

World Day of the Poor sheds light on tough times and need for big changes

Wayne drove a truck for 25 years until the COVID-19 pandemic sent his life completely off course.

Laid off in February, this is the first time in his nearly 50 years that he's ever been out of work. His Employment Insurance ran out a few months ago. Now he fears being evicted.

"It's tough. I haven't had work since COVID started," said Wayne, who declined to give his last name. "I haven't received any funds in almost three months. They're wanting to kick me out of my apartment, but I don't think they're allowed to do that yet. I haven't been able to pay rent in three months."

Wayne has applied for Alberta Works income support. Currently he relies on food banks near his home off Jasper Avenue in downtown Edmonton and on the generosity of others, including a backpack with a winter jacket, underwear and gloves handed out by volunteers on Nov. 15, World Day of the Poor.

Over 260 backpacks of winter clothing, underwear and toiletries were distributed after Mass celebrated by Archbishop Richard Smith with the inner-city Edmonton parish community of Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples to commemorate World Day of the Poor.



Lillian McCallum, 85, was one of the recipients of a backpack on World Day of the Poor. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

The parish itself has own challenges. Located in an economically challenged part of Edmonton, Mass has been held at the nearby school gym instead of the church, following a devastating fire in August.

Despite these challenges, volunteers handed out backpacks after Mass – and later outside the parish rectory.

“I’m very grateful to them,” 85-year-old Lillian McCallum, who picked up one of the backpacks with her daughter Maryanne after Mass. “I hope that as many people will get this gift, especially the homeless.”

Filling the backpacks was a partnership between Catholic Social Services and Evergreen Catholic School Division, west of Edmonton. This year, the school division’s Brief Project collected more than 3,400 items over a shorter time period with in-class time for students due to the pandemic. Over the past four years, students, parents and staff have donated more than 14,000 items during Lent.

While Evergreen Catholic Schools help many charities, “we also have to be aware and recognize that in our backyards we have those needs as well” said superintendent Mike Paonessa.

Normally the donated items would be distributed at CSS’ annual Uplift Day of Mercy. Instead, due to the pandemic, the items were filled into backpacks handed out to the needy after Mass. Volunteers then distributed the remainder in the neighbourhood.

“This is a time when people have lost everything. This is a time when people are struggling,” said Gerald Sseguya, faith and community liaison with Catholic Social Services. “Because of the injustices in our society, in the communities where we live, we’re going to find inequitable distribution of resources.

“We have to open our eyes and to be able to stretch out our arms always. Sometimes we tend to forget that another neighbour of ours is struggling.”

Pope Francis established the World Day of the Poor four years ago and it’s been observed ever since. This year’s theme is “Stretch forth your hand to the poor”, a call to responsibility and commitment of all men and women to one human family, particularly in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.



A line forms for donated backpacks outside the Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples rectory. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

And the need is great. As of Nov. 15, there are 9,618 active cases of COVID-19 in Alberta. Over 260 people are in hospital. More than 400 have already died from the virus.

At the same time, Alberta's jobless rate is at 11.7 per cent – the highest of all Canadian provinces. One in 10 Edmontonians – about 119,950 people – now live on low income, earning a median of just \$27,790 per year. Over half of low-income people in the city are women, and nearly a third are children, according to the Edmonton Social Planning Council.



Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith, seen with Fathers Susai Jesu and Mark Blom, celebrated Mass Nov. 15 with the Sacred Heart parish community. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

Those stark numbers indicate that the need for help goes beyond a single World Day of the Poor.

“The pandemic circumstances in which we find ourselves really show the need to make this a steady, constant event,” Archbishop Smith said. “It really lifts up to us, I think, an awareness of our brothers and sisters around us ... who are always, always in need. This is not just a one-off. It kind of lifts up as a reminder to all of us of what we need to be doing all the time.

“There can be a tendency, a temptation if you will, just to get through this pandemic so that I can get back to what always was,” Archbishop Smith added. “We can’t go back to that normal because that normal was characterized by great economic inequalities and a lot of suffering.”

Lillian McCallum is optimistic that the COVID-19 pandemic will mark a watershed moment. The elder survived breast cancer and war, through a sense of community like the one in her hometown – the Métis settlement of Conklin, in northeastern Alberta.

She hopes we can all return to sense of community when the pandemic subsides.

“The Second World War was hard times. Everything was put in rations. It’s sort of similar, like today. COVID reminds me of that time,” McCallum said. “It’s poorer and poorer now. People should try and look for that peace again.”