

---

## EndPoverty Edmonton: An Interview With Mayor Don Iveson and Bishop Jane Alexander

This article is the second in a [series](#) on Poverty and Human Rights in Canada.

**SUMMARY:** In this article, Mark Holmgren interviews Mayor Don Iveson and Anglican Bishop Jane Alexander about the Mayor's Task Force "EndPoverty Edmonton" which sees poverty as an issue of human rights and social justice. Poverty is also a condition to be eliminated rather than managed. The article identifies the contribution of Bishop Alexander as Co-chair, the role of multiple organizations and agencies in Edmonton and the inspiration from Aboriginal traditions and lived experience. Six "game changers" among the twenty-eight task force recommendations are noted.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Dans cet article, Mark Holmgren rapporte son entrevue avec deux personnalités d'Edmonton : le maire Don Iveson et l'évêque anglicane Jane Alexander, au sujet du groupe de travail « EndPoverty Edmonton ». Ce groupe, mis sur pied par le maire, considère que la pauvreté est un enjeu relatif aux droits de la personne et à la justice sociale. La pauvreté est aussi un problème qu'il faut éliminer plutôt que gérer. Cet article mentionne la contribution de l'évêque anglicane en tant que coprésidente, le rôle de plusieurs organismes et agences d'Edmonton, et l'inspiration tirée des traditions autochtones et des expériences vécues. Le groupe de travail propose vingt-huit recommandations, dont six visant à changer la donne.

When Elizabeth Mclsaac, the President of Maytree, asked if I would like to interview Don Iveson, the Mayor of Edmonton and Bishop Jane Alexander on the EndPoverty Edmonton Strategy for a special series of *The Philanthropist*, my answer was an immediate and enthusiastic "yes!"

As a participant on the EndPoverty Edmonton (EPE) task force and the chair of its working group on housing and transportation, my experience has not only been inspiring but also a lesson in what is possible when a community comes together to tackle a historically intractable problem.

The EndPoverty Edmonton strategy approaches the elimination of poverty as a human rights issue and has been significantly influenced by Aboriginal culture and wisdom. The Mayor and the Bishop are the co-chairs on the Mayor's *Task Force to Eliminate Poverty in a Generation* and their leadership has been passionate and inclusive.

The EPE task force defines poverty as follows: "Poverty is defined as when people lack, or are denied, economic, social and cultural resources to have a quality of life that sustains and facilitates full and meaningful participation in the community."

**Mark Holmgren:** Mayor Iveson, your task force was up and running within five months of your election in October 2013. Of all the challenges facing the City of Edmonton, why did you decide to make poverty elimination a Mayor's Task Force undertaking? There was, after all, a City committee already working on poverty reduction.

---

**Mayor Iveson:** *Our task force, by bringing the weight of the Mayor's office to bear, built on the good work of the previous councillors' poverty-reduction initiative. In fact, we ensured there was continuity by inviting those individuals who had a wealth of knowledge and research to serve on the task force and its round tables and working groups. One notable addition was the inclusion of a business and entrepreneurial lens; the employer's perspective is absolutely critical to look at how we, as a community, end poverty in a generation — together.*

**Mark Holmgren:** Mayor, you made a decision to ask Bishop Alexander to join as co-chair. Some had expectations you might select a business leader or a well-known philanthropist. What prompted you to ask her? And Bishop Alexander, what went through your mind when you were asked?

**Mayor Iveson:** *Ending poverty is a community effort and I sought a strong, proven accomplice in the journey. Bishop Alexander is a respected community leader, bringing the faith sector to the table and adding its voice to that of academia, social-service agencies, government, business, health and wellness, not-for-profits, and our Indigenous peoples. Indeed, faith leaders have been on the forefront of such initiatives as Edmonton's ten-year plan to end homelessness.*

*Bishop Alexander brings a strategic approach combined with her passion for justice. We lead deep and complex — at times tough — discussions at our task force table. In addition, her strong links to Edmonton's broad inter-faith community offer powerful, committed allies to ending poverty.*

