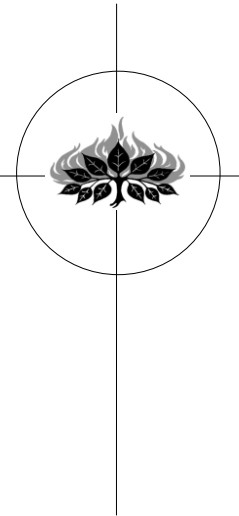


# The Presbyterian Church in Canada L'Église presbytérienne au Canada

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Wednesday, July 15, 2009

Mr. Dean Allison,  
Chair,  
Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development  
and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA),  
131 Queen St. Sixth Floor,  
House of Commons,  
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Dear Mr. Allison,

I am writing on behalf of the Life and Mission Agency of The Presbyterian Church in Canada re: the Standing Committee on HUMA's focus on the **Federal Role in Poverty Reduction**.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has 117,000 members in nearly 1,000 congregations. Church policies and statements are the responsibility of our General Assembly which meets annually.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada welcomes the Standing Committee's decision to give the **Federal Role in Poverty Reduction** some attention. This is particularly timely given the recession and the growing number of Canadians who are losing their jobs.

Please find enclosed our brief to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. As members of the Standing Committee consider the role of the federal government in reducing poverty, I appreciate that your deliberations and reflections have moral and ethical implications.

Thank you for considering this brief. On behalf of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, I wish the members of the Standing Committee well in your deliberations. Rest assured of our continuing prayers.

Yours sincerely,

Rev. Dr. Richard Fee,  
General-Secretary,  
Life and Mission Agency,  
The Presbyterian Church in Canada

**Brief to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on  
Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and  
The Status of Persons with Disabilities (HUMA)**

**A Federal Role in Poverty Reduction**

**Submitted by the Life and Mission Agency,  
The Presbyterian Church in Canada**

**July 15, 2009**



## Introduction

The Presbyterian Church in Canada welcomes the Standing Committee's decision to consider the **Federal role in Poverty Reduction**. This is particularly timely given the recession and the growing number of Canadians who are losing their jobs.

As the Standing Committee is well aware, the gap between rich and poor in Canada has grown over the past 25 years. In 1976, the wealthiest 10% of Canadians had 30 times the wealth of the poorest 10%. In 2004, this had grown to almost 80 times. In most provinces and territories, the minimum wage (in real terms) has not kept pace with the cost of living.

Canada enjoyed an enviable period of economic growth for a decade, yet poverty levels are back to the levels of the late 1980s. While Canada is faring better than many countries in this current global recession, we are concerned about the Canadians who are affected by the recession.

## Social Determinants of Health

There is extensive literature on the relationship between poverty and health. A report issued in August 2008, by the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Determinants of Health confirms many studies demonstrating that poor people have poorer health.<sup>1</sup>

A chart developed by the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research and published in a report by the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, entitled *The Health of Canadians: The Federal Role: Volume One - The Story So Far*, reminds us of the impact that social, economic and environmental factors have on an individual's health.<sup>2</sup> The report states that the care provided by our health care system is a major factor in an individual's health. It goes on to explain however, that a living wage, decent housing, access to affordable child care, being connected to family, a network of friends and a clean environment have a significant bearing on an individual's health.

The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development notes in a report issued in October, 2008, entitled *Growing Unequal? Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries* notes that income inequality increased significantly in the early 2000s in Canada, Germany, Norway and the United States. The report observes that Canada spends less on cash benefits such as unemployment benefits and family benefits than most OECD countries. Taxes and transfers do not reduce inequality in Canada by as much as in many other countries. The report also notes that if a Canadian falls into poverty, he/she is likely to remain poor for longer than citizens living in poverty in most other OECD countries.<sup>3</sup>

Effective public policy can have a positive impact on the lives of citizens. Today most Canadians over 65 enjoy higher incomes than their counterparts of the late 1970s. Seniors on low incomes have seen significant increases in their incomes because of programs such as Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement.

The situation for children is a sobering one as almost one child out of every nine still lives in poverty; one in four Aboriginal children live in poverty.

## The Presbyterian Church in Canada

The Presbyterian Church in Canada wrote to the Prime Minister and the leaders of the Opposition Parties prior to the federal budget that was tabled in January of this year. Our denomination was

concerned that Aboriginal people not be left even further behind in the current recession and hoped that the budget would include resources to provide Aboriginal people with new opportunities to address pressing social needs and that reduce the levels of poverty, improve the infrastructure, and support economic development in their communities.

