



January 13, 2009

The Honourable James Flaherty
Minister of Finance
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Dear Minister:

Street Level: The National Roundtable on Poverty and Homelessness is a self-directing partnership that was created in June 2003, and operates under the auspices of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC). It is composed of experienced leaders of significant Canadian Christian organizations and programs from across the country that work among our nation's poor and homeless and are dedicated to addressing systemic, sociological, economic, cultural and spiritual deficits that contribute to poverty and homelessness in Canada.

The Roundtable's first significant activity was the planning and hosting of the national Street Level conference in March, 2006, that brought together nearly 350 individuals, representing some 70 organizations from across Canada who are passionately engaged in finding solutions to poverty and homelessness. At the opening banquet of the conference, we presented a document called the Ottawa Manifesto (attached), a call and commitment to a shared vision of Canada in which no person is denied the reality of "home." The Manifesto was made available online at www.streetlevel.ca/manifesto, and since the conference a steady stream of individuals from across the country have continued to add their voices to those of the Roundtable and delegates of Street Level 2006, in calling the nation to place a high priority on addressing issues of poverty and homelessness.

19 Members of Parliament accepted our invitation to attend the opening night of the 2006 conference, and official greetings were given by representatives from all four federal parties. The evening offered our guests an introduction to the important work already being done by church and ministry organizations in this area and served as a launch pad for a constructive, ongoing dialogue between "street level" ministries and government in seeking solutions to this issue.

As frontline, 'street level' practitioners, we believe Street Level has a unique role to play in public policy discussion and development, and are eager to partner with all levels of government in working towards the best possible solutions to issues of poverty and homelessness, which are reaching crisis proportions across the nation.

It is out of this desire for cooperation and collaboration that we offer here some recommendations and things to consider in the development of the next federal budget.

We are convinced that addressing issues of poverty and homelessness ought to be a top budgetary and policy priority for the federal government.

As practitioners committed to caring for some of the nation's most vulnerable people, we call on the government to develop a budget that makes it clear that addressing poverty is a significant priority for this government, and recognizes that doing so will result in a net gain for all Canadians.

We believe that such a prioritization will require/must include an affirmation of the following three things:

1. The time has come for us to commit to establishing a national poverty reduction strategy that includes an array of measures, targets, timelines and measurables;

2. It is time for the government to develop, in partnership with the provinces and territories, a national housing strategy that is clearly defined; and

3. The government should make a commitment to a guaranteed minimum standard of living for all Canadians.

In these times of global and national economic uncertainty, it is vital that the nation's leaders and decision-makers draw a line that says we will not allow the number of Canadians living in poverty to increase.

We do not believe that now is the time for implementing substantial tax cuts or cutting spending on vital social programs and services.

During uncertain times, such measures as tax cuts or reduction in spending on vital social programs would negatively impact the social fabric of our society, further disadvantaging our most vulnerable, and putting countless others at risk. This budget must seek to protect Canadians who are at risk of falling into poverty.

We affirm the value of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy, and encourage the government to not only maintain its commitment to the Strategy, but also to extend and expand that commitment.

Faith-based groups such as the ones that make up Street Level already have the infrastructure and expertise to multiply the effect of government funds in the delivery of service (through, for example, adding the value of charitable donations and volunteer service).

We also urge the government to consider changes to the Employment Insurance Program. Access to EI is becoming increasingly difficult and restricted. If this continues, and EI becomes inaccessible to those who have been laid off, or who may be in the coming months, we will see rapidly increasing levels of poverty, the likes of which we've not seen for generations.

As a service provider to poor and homeless citizens, second only to government, faith-based charities and their communities offer a significant experience-based resource to government. This experienced and valuable resource should be accessed in the formulation of appropriate and effective programs. *We are eager to work together.*

The members of Street Level are engaged in issues of poverty and homelessness firsthand, and while we may not be able to offer the dollars-and-cents specifics of policy development, we understand well the vastly more important human currency - the complexities, realities and roots of poverty and homelessness in human terms. Things that simply must be taken into consideration in seeking solutions to poverty and homelessness that will be lasting and go beyond simply another program or handout.

One of the building blocks of the Ottawa Manifesto states, "*Christian Groups make good partners for government initiatives.*" As frontline, 'street level' practitioners, we can play a unique role in public policy discussion and development, and are committed to building constructive dialogue and partnership with all levels of government in working towards the best possible solutions to issues of poverty and homelessness, which are reaching crisis proportions across the nation.

We maintain that both faith-based agencies and government have vital roles to play, and that the only way we will see lasting solutions leading to real change in the lives of individuals is through the actualization of healthy cooperation and partnership between the two.

We are currently in the final months of preparation for the next national Street Level conference, which will once again take place at the Westin Hotel in Ottawa. The 2009 Street Level conference will be an important next step in the dialogue to create a comprehensive national poverty strategy, simply by virtue of the great wealth of experience and understanding of those who will gather there. But prior to that, the first step is the opportunity presented by the budget for difficult economic times scheduled to be delivered on January 27.

In the coming weeks, we will be inviting Members of Parliament to attend the opening night of this unique and meaningful conference, and once again offering each party the opportunity to bring words of greeting and encouragement to the 400 or so delegates who will gather. The conference opens the evening of Wednesday, March 25, 2009.

We encourage you to take advantage of this moment to meet, hear from and share with dedicated and compassionate individuals who daily serve the most vulnerable on the streets of our nation.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to explore further how we can be of assistance. To arrange a meeting or to find out more about the Street Level conference, please contact Julia Beazley, Coordinator of Street Level, and of Poverty and Homelessness for the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, at 613-233-9868, ext. 223, or Julia@efc-canada.com.

Kind Regards,

Don Hutchinson
Vice-President, Centre for Faith and
Public Life
General Legal Counsel
The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

Greg Paul
Chair, Advocacy
StreetLevel: The National Roundtable on
Poverty and Homelessness

Encls.

- cc. The Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada

- Mr. Michael Ignatieff
Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada

- Mr. Jack Layton
Leader of the New Democratic Party of Canada

- M. Gilles Duceppe
Leader of the Bloc Quebecois

- Mr. Scott Brison
Liberal Finance Critic

- Mr. Thomas J. Mulcair
NDP Finance Critic

- M. Jean-Yves Laforest
Bloc Quebecois Finance Critic