

Pope Francis invited to Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

An interfaith group has sent letter with hope the pontiff will bring focus to poverty in area

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Tom Beasley and Judy Graves with a letter to Pope Francis asking the pontiff to visit Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Photograph By Ric Ernst

VANCOUVER — A group of Vancouver residents representing a broad interfaith community have invited Pope Francis to tour the Downtown Eastside and two First Nations reserves.

The unusual request involves members of the Jewish, Muslim, First Nations, Anglican, Catholic and United Church communities, who believe Pope Francis could spur real change in the welfare of the city and province's poor and homeless.

The invitation has received the endorsement and support of both the Catholic Archdiocese and the Anglican Diocese, who agreed to deliver the written message directly to the Pope through Vatican emissaries in addition to a couriered invitation that the group delivered to the Vatican's front door.

Letter to Pope Francis

The effort to get the Pope to Vancouver is not being organized by the churches themselves. Instead, it is the brainchild of Vancouver lawyer Tom Beasley, who said he was motivated after seeing virtually no change over a decade of travelling through and walking in the

Downtown Eastside. He enlisted the support of a friend, former City of Vancouver homeless advocate Judy Graves, and members of faith communities. The group believes the Pope — who has made helping the marginalized a major plank