**Bishop Alexander:** *I think it would be fair to say that I was surprised to be asked. I was so thrilled that Mayor Iveson placed such a bold vision before the city. I was hooked with the word "eliminate" rather than "manage" or "reduce." I believe that we have everything we need in this city to transform our community and really tip the scales on poverty. It is a justice issue for me as well as a gospel-based directive. However, if we are going to manage this, it will take a whole community and a different conversation. Poverty is neither a "given" nor a "virtue;" therefore, it can and should be eliminated. Bringing in new voices and new ideas would, I thought, generate a new solution. I couldn't wait to get started, and I have to say it has been a very full and rewarding two years.*

**Mark Holmgren:** The EndPoverty Edmonton strategy is receiving some well-deserved attention from across the country. In particular, the strategy report has a strong dual emphasis on human rights and reconciliation. In fact, the introduction invokes a human rights narrative from the United Nations Charter, and the body of the document begins with an Aboriginal perspective on poverty.

Why are these two perspectives so prevalent throughout the document? Was this emphasis intentional from the start, or did they evolve out of the work of task force members?

**Mayor Iveson:** *Our journey through reconciliation benefited from the insight of our Aboriginal round table (one of two round tables we set up from day one) and from conversations with Indigenous Edmontonians and community leaders. As a result, their collective wisdom informed how we define poverty — this is perhaps one of our plan's strongest features. Indeed, we are living and breathing the Treaty spirit.*

---

**Bishop Alexander:** *I think we were also very aware that the task force was formed at the time of the final event of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. We had a unique opportunity for a focus on reconciliation that has now shown itself to be consistent with the Commission's final report and its call to action.*

**Mark Holmgren:** Let me now move to human rights. Most people understand poverty as lacking things like money, education, jobs, and community activities most of us take for granted. But the EPE definition of poverty goes further and talks about people being denied the economic, social and cultural resources need for a quality life. To what extent is the “denial” of such resources connected to people’s human rights being denied?

**Mayor Iveson:** *When the Cree refer to poverty, it encompasses their attachment to cultural, family and social traditions. Our task force looked to our Aboriginal round table (the other round table dealt with information and research) for an inclusive and reflective definition that captured the systemic injustices of the past which created the challenges faced by our Indigenous peoples today. The poverty experienced by diverse Edmontonians is more complex than an economic circumstance. All Edmontonians must have the basic rights and freedoms to take part in society’s civil, cultural, political, social and economic dimensions.*

*“Denial” infers how our systems and our institutions reinforce present-day inequities. It may not be intentional; in fact, it may be subtle. But it requires us to change the conversation, address inequities and reshape how we work so that every Edmontonian has equal opportunity to thrive, prosper and contribute to their community.*

**Bishop Alexander:** *I think I would add that this human rights focus takes us into the UN conventions on the Rights of the Child. There is a very important assumption in eliminating poverty: we cannot eliminate poverty without focusing on children —building their capacity to be resilient and ensure their healthy and prosperous future. It is also our fundamental responsibility as a society to provide appropriate care and nurturance for our children so they can enjoy life and participate fully in community life. I like the quality of life piece too — we can throw that phrase around quite easily but quality of life has something to do with dignity.*

**Mark Holmgren:** As you know, residents are often critical of governments making decisions without duly involving them in identifying options or solutions. EndPoverty Edmonton seems to have gone beyond consultations to include engagement of people from all walks of life, especially people with lived experience.

Can you speak to the efforts made to be optimally inclusive of people affected by poverty and how their voices and ideas helped shaped the EPE strategy?

**Mayor Iveson:** *From the beginning, we knew it was critical to hear from Edmontonians with lived experience or affected by the vicious cycle of poverty. We wanted to make sure we were doing all we could to ensure we were in conversations with those who are marginalized.*

*We also knew that, in any collective impact approach, which is central to our thinking, hearing those voices helped to direct us to workable, real-life solutions.*

**Bishop Alexander:** *We were really fortunate to have an incredibly rich resource from Families First Edmonton, a longitudinal and community-based research project led by the Community*

---

and University Partnership of the University of Alberta and 17 government and community partners, including the City of Edmonton, the United Way and Edmonton Community Foundation. This project engaged 1,200 low-income families from 2006 to 2011. Not only did the project produce important data for us to grapple with, but it also served as another key voice of those with lived experience.

