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REQUESTED MEETING WITH PREMIER DOUG FORD COVID AND BEYOND

Dear Premier Ford,

The Toronto Area Interfaith Council is privileged to be coordinating with the Toronto Faith Communities and other Community support groups to capture our experiences, front-line support efforts, planned activities and social concerns as a result of the work we started as part of the Eradicating Poverty dialogue which has been quickly taken over by the immediate concerns and impacts of Covid-19. This report is by no means reflective of all that is being done in the Toronto GTA but it gives you a sense of what we are doing now, what we feel we can do to assist further and provide the citizens of this great province the support and dignity needed to immerse from this situation, a whole and vibrant community.

We also believe that the Faith Community resources and abilities should not be overlooked as we deal with the issues of today and in the future, encouraging all levels of government to utilize our abilities and resources to help in such causes. Clearly the Faith Communities are now speaking in unison with one voice that we hope can be harnessed in creating the good works of our changing society.

We look forward to sharing our thoughts, ideas, and current action plans, including the Summit on Eradicating Poverty initially planned for June 9, but is now even more critical. It is our desire to present these thoughts and ideas to you so a collective energy can be directed towards making improvements now and in the future.

Regards,

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Faith Organizations can be a beacon of hope providing resources for those in need, not only in this time of crisis but beyond. This document focuses on contributions made by respective Faith groups contributing in the fight against the Covid pandemic and suggests how Faith Organizations can have a larger impact now and especially in the post Covid period.

The TAIC Standing Committee on Eradicating Poverty has for the past year put tremendous efforts and research on poverty related issues with the intention of hosting a Summit on June 9th. It focused on four pillars of poverty related issues, i.e. the increasing need for food banks, income insecurity, homelessness and all the other myriad social ills so many are burdened with. Faith Organizations will need to be even more vigilant as compassionate and caring leaders in enumerable ways.

In Ontario, there appears to be some specific items the Province can address on its own. These are:

- A cohesive and collective approach on how all manners of access to food can be better coordinated, distributed and made available to the requests of those with desperate requirements.
- Access to accommodation as well as facilities to ensure health and safety of those marginalized. This also includes access to income to assist with the daily needs of the individual. There will be a continued requirement for essential services and access to funds to help in such endeavours.
- The continued access to PPE's for all front-line services as well as volunteer organization (eg food banks, homeless shelters) so that not only can volunteers feel comfortable in providing support but also keep the curve flattened for the future.
- Create a specific task force to deal with the findings and results of the deplorable situations in our long term and senior care locations. We need to address the level of training, the level of staffing, health security and accessibility to these souls who deserve our respect and dignity.

The following highlights what we view as the key focus items to put in place to address both the near and long term objectives of working with Government Services and the significant Faith Community philosophy and resources to make a difference:

- Continue to develop a Consortium of Faith Leaders and Faith organizations with Community Support group leadership and Governmental representations as a single point of contact to represent the conscience of and advocate for our Communities' needs and priorities
- Generate financial support from Faith Communities, Private and Public mechanisms, and corporate interests, to facilitate assistance with a strengthened organizational structure and supporting community needs and priorities
- Continue to plan for the Eradication Poverty Summit to be held in the 3rd or 4th Qtr. 2020
- Work with all levels of Government to participate in future planning activities and align efforts with Provincial and City strategic priorities

We firmly believe that the crisis caused by the Covid pandemic can serve as a catalyst to address many of our (policy) shortcomings with respect to various social and economic problems. This behoves us to rethink many aspects of how we live, how we govern and the kinds of policies we need to put into place to create a more just society in which human values count. We believe that Faith Organizations can play an important role in the sensitivities of society, humanity and religious doctrines, along with Government and Corporate, in the design of a better future for all in the Province of Ontario.

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COVID AND BEYOND

1. INTRODUCTION:

The fallout from the spread of Covid-19 has created tremendous panic in society across the Globe. The economic dilemmas have added a toll on the emotional condition of life for most Torontonians who are homebound; many laid off or lost their monthly/hourly wages. In times of despair individuals look to a place to worship for hope as a space for silent prayer, daily or weekly services, uplifting spirit and energy with community gatherings, and counselling with faith leaders or staff.

Faith Organizations can be a beacon of hope providing resources for those in need, not only in this time of crisis but beyond. The purpose of this document is to discuss not only what respective Faith groups are contributing in the fight against the Covid pandemic but also to suggest how Faith Organizations can have a larger impact now and especially in the post Covid period.

