

Inspired by nativity story, Edmonton churches raise \$1 million to alleviate homelessness

It started with Edmonton churches asking “How can we help?”

The answer has been No Room in the Inn, an annual ecumenical appeal that over 20 years has raised more than \$1 million to help those who lack adequate and safe housing.

It’s a milestone that Mayor Don Iveson will honour at City Hall on June 12. But it’s also a reminder that homelessness continues to be an issue in Edmonton.



Don Mayne

“Why does the campaign continue? It’s because there are a lot of people still living on the streets, and that will happen no matter how much we help, but there are fewer people on the streets than years ago,” said Don Mayne, a former United Church minister who helped found the No Room in the Inn.

“How better to help the homeless than letting the churches do it?”

Based on the biblical story of Mary and Joseph on the night Jesus was born, the No Room in the Inn campaign appeals to churchgoers at Christmas time. Each year their donations go to a designated organization that provides housing.

No Room in the Inn has raised \$1,028,493.15 since it was started by the Edmonton District Council of Churches. Participants include Roman and Ukrainian Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and Quaker congregations, as well as the United Church – the largest contributor.

At 91, Mayne continues to be a strong supporter of the campaign he helped launch back in 1999. He recalls an organizational meeting where the question on everyone’s mind was: “How do we serve the inner city better as churches? And the answer was: We need to work together more.

“It’s work that was very much needed,” Mayne said. “A lot of people wanted to support the work of churches to help the homeless, but they didn’t know how or where to do it.”

Twenty years later, the No Room in the Inn campaign is still strong – and very much needed.

An estimated 1,720 people experience chronic homelessness in the city, according to a 2018 report by Homeward Trust Edmonton. As well, more than 22,000 households spend more than 50 per cent of their income on rent, and over 6,000 households are on the waitlist for social housing.

In the Archdiocese of Edmonton, a letter is sent to parishes each year encouraging support of the No Room in the Inn campaign. The Archdiocese has been a member of the Edmonton District Council of Churches for more than 60 years, and helped start No Room in the Inn.

Donations have varied each year from a low of \$18,356.21 in 2002 to a high of \$79,540.35 in 2011.

This year’s recipient of the No Room in the Inn funds will be Seniors Association of Greater Edmonton, which will use the money to address homelessness among the elderly.

Past recipients include Hope Mission, L’Arche Association of Edmonton, Wings of Providence – a shelter for women – and in 2018, Youth Empowerment and Support Services.

It was the first time the campaign directly targeted homeless youth. Its \$42,186.36 donation will cover most of the renovation costs for one washroom at the YESS facility on Whyte Avenue. Program director Jessica Day said their washrooms are being renovated to make them safe and reduce harm to clients, 40 per cent of whom identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or two-spirited.



In 2018, \$42,186 from No Room in the Inn allowed YESS to support badly needed dormitories for homeless youth.No Room in the Inn

The donation was particularly meaningful, she said, because homeless youth often have a complicated relationship with religion – some are experiencing homelessness because of religion while others are leaving behind the support of a faith community.

“I don’t think you will ever eliminate youth homelessness,” Day said. “But what we can do is provide safe accommodation faster and more effectively, so the time they are experiencing homelessness is as short as possible.”

Julien Hammond, chairman of the No Room in the Inn committee for the Archdiocese of Edmonton, added: “It’s absolutely an area of underrated, but also chronic, concern in the Edmonton area.”

Homeward Trust Edmonton has conservatively identified 180 youth who are homeless, but those are only those whose names are on the city’s By Name List, a registry of homeless people. That’s not surprising to those who see the homeless, and youth in particular, every day.

Hammond said the campaign members are in “complete and utter awe” that they have been able to raise more than a million dollars with little infrastructure – the campaign is based largely on volunteers.

Last year, contributions were made by several Catholic parishes in Edmonton, the Catholic Women’s League, a number of religious orders, individuals, and staff of the Archdiocese, who gave \$1,000 in cash and filled 80 backpacks with toiletries and other supplies for homeless youth.

The twin parishes of St. Alphonsus and St. Clare, located in Edmonton’s inner city, are among the largest contributors. At St. Alphonsus, a second collection

on Christmas Eve is specifically for No Room in the Inn. The parishes donated \$1,285.40 last year, helping the campaign surpass the million-dollar mark.

“I’m elated because it’s always good that we are caring for the homeless, but it’s sad that it’s an issue in a First World country,” said Rev. Glenn McDonald, the associate pastor at St. Alphonsus and St. Clare. “Jesus said the homeless will always be with us, but that’s not an excuse to do nothing.”



Urban Manor received \$40,292 from No Room in the Inn to help house and assist people living with mental challenges and substance abuse issues.No Room in the Inn

McDonald described homelessness as a symptom of larger social issues – income inequality, inadequate health care, mental illness, for example – that society needs to keep pushing to address. He noted that often homelessness is not easily visible, especially among youth.

“It’s a reality living on 118th Avenue, but there’s homeless at the university – students struggling to find a place to stay and to pay for food while they go to school,” McDonald said. “It’s a catch-22. You go to university to get out of poverty, but how do you pay for it?”

Asked about the future of the No Room in the Inn campaign, Hammond said “it’s not the dollar amount that matters ecumenically for us. It’s that we are working together, in some measure to address – if not eliminate – homelessness in this city. That will continue. Yes, we’ll keep driving to another million dollars. Why not?”

The money raised in 2018 will help pay for a \$220,000 renovation of the four

washrooms in YESS's building in Edmonton's French Quarter neighbourhood. Two are located in the emergency overnight shelter and the other two in the residential program, Graham's Place, which houses eight youth around-the-clock.

About \$1.1 million of the YESS's annual \$4.2-million operating budget comes from government sources, mostly Alberta, but the bulk comes from donations. At this time of year, as donations come in, Day said both youth and staff at YESS begin to feel the Christmas spirit.

For more information on how to get involved or donate, visit [No Room in the Inn](#).