**Mark Holmgren:** Can you point to one example of how such involvement influenced the task force to address poverty through a human rights perspective?

**Mayor Iveson:** *Including the voices of Edmontonians experiencing poverty first-hand enabled us to learn about barriers and the types of supports that helped families overcome poverty — many of these voices are incorporated into our EndPoverty Edmonton plan and its priority areas. Low-cost transit, affordable housing and the need for system navigators are examples of recommendations from these families.*

**Bishop Alexander:** *Our task force also benefited from the insight and wisdom of the youth of the John Humphrey Centre for Peace and Human Rights, many of whom have experienced trauma and poverty first-hand. Focused on decriminalizing poverty, addressing racism and creating a human rights city, their passionate contribution had a significant influence in our recommendations.*

**Mark Holmgren:** The overarching strategy of EPE under which the other 28 strategies sit is about changing the conversation and creating a movement to end poverty. Are citizens ready for this change in conversation? Do you think Edmontonians are ready to end poverty and understand how poverty is tied to people's human rights?

**Mayor Iveson:** *We tested our plan with thousands of Edmontonians and they told us they are more than ready to join us in the work to end poverty in a generation. In addition, we did an independent survey of Edmontonians about the task force's intentions. Although I was confident the public was ready for our plan, I admit to being a bit nervous about what the results would be.*

*As it turned out, the large majority of our citizens told us that they support the goal of ending poverty, that they believe it can be done, and that everyone has a role to play in reaching the goal. Such a resounding voice of support was encouraging to say the least and was a further motivation for our work.*

**Bishop Alexander:** *In the engagement sessions, while Edmontonians embraced the task force recommendations, there was also a sense of frustration that, for so long, we talked about tackling poverty but have not done much to solve it. We are confident that Edmontonians want to be part of the conversation to find solutions and change entrenched attitudes about poverty that have hampered significant progress in this work. To date, 650 individuals have signed on to our "count me in" network — ready to have their voices heard — a right that is often not exercised for many. We envisioned that EndPoverty Edmonton will provide the democratic space where people, especially those historically marginalized from these conversations, will find their place and their voices.*

**Mark Holmgren:** It is clear that your task force is not inclined to see poverty being eliminated by simply creating more programs and services. To what extent is the EPE perspective

---

important in the strategy to re-frame roles of governments and sectors in pursuit of a poverty-free Edmonton?

**Mayor Iveson:** *To be effective and successful, eliminating poverty will require the participation and partnership of different orders of government, philanthropic organizations, service agencies, non-for-profit groups and many others. From day one, the provincial government, at the most senior level, has been at the task force table and is now a key participant in the work on an implementation road map. We have had good discussions with the provincial government to date and look forward to working with them further.*

*While poverty policy levers are mainly outside municipal jurisdiction, we have shared interest and responsibility. Health outcomes, for example, will be enhanced if there is timely and multiple access to mental health supports or guaranteed incomes to ensure that individual and families have enough to afford a decent standard of living.*

**Mark Holmgren:** The EPE plan has 28 strategies, but it identifies six game changers. They are: Livable Incomes, Affordable Housing, Accessible & Affordable Transit, Affordable & Quality Child Care, Access to Mental Health Services and Addiction Supports and Eliminate Racism. How did you choose these particular game changers and how do these relate to rights?

**Mayor Iveson:** *These are fundamental areas of action that, when implemented, will make a significant difference for individuals and families struggling with poverty. While some game changers may encroach on our comfort zone, altogether these were common themes in our engagement with Edmontonians and are, in essence, basic rights for Edmontonians to fully take part in society. As a task force, we deemed that they deserved to be lifted up rather than just be considered as single strategies among the twenty-eight.*

**Bishop Alexander:** *We heard very strongly from close to 3,000 Edmontonians that these game changers were urgent actions that needed to be done to lift people out of poverty. Foundational actions such as eliminating racism resonate with the need to address stigma and discrimination that prevent many people from accessing the right opportunities to succeed. Then there are the other actions, such as liveable income and affordable housing, which aim to meet basic needs and help people live a decent life — for example, barriers to employment for Aboriginal people and newcomers. These game changers are strongly supported by research. We are well aware of the indisputable relationship between poverty and poor outcomes for children in school; and that a nurturing environment for children to grow contributes to healthy brain development which opens pathways towards a successful future.*

**Mark Holmgren:** How will you measure progress of the strategy? How do you make sure that you stay on track, even if not everything gets done as fast as you hoped? Who will be held accountable?

