

We have to be advocates for social justice

Each one of us needs encouragement and affirmation from time to time to begin to believe in ourselves and become engaged once more with the community around us.

Recently, Monty Laskin, CEO of Caledon Community Services (CCS), wrote about four individuals who faced serious social and financial challenges and who, with supports from CCS, were able to overcome severe handicaps to become creative and productive people again. We are indeed very grateful to CCS for its work of creating an inclusive community and enabling people to develop their full potential, even if it is one at a time. Yet, it often feels that the number of people in distress never seems to decrease.

Most of us think that Caledon is a well-off community. True, our town may have the largest rich population of most jurisdictions. However, many households have to figure out a way of how to spend their limited monthly budget on food, rent and other necessities, such as footwear, clothing and gifts for the Christmas season. If you add other families who keep mum about their poverty, seniors badly needing affordable housing, homeless youth and folks challenged by health problems, you may end up with a much larger number of people below the poverty line.

A recent CCS letter stated the 158 families with 304 children do a balancing act between rent and adequate food, and will be turning to CCS for help this Christmas. A study quoted in the In The Hills, based on the 2006 Census had actually put 250 households below the \$10,000 mark and another 200 in the \$10,000 to \$20,000 bracket. You'd expect that the situation today will be worse, post-recession.

A discussion paper released Dec. 1 by a group called Put Food in the Budget, concluded that food banks country-wide contribute only nine per cent of the food needs per month. Many families do not eat wholesome food and parents go hungry in order to feed their children. It urged the governments at both federal and provincial levels to address the underlying cause of hunger and poverty by raising both social assistance and minimum wages. The study went on to submit that food campaigns can often stand in the way of real solutions, as they give the impression to many people that something is being done to get rid of hunger and poverty. Food banks readily agree that they only supplement to the food needs of families and that government should create policies that eradicate poverty.

Christmas is one of those yearly festivals when human generosity and compassion brim over: People readily give canned and dry food, blankets and money to charitable organizations and churches to distribute among needy families. Many are eager to feed homeless persons on the city streets or serve dinner at drop-in centres. We have done that year after year. The grim truth, however, is that poverty and hunger stalk many families through the year. The number of visits to food banks keeps climbing. According to reports, 375,000 visits to food banks in Ontario took place per month in 2014, a 20 per cent increase over 2013.

Many of us, who are moved by compassion and charity to contribute to food banks, can see that our efforts do not resolve the larger problem. In 1989, Ottawa unanimously made the pledge to eradicate child poverty by the year 2000, and here we are in 2014, with about 1,168,000 children still living in poverty. Clearly, while not ignoring charitable acts to assist people in need of basic necessities, we need to elevate our lofty instincts of charity to seek justice and demand that our governments reorder their priorities and bring policies and structures that will benefit all sections of the population, especially those at the bottom. Priorities such as sufficient affordable housing units, a living income for those on social assistance and with low wages, subsidized child care, access to health and dental services, etc. Only when we compel governments to move in that direction can we start making a dent in the blight of poverty. Children in poor families also deserve to grow up to their full potential and every family below the poverty line should regain its pride and dignity.

In our unique ways, we can all be advocates for fairness and social equality as benchmarks of our society. Being advocates can mean keeping track of a social issue in our community or province, such as child poverty, hunger, high rents and minimum wage, or calling our councillor, MPP or MP to express opinion or outrage over a particular policy or lack of it, writing letters to our local or national papers, raising our little voice over the systems and ideological attitudes that leave multitudes of families bereft of the necessities of life (and this I was taught at a workshop for faith advocates), praying for and with our elected representatives for courage and passion to promote progressive policies within their own caucuses and legislative assemblies.

Carmel Hili,
Bolton