

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, P.C., M.P.  
Prime Minister of Canada  
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Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

The Honourable Chrystia Freeland, P.C., M.P.  
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Privy Council Office, Room 1000  
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The Honourable Patty Hajdu, P.C., M.P.  
Minister of Health  
House of Commons  
Ottawa, ON, K1A 0A6

**A Letter Addressing Increased Vulnerabilities and Access to Health Care During the  
Covid-19 Pandemic**  
December 21, 2020

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

It is the duty of the Church to speak into the public sphere on matters of grave social importance and our present context moves The Presbyterian Church in Canada to do so. Jesus calls us to love our neighbour and used the story of providing medical and economic care to someone in need to explain what love of neighbour is.<sup>i</sup> Our statement of belief, *Living Faith*, also reminds us that “Justice involves protecting the rights of others... [and] seeks the best way to create well-being in every society. It is concerned about employment, education, and health as well as rights and responsibilities.” (*Living Faith* 8.4.3-8.4.4)

As the COVID-19 pandemic that has gripped the globe continues, several things have become painfully apparent:

- The impacts of the virus (health, economic, social, etc) disproportionately affect those already vulnerable both in Canada and around the world<sup>ii</sup>
- Indigenous communities, in particular those on reserves where access to health care services can be difficult, housing may be limited, and where there are boil-water advisories that make handwashing difficult, are at particular increased risk<sup>iii</sup>
- Long Term Care facilities are also especially vulnerable and many lack the resources to deal with this pandemic. Health care workers often carry heavy burdens, and some support staff—for example, Personal Support Workers (PSWs) remain underpaid<sup>iv</sup>
- Housing and food insecurity are increasing across Canada and around the world<sup>v</sup>
- Increased stress, isolation, and insecurity have made room for a significant increase in domestic and partner violence<sup>vi</sup>
- Human trafficking, including child sexual exploitation and online trafficking, has also increased<sup>vii</sup>

In order to address these and other realities, work across multiple fronts and at multiple levels of government, as well as social and international cooperation, is necessary. To end the pandemic, effective treatment, prevention, and vaccination against the virus is vital. Access to equitable quality health care is a human right, and the social consequences that occur when that right is not met are all the more apparent in a pandemic. Additionally, the increased vulnerabilities in areas of housing and food insecurity and safety from domestic violence or human trafficking must be addressed.

The first vaccine against COVID-19 to be approved in Canada, the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, is rolling out over the next few weeks. But already some challenges are apparent; among them, the exclusion of the Territories from the first wave of vaccine rollout due to logistical issues with the type of storage needed to keep the vaccine effective.<sup>viii</sup> While acknowledging the difficult logistical issues involved, The Presbyterian Church in Canada reaffirms its stated position that:

- Everyone should have equal access to the best available health care regardless of ethnic, religious, sexual, age or economic distinctions<sup>ix</sup>
- Everyone has the right to expect the implementation of those social, economic, occupational and environmental measures which encourage health.<sup>x</sup>

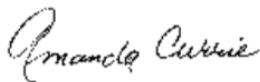
From that position, we call upon the Government of Canada to:

- Ensure that all in Canada, including in the Territories, more remote or difficult to reach areas, and Indigenous communities have the ability to be vaccinated swiftly and equitably, and have equitable access to all needed health care
- Explore and implement effective means to address the increased housing and food insecurity, either through benefits or programs such as a Guaranteed Basic Income
- Work with local and national anti human trafficking advocacy groups to identify how trafficking has changed over the pandemic, what has allowed it to flourish, and how best to implement a program to stop human trafficking.
- Work with local and national anti-violence groups to identify means to increase support for those facing violence in their homes

No matter our creed, we are all always called to pursue the kind of fulsome justice that concerns itself with well-being, employment, education, health, protection, and fair laws justly administered. In this time of increased isolation, vulnerability, and crisis the need to live out that calling has never been clearer. We thank the Government of Canada for the work it has already done to pursue fulsome justice, but emphasize that more—and more targeted—work is needed, especially in the areas highlighted here.

We look forward to your response and in the meantime please rest assured of our prayers during this difficult time.

Sincerely,



The Rev. Amanda Currie  
Moderator  
145th General Assembly  
The Presbyterian Church in Canada

C.c.:

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<sup>i</sup> In the story of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37.

<sup>ii</sup> See the Canadian Human Rights Commission's statement, "Inequality Amplified by Covid-19 Crisis" available at <https://www.chrc-ccdp.gc.ca/eng/content/statement-inequality-amplified-covid-19-crisis>

<sup>iii</sup> "The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic poses a grave health threat to Indigenous peoples around the world. Indigenous communities already experience poor access to healthcare, significantly higher rates of communicable and non-communicable diseases, lack of access to essential services, sanitation, and other key preventive measures, such as clean water, soap, disinfectant, etc. Likewise, most nearby local medical facilities, if and when there are any, are often under-equipped and under-staffed. Even when Indigenous peoples are able to access healthcare services, they can face stigma and discrimination." United Nations department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Covid-19 and Indigenous Peoples" <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/covid-19.html>

<sup>iv</sup> "Beneath the lack of pandemic preparedness for continuing care lie many systemic problems.

Historically, Canadian society has undervalued the continuing care workforce, which consists mostly of racialized women who are underpaid for the important work they do. Personal support workers (or health care aides), who provide the day-to-day personal care, psychological support and other care needed by residents, can earn as little as \$14 per hour. Poor pay forces many to work shifts in several care homes in order to earn a living wage, which has contributed to the spread of SARS-CoV-2 across facilities. Many residents in continuing care share rooms, and staff are expected to care for more patients than they should, which presents obvious challenges to controlling the spread of infectious illness." Jayna M. Holroyd-Leduc and Andreas Laupacis "Continuing Care and Covid-19: A Canadian Tragedy that Must Not Be Allowed to Happen Again" CMAJ June 08, 2020 192 (23) E632-E633; available at <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/192/23/E632>.

<sup>v</sup> "The impacts of the pandemic and the economic fallout have been widespread, but are particularly prevalent among Black, Latino, Indigenous, and immigrant households. These disproportionate impacts reflect harsh, longstanding inequities — often stemming from structural racism — in education, employment, housing, and health care that the current crisis is exacerbating." Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "Tracking the Covid-19 Recession's Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships" published December 10, 2020 available at <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and-employment-hardships>; Also "2020 marks the most severe increase in global food insecurity, impacting vulnerable households in almost every country." World Bank, "Food Security and Covid-19" accessible at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-and-covid-19>. For Canada: "Even before COVID-19, nearly 4.5 million Canadians struggled to put good food on the table for themselves and their families. In the first 2 months of the pandemic, that number grew by 39%, affecting 1 in 7 people." Community Food Centres Canada, "Beyond Hunger: The Hidden Impacts of Food Insecurity in Canada" published September 2020.

<sup>vi</sup> See for example Kim Usher et al. "Family violence and COVID-19: Increased vulnerability and reduced options for support" International Journal of Mental Health Nursing (2020) 29, 549–552. Available online at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/inm.12735>

<sup>vii</sup> See for example "Social media-based trafficking on the rise during coronavirus pandemic" United Nations News, Nov 10 2020, available online at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/11/1077402>

<sup>viii</sup> "Here's the COVID-19 vaccine rollout plan, province by province," CBC news December 10, 2020; accessible at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/covid19-vaccine-rollout-plans-canada-1.5836262>

<sup>ix</sup> Acts and Proceedings of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1982, pp. 326-327, 99.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.