The 133<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly (2007) of The Presbyterian Church in Canada received, considered and approved a report entitled *The Growing Gap in Canada: Building The Common Good – Reaching Out To Our Neighbours*. The report begins with the following biblical passage:

*The first is, Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your god with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these (Mark 12:29-31).*

I will highlight several of the recommendations that were approved by the 133<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly:

1. The federal government introduce a national poverty reduction strategy.
2. Provincial/territorial governments establish measurable targets and timelines to reduce poverty in their jurisdictions.
3. Provincial and territorial governments establish a minimum wage of \$ 10.00 an hour and indexed to the annual cost of living.
4. Federal and provincial/territorial governments collaborate in establishing a national social housing program.
5. Employment Insurance coverage should be expanded to make it more accessible and benefit rates and the maximum benefit period should be increased.<sup>4</sup>

There have been welcome changes in the Employment Insurance program, but there is scope to improve the program so that it more effectively meets its mandate of assisting Canadians who have lost their jobs.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada seeks to assist citizens on low-incomes. Many congregations respond through support to local food banks, out of the cold programs and life skills workshops. Our denomination supports local social housing programs and inner city ministries in several communities.

### **Federal and Provincial/Territorial Cooperation**

A growing number of provinces have poverty reduction policies in place or are in the process of developing such policies. In partnership with the provinces and territories, faith communities, the charitable sector, the business community and the labour movement, there is an opportunity for the federal government to provide leadership in shaping a national vision in a common effort to reduce inequality and poverty in Canada. Canadians welcome cooperation between the two levels of government.

While recognizing the jurisdictional powers and responsibilities of the provinces and territories, we hope that efforts are made to ensure as much coherence and complementarity as possible, between federal

and provincial and territorial programs. In partnership with the provinces and territories, there is also a role for the federal government in sharing best practices.

### **Public Policy Has Ethical and Moral Dimensions**

The following is by no means an exhaustive list, but is offered to the Standing Committee for its consideration. The following principles are relevant to public policies designed to reduce poverty.

- Affirm the **dignity** of all people in our wealthy society.
- **Compassion** for those citizens who are excluded, marginalized and vulnerable.
- **Solidarity, mutuality and reciprocity** – human beings are social beings. We have responsibilities toward and for each other.
- Provide opportunities which enhance the **inclusion** and **participation** of all citizens in society. Inviting citizens on low-incomes into the policy making process to share their experiences and insights is a practical way to include those who often feel excluded.
- **Sufficiency** – the basic needs of each citizen is met.
- Practice wise **stewardship** of public resources. There are not unlimited public funds. Choices are made and compromises are reached. Nonetheless, investing in effective poverty reduction programs, is an opportunity to enhance an individual's sense of autonomy and self-worth and her or his capacity to contribute to society. Poor people have poorer health than other citizens. Poverty reduction programs that help people get out of poverty also brings health benefits.
- All levels of government, the charitable sector, the labour movement, the business community and faith communities have a contribution to make in reducing poverty and inequality in Canada. The principle of **subsidiarity** recognizes that not all decisions or programs need to be the responsibility of a central body, but may devolve, as appropriate, to other bodies including local ones.

We all benefit when policies and programs reduce inequality and poverty. The good life or human flourishing is more than what we enjoy individually, but more importantly, what we can accomplish and enjoy together as a community.

### **Summary of Recommendations:**

1. The Presbyterian Church in Canada is concerned that Aboriginal people not be left even further behind in the current recession. Adequate resources should be allocated so that there are new opportunities to address pressing social needs, reduce the levels of poverty, improve the infrastructure, and support economic development in Aboriginal communities.
2. The federal government introduce a national poverty reduction strategy.
3. The federal and provincial/territorial governments collaborate in establishing a national social housing program.
4. Employment Insurance coverage should be expanded to make it more accessible and benefit rates and the maximum benefit period should be increased.

**Conclusion:**

In these challenging times, Parliamentarians have a wonderful opportunity to articulate a common purpose and to stir hope amongst all Canadians that more can be done to tackle poverty in our land.

Life and Mission Agency,  
The Presbyterian Church in Canada

## Sources Cited:

1. World Health Organization, Commission on Social Determinants of Health, *Closing the Gap in a Generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health*, 2008. Available online at [www.who.int/social\\_determinants/thecommission/finalreport/en](http://www.who.int/social_determinants/thecommission/finalreport/en).
2. Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, *The Health of Canadians: The Federal Role: Volume One: The Story So Far*, p. 81, March 2001.
3. The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, *Growing Unequal? Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries*, October 2008. Available online at [www.oecd.org/els/social/inequality](http://www.oecd.org/els/social/inequality).
4. The Presbyterian Church in Canada, *The Growing Gap in Canada: Building The Common Good – Reaching Out To Our Neighbours, The Acts & Proceedings of The 133<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly*, pp. 329 – 336, 2007. Available online at [www.presbyterian.ca/webfm\\_send/397](http://www.presbyterian.ca/webfm_send/397).