Living wage effort is a moral responsibility: Bishops Bird and Crosby

Cake-and-Loaf
Photo by Tamara Kate Photography
Josie Rudderham and Nicole Miller of Cake and Loaf Bakery. The bakery is among 30 organizations in Hamilton that have recognized the importance of paying a living wage. Bishops Douglas Crosby and Michael Bird argue living wage is about dignity and well-being.

Hamilton Spectator

By Bishop Douglas Crosby and Bishop Michael Bird

"Money isn't the bottom line for everything, people are the bottom line for everything," said a participant at the recent Social Audit conducted in Hamilton.

We couldn't agree more. As a society we are called to care for the dignity and well-being of all our citizens. Yet more than 29,000 Hamiltonians go to work but do not earn enough at their jobs to move out of poverty.

This reality must spur us to action. At a time when many seek to sow division and discord, paying living wages is an act of justice and inclusion.

As bishops we have had the privilege of hearing many stories from Hamiltonians and it's abundantly clear that no one chooses to live in poverty.

Five years ago, a coalition of community partners including the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction and the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton launched the Living Wage Hamilton initiative to encourage local employers — including the municipal government — to end working poverty in the city. Our diocesan offices are rooted in Hamilton and since that time we have sought to meet or exceed the current living wage rate of $15.85 per hour for all our staff. We believe that providing employees with living wages is important; for it speaks to our belief that God has provided enough for all if we truly embrace the call to equitably share these resources.

Establishing living wages holds the promise to transform the lives of so many in our province; providing a decent quality of life with opportunities to fully participate in our society through recreation, culture, and entertainment. If we implement a fair minimum wage in Ontario the very fabric of our society would be transformed for the better.

Of course many will argue their budgets simply won't allow for this practice to be implemented. We understand the challenges to make ends meet. But such challenges do not absolve us of our responsibility and we must be steadfast in moving toward the vision of a society where all have enough.

We, along with over 30 organizations in this city, have recognized that we have a moral responsibility to guarantee that all of our employees receive a wage that lifts them above the poverty line.

Paid employment, after all, should be a pathway out of poverty.

Drawing on a deep commitment to the people of this community, our encouragement is two-fold:

•first, we echo the call of the recent Social Audit report and urge the City of Hamilton to pay all of its employees a living wage as part of the 2017 city budget. Paying a living wage would enhance the City's noble aspiration to be the best place to raise a child and age successfully;

•and second, that local business leaders embrace their moral responsibility to the 29,000 people in Hamilton who work but don't earn enough to be freed from a life of poverty.

Together we can unbind those held captive by poverty; bringing release to those who are marginalized by low wages. All Hamiltonians, and indeed all people, should have an adequate standard of living, with proper housing, food security and good jobs.

We firmly believe that when living wages are paid, human dignity is enhanced, communities are healthier and everybody can better share in the abundance of this incredible City.

Bishop Douglas Crosby leads the Roman Catholic Diocese of Hamilton and Bishop Michael Bird leads the Anglican Diocese of Niagara. Tomorrow night, Wednesday, Feb. 15, this and other subjects will be addressed at Give Us A Chance to Succeed, a report on the 2016 Hamilton Social Audit. The event is being held at the Nicholas Mancini Centre behind the Cathedral at 44 Hunt St., Hamilton, from 7 to 9 p.m.