 percent recently by the government, so that others more well off could get tax cuts.
- They are the people who went off welfare to go to school and then found themselves still unemployed and back on welfare with a huge student loan to pay.
- They are the people on welfare, who, if they do not declare other income, such as a student loan, face the risk of criminal charges and a lifetime ban from welfare.
- They are the people who, under house arrest and no income, decide that the only way out is suicide.
- They are the people who work for a minimum wage that is far below the poverty line.
- They are the people who sometimes need two or three jobs in order to make ends meet and then are criticized for not being there for their kids.

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<sup>1</sup> Mel Hurtig, *Pay the Rent or Feed the Kids: The Tragedy and Disgrace of Poverty* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1999).

- They are the people who are lucky if they can even get part-time jobs with no benefits.
- They are the people who cannot get any form of employment because they have been out of the workforce too long or because they do not have any Canadian work experience.
- They are the refugees fleeing violence in their own country, after which they experience social exclusion here.
- They are the immigrants who came to Canada to better themselves economically, only to find that they are eligible only for low-paying, dead-end jobs.
- They are the people who experience systemic racism and find themselves unemployed, underemployed, or racially profiled by the criminal justice system.
- They are the women who experience systemic barriers in achieving their potential. They are the women who experience violence in their relationships and on the streets.
- They are the people who come from communities in which it is more likely that they will experience jail than graduate from high school.
- They are the people who come from communities in which sniffing gasoline is a recreational activity of the young.
- They are the people who have had long historic roots in this country but have had the pride of their culture stripped from them.
- They are the people who find themselves strangers in their own land.
- They are the people who have such wounded lives that many times their only relief is to lose themselves in drugs and alcohol.
- They are the people who, in order to make ends meet, prostitute themselves by selling their bodies or illegal substances.
- They are the people who come out of prisons or psychiatric institutions and have nowhere to stay.

Yes, these are the people we hold in our hearts as we work, on behalf of the church, to bring about justice.

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.  
The Lord has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*  
—Luke 4:18–19

**Barry Reider** is originally from Calgary, Alberta, and now lives in Toronto. He has a social work degree from the University of Calgary and a Master of Theological Studies from Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. His work has included children's counsellor in the battered women's movement, youth literacy worker with the Downtown Church Worker's Association, community youth worker at Davenport Perth Community Health Centre, community development worker for an interfaith coalition in Lawrence Heights, and a program consultant with the Addiction Research Foundation (now the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health). For the last 13 years, he has been working for the United Church as a community minister in the culturally diverse, low-income community at Jane and Finch in northwest Toronto. In 2006, Barry received an award for outstanding achievement in the area of social justice.