

## Let's break the poverty cycle

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### Document Text

A friend told me of a study which reports that a family can break the poverty cycle if they worked more hours. That is fine if there are several adults in the family and an extended family lives as an economic collective.

But many Canadian parents are alone and not only work, they have child care plus other essential household duties. These parents -- often single -- are unable to work more hours.

In the 1950s and '60s, a father was able to earn enough money to support a family of five: himself, a wife and three children. During the last 30 years, many adults have not seen an increase in "real dollars" or purchasing power. Many families need two incomes to pay the rent or mortgage, feed the family and take care of other expenses.

To cover basic expenses with no luxuries, Opportunities 2000, with regional staff and other consultants, has figured that one person needs to earn \$16 an hour with benefits or \$17.50 an hour without. This is more than the average wage for women and close to the average for men in our area.

But this means that more than half the women and 40 per cent of the men could not provide basic needs for their family, unless they own a home or have significant savings.

This economic struggle is occurring when there is a growing gap between the rich and poor, with average Canadians falling further and further behind since the early 1980s. Can we begin to reverse this trend?

Statistics observing families leaving welfare show the most successful were single mothers or fathers, who married and then had two incomes to maintain the family. But how does a single parent survive? Marriage is not an alternative for everyone.

Atlantic Canada's experimental programs show that if a family or single person on social assistance can keep their benefits for one or two years as they begin working, they accumulate some financial resources, find safe housing, start receiving health benefits from the job and build up sick and vacation leave.

With these assets, they are more able to sustain themselves, even with minor illness or a short layoff. Their children are more secure and have stable routines, even find greater success in school and think about participating in sports or community

activities. They are able to break the cycle of poverty for themselves; in the long run, they are healthier and society is stronger.

Immigrants and refugees to Canada have been the group that breaks the cycle of poverty most quickly because they live and work as an extended family and economic collective.

But recent news reports include surveys showing that recent immigrants and refugees to Canada are no longer able to break the cycle of poverty as quickly as in previous decades.

When working in community centres and other programs helping lower -income families, many staff expected the new Canadians to leave the community, purchase vehicles and buy their first home within the first 10 years.

Foreign-trained professionals and skilled craftsmen are not accepted into their trade in Canada and must take minimum-wage jobs for long periods of time. This is an issue that the current Ontario Liberal government has pledged to address within its first year.

A local study by the Centre for Research in Education and Human Services details how the professional needs in our community could be addressed by a more rapid process of certifying the training of these skilled men and women, especially in health care and engineering.

Though new Canadians come with a strong will, lots of hope and much energy to succeed, they struggle with part-time, contract and low-wage jobs.

Our economic culture provides high income for managers and owners, but low wages or irregular work for the employees. This combined with higher and higher housing costs makes it difficult for a family to succeed, even when several incomes are included and an extended family lives together in one apartment.

Our region -- hopefully now with the provincial government joining the federal government -- has joined with local citizens to create more affordable housing units. The private sector finds it difficult, if not impossible, to create housing for the shelter allowances set by Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program.

Even two adults working full time at minimum wage only earn \$27,000 per year before taxes, which is far less than the living wage of \$32,000.

I have been amazed at how many workers with training earn less than a living wage, especially in the non-profit sector. Child-care workers with early childhood education certificates often make \$9 or \$13 an hour -- less than a living wage -- and they have three years of college. They are also providing an essential service for employers who need the skills of those children's parents.

Can we, as a region, province and country begin to examine how we increase the income security of workers?

Most employers cannot immediately move to offer wages of \$16 an hour with benefits. But can we start to argue for a higher minimum wage immediately?

Can we ask that the province follow through with certification of foreign professionals and skilled workers?

Can we start to put more priority on the workers, rather than on higher and higher salaries for the top executives and managers?

One fast-food restaurant now pays benefits to their employees, even though wages are below \$10 an hour. Paying benefits and providing sick leave help employees break the cycle of poverty and enable them to care for self and family.

We have had 20 years of a growing gap between the wealthy and the middle class, as well as poorer residents. It's time to look at creating a society where everyone can take care of their basic needs and have a stake in it.

Summary - "It's time to look at creating a society where everyone can take care of their basic needs."

Brice Balmer of Kitchener is a Mennonite pastor and community chaplain. He is secretary for Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC).

**[Illustration]**

Photo: CANADIAN PRESS / This week Quebec Health Minister Philippe Couillard outlined plans to help 450 foreign-trained doctors in Quebec pass the provincial medical exams. He said Quebec can't afford to waste such expertise. Neither can Ontario. Too many qualified people work at minimum-wage jobs.; Photo: BRICE BALMER

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