**Mayor Iveson:** *A significant success factor in our task force to date is the partnerships that have emerged with local leadership from numerous institutions in Edmonton.*

*One is the Edmonton Social Planning Council, which has enriched our work by producing a 2015 baseline poverty profile for Edmonton, with another to come this year. In order to measure change, it is important to know your starting point. In calculating a living wage for Edmonton this past year, the Planning Council's deep knowledge of our community is critical to*

---

*how we measure success as it has its finger on the pulse of the ever-changing landscape.*

*Another partnership I am excited about is an emerging and multifaceted connection with distinguished colleagues from the University of Alberta. From day one, we had leaders from my alma mater at the table, providing links to longitudinal research studies of vulnerable Edmonton families, to the business school, community engagement specialists and health professionals. This kind of rigour and expertise is playing a key role in our ability to understand the face of poverty in our city, and to develop a comprehensive framework to measure our progress in the years ahead.*

**Bishop Alexander:** *Fundamentally, our measure of success should resonate with our holistic definition of poverty — beyond income— and how people enjoy a life that is meaningful and connected to their culture and community. Throughout our process to date, we have had input from our task force’s information and research round table. We have kept the complexity of poverty before us as we have reflected on measurement and best practice.*

*We are confident that our measurement strategy will be comprehensive which starts from how people have achieved economic success in terms of liveable wages and better income, being able to access services at the most appropriate and timely manner, being able to exercise their rights, and be engaged in their community.*

*This means that keeping track of progress and success will be a combination of multiple measures of well-being, grounded in people’s experience and in their stories. The attention we pay to measurement will help us see the progress of our actions, and allow us to adapt to changes in the environment that might negatively impact the achievement of our goals.*

*We are currently working on a stewardship model grounded in a collective impact approach. This will allow us to steer the course, catalyze coordinated action, communicate, broker new partnerships and be accountable for the success of the ten-year road map.*

*This includes identifying accountabilities at the individual action level — organizations which have committed to take the lead will be accountable for this commitment, including public institutions. As for the overall strategy, it will be this potential stewardship structure that defines responsibility and accountability.*

**Mark Holmgren:** *There is a cost to all of this. Ending racism, improving human rights, and taking actions to increase affordable housing, low-cost transit, access to early childhood centres, and so on all cost money. Where might the money come from and how should poverty elimination stack up against other budget challenges?*

**Mayor Iveson:** *To shift our conversation from “managing” poverty to “ending” poverty, it takes the effort of many from across all walks of life and from all sectors. The annual cost of poverty to Alberta has been estimated at upwards of \$7 billion. Work is now underway on an implementation roadmap, to be unveiled later this spring that will chart a ten-year plan to get our work going, including how this community effort will be funded.*

*Many policy levers that deal with poverty are under the jurisdiction of the Alberta Government. The Province has been at the task force table since day one and continues to be with the change in government. In spite of pressures from the economic downturn, we have had good*

---

*discussions about working together.*

**Bishop Alexander:** *I believe that if we truly shift how we look at poverty and seek solutions that are upstream in nature and focused on root causes, we will in the end save money as a community. Edmonton, for example, is well into its ten-year plan to end homelessness, something our interfaith community has been a key partner on. It is clear that eliminating poverty will help us end homelessness, by turning off the tap and stopping that cycle of people who are impacted by poverty.*

---

### **About the interviewees:**

Mayor Don Iveson Don Iveson is Edmonton's 35th Mayor. Since his election in 2013, Mayor Iveson has set his sights on transforming Edmonton into a highly uplifting, more resilient, globally competitive, well-governed city that is recognized as one of Canada's very best places to build something great.

Bishop Jane Alexander Bishop Alexander, known to all as "Bishop Jane," is Mayor Iveson's co-chair on the Task Force for the Elimination of Poverty. She has been the 10th Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Edmonton since she was elected, consecrated, and installed as chief pastor in May 2008.