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Love the City Conference Gathers Faith and Secular Leaders to Combat Poverty

Image



Making connections and pooling resources for a shared vision

How can we combat poverty and inequality in Calgary, right now?

Spark. Equip. Connect.

Those were the three goals of organizers of last weekend's [Love the City conference](#). The gathering brought together more than 80 of the most active and committed people in the city on these issues.

It especially aimed to bridge and link the city's faith community and secular

organizations, to share their knowledge, strategy and resources.

The referenced media source is missing and needs to be re-embedded.

The conference came out of a series of simple questions. How does the city work when it comes to these issues? What are the best and most inspiring things that are already happening? Who needs to know each other, and doesn't?

There was another related goal, reflected in the name of the event: to spark a new story, a new narrative of what's happening in Calgary, and develop a new affection for the city based on that often untold story.

"Here's the idea," conference coordinator Evangeline Hammond says.

"The Christian churches in Calgary, they have incredible potential as resources in community development. They have got buildings, they have got a volunteer workforce that has a shared ethic and shared energy. They've got money that is not tied up in bureaucracy. They are so incredibly free to do so many things, because they are private institutions."

They also have unique knowledge of the community and deep roots in neighbourhoods.

"And then we have these secular organizations also doing fabulous things. They have knowledge and training that enables them to do things very intelligently and very efficiently, that the churches don't have."

The two groups have a shared vision, but assumptions, maybe even a bit of fear, can keep them apart.

Evangeline has seen, in her own work at Bethany Chapel with community development pastor Heather Webber, and as a grassroots, live-in activist in a community house run through Calgary Housing, that partnerships are absolutely possible and can do beautiful things.

Over the weekend, these groups got to know each other better, and inspired each other with their best ideas.

Local partnerships between churches and social workers. Using church kitchens, that already have commercial licenses, for immigrant women to start small businesses.

Empowering new leaders, through dynamic processes like the Calgary Poverty Reduction Initiative's recent Poverty Talks Pecha Kucha event. The co-op model.

There can be an easy assumption, Evangeline says, that Calgary is an oil city that is selfish, isolated and behind the times when it comes to innovative social programs.

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The Love the City conference was full of opportunities to meet in deep conversation and small groups.

Pictured: Lemlem Haile, right and Cesar Cala. (Photo: John Nguyen)

"Which is not the case," she immediately adds. "Even in my couple of years involved in community development, I was seeing such exciting things."

One of her own favourite examples is a small idea that is having large effects. She describes meeting a former refugee from Kenya who is running a soccer program for boys in a low-income neighbourhood.

"We have a lot of youth unemployment, a lot of social barriers. The boys are often outside, they get kicked out of their houses and they don't have anywhere to go so they just start causing trouble."

The soccer program has become a gateway for many changes.

"They are getting references for jobs out of this. They have a leadership training development program. They're having mentorship with other men in the neighbourhood."

The spark and connection goals of the event reached her too. She met other people who are doing change work through community houses, and they are forming a loose network for mutual support.

One of the conference's organizing questions was: What are first steps that ordinary groups of people can take to become a part of the much larger story of transformation happening in Calgary?

Some of them took those steps at the Love the City conference, and the results are bubbling in many directions.

"Who knows — maybe we can do this again next year. I'm not saying it yet, my volunteers would kill me, but I'd like to look at maybe having this as a regular event."

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