The TAIC Standing Committee on Eradicating Poverty has for the past year put tremendous efforts and research on poverty related issues with the intention of hosting a Summit on June 9th focusing on four pillars of poverty related issues, i.e. the increasing need for food banks, income insecurity, homelessness and all the other myriad social ills so many are burdened with. Faith Organizations will need to be even more vigilant as compassionate and caring leaders in enumerable ways.

The human tragedy from the Covid pandemic is unprecedented, exacerbating the human condition now propelling greater disparities in the lives of individuals faced with loss of incomes leading to exponential increases in poverty and emotional tolls. We cannot reduce life to a cost/benefit ratio; that, life is not about wants but needs.

The Government of Ontario released its list of essential workplaces that can continue to operate during the COVID-19 outbreak. The list included liquor stores, alcohol producers, wholesale stores that sell beer and wine to providers as well as cannabis stores and other producers. Yet faith based organizations which provide social, emotional, and spiritual support for communities is mostly absent from the list. In times of increases in domestic violence and substance abuse, Faith Organizations can provide support, hope and healing to individuals, families and communities.

Through the Covid pandemic we have discovered that there is such a thing as 'society'; that not everybody can look after themselves. And it is a moral imperative to look after the poor, the elderly, and other most vulnerable individuals /groups.

2 CHALLENGES THAT FAITH COMMUNITIES HAVE WITNESSED AND EXPERIENCED.

There are very few food programs open in the evening albeit most provide breakfast and lunch. There is a strong need for evening food programs in the downtown area.

For evening food programs public and private partnerships should be more integrated as they can be supportive to each other and be able to utilize available resources.

There is no work available for individuals who are living at shelters and have relied on 'Labour Ready' and other part-time employment (instead of work already in the first line) for income to buy food and other necessities. We are also concerned about those families on fixed incomes who don't have the ability to receive the same benefits as

other groups and are barely surviving on what income they do receive. The discussions around basic income, needs to be reinvigorated.

Individuals who are homeless need to be able to access places to sleep and meals later in the evening when they miss the curfew time for their regular shelter.

Another issue for the homeless is the lack of washrooms, laundries, showers and access to drinking water. With restaurants and even many transit washrooms being closed is a big concern of front-line workers. Is there a way for the Province to provide access to drinking water or offering bottled water in areas where there is homeless neighbours?

Food Banks are not only experiencing greater demand for their services, they need protective equipment, donations as well as food. Would it be possible to see if Food Banks and other Volunteer organizations be categorized as First Responders or front-line workers so they get the support of their needs. The Prime Minister has announced relief for the food banks and charities, mall charities like mosques and food banks may feel excluded, and unaware of access to this funding. And finally some Faith organizations that are dependent on receiving Faith Ministers from across Canada to conduct service for Funerals and important Religious Services are not able to do so because of travel restrictions.

3 WHAT FAITH COMMUNITIES ARE DOING

Currently religious places are mainly closed and are doing online services. However, we could be leaders in supporting the services of those who are working alongside Government and First Responders. A number of Faith groups have opened a conversation with the City of Toronto or other agencies about use of space in their respective buildings.

Saint Theodore's has created a Deacon's Cupboard - a small foodbank cupboard on the front lawn, accessible 24/7, which they are trying to keep stocked with pasta, rice, legumes, cereal, and dry soups. Several members of the congregation are signed up with the We Love Willowdale volunteer list, to deliver groceries, etc., and offer phone support and online administrative support as required. They have built a system of looking after each member of its congregation through the Ministering program. The goal is to ensure no one is left to be alone or not cared for.

Other initiatives include 1000 Face Masks a Week for Michael Garron Hospital, surgical caps for nurses at Kitchener-Waterloo Sick Kids Hospital. As well as the disbursement of older/unused computers to families who need access for schooling online.

Furthermore Faith Communities are remaining open with their outreach meals/foodbank initiatives they have always provided e.g. YSM, Salvation Army, Sikhs, Jewish group, Good Shepherd etc.

4 PARTNERING WITH THE PROVINCE NOW

- **Personal protective equipment**

In this context then how can the Faith community help the Province take the lead in providing appropriate and effective personal protective equipment for those providing public services during the pandemic who are not employed by higher levels of Government. We recognize that there may be a shortage, but can we press higher levels of government and industry to fill the shortage and in the meantime triage the distribution of equipment to those with the highest need.

- For immediate needs, however, can the Province and its agencies including the TTC respect those workers who exercise their right to refuse to perform work that endangers their health and safety and not impose discipline on them?
- **Income support**

The Prime Minister announced that the Federal government was working to cost-share a wage boost for essential front-line staff that are making less than \$2,500 a month.

 - Can the Province advocate with the Federal Government that the CERB should be made available to inhabitants of shelters, homeless, and undocumented persons?
- **Staffing in long term care facilities**

According to a Prime Minister's Office announcement all agreed on the urgent need to ensure long-term care facilities have the resources they need to protect the health and well-being of their residents and workers. There has been a chronic understaffing of long term care homes – that is only now coming to the surface. There is also a recognition of the dangers of spreading the disease by persons working in more than one facility.

 - The Province should set an example for other operators of long term care homes and by enhancing staffing levels, so that residents of the Province's home personnel with the lowest acuity level (CMI) receive an average of 4 hours of front-line hands on nursing care. Also higher average hours of this care for residents of its other homes based on the proportion of those homes' CMI to the CMI of the lowest acuity home?
 - Part of the solution could be the conversion of staffing complement at its Homes for the Aged to a higher proportion of full time positions. In the meantime offer to the Union representing its part-time employees at these homes to amend the collective agreement to provide the part-time employees with the same benefits as are provided to full-time workers.
- **Proper accommodations**
 - There also needs to be a heightened strategy in Senior homes to further isolate those residents who have tested negative for the Coronavirus by placing them in other locations, if they so chose, to ensure they are not exposed to the virus. (e.g. Hotel space).
 - The Province should take the lead to provide greater transparency by publicizing each of its Homes and shelters where there has been an outbreak of Covid19.

How can the Faith communities and the Province work with Financial Institutions to provide assistance to those in immediate need? How can the Faith Communities identify those families who are in desperate need of funds right now? What can the Faith Communities do to address the increasing level of anxiety in the Communities and Society? This is in terms of mental health and domestic violence. There is a need to provide more communications vis a vis context and background for the various 'instructions' issued re distancing and transparency on what is attempting to be accomplished.

5 PARTNERING WITH THE PROVINCE AFTER COVID-19

The Poverty Eradication Summit originally planned for 9th June 2020 was going to address basic issues such as food insecurity, homelessness, income insecurity and all the sociological and psychological problems that go hand in hand and now will get much worse. Homelessness, Mental Health, and Addiction must be looked at holistically and not compartmentalized in future planning and budgeting. So a Summit in the 3rd or 4th quarter is more necessary than ever.

Toronto has the largest homeless population in Canada with over 7,000 each night seeking shelter. This is an opportune time to think about what a post Covid19 world should look like.

In addition to addressing Poverty via a Summit and given the uncertainty about the future in terms of Economic Growth and Employment creation, how can Faith Communities get involved with the Province and the City of Toronto, in designing a better, more strategic economic development plan? There should be a joint City/GTA/Province task team including representatives of the Faith Communities.

We are working to consolidate and gather all the constituent Faith organizations to work holistically on common areas of need and work together to prioritize where energies can be focused. By working with all the Faith Leaders and their organizations such as TAIC, Faith in the City (FITC) and other Partners we can optimize efforts and speak with a united interfaith voice. The support of its volunteer base of foot soldiers can be available now to act as a support to essential workers. This is beginning to become a reality with the efforts started with the Summit composition.

Through the Faith Communities interaction, we will look for Faith Communities, Public, Private, Government and Corporate resources to help with the needs of Society. Such effort with resources can evaluate the immediate and short term needs by working with the Province. This will ensure there is alignment on those items that need addressing on a coordinated basis and use the available human resource the Faith Communities can bring. We currently have established National Not-for-Profit organizations (Pluralism in Motion Inc) with ongoing charitable status applications, we believe we can work to augment resources.

6 ONGOING FOCUS ACTIVITIES

1. Continue to develop a Consortium of Faith Leaders and Faith organizations with Community Support group leadership and Governmental representations as a single point of contact to represent the conscience of and advocate for our Communities' needs and priorities
2. Generate financial support from Faith Communities, Private and Public mechanisms, and corporate interests, to facilitate assistance with a strengthened organizational structure and supporting community needs and priorities
3. Continue to plan for the Eradication Poverty Summit to be held in the 3rd or 4th Qtr. 2020
4. Work with all levels of Government to participate in future planning activities and align efforts with City strategic priorities

Authored by the Eradicating Poverty Standing Committee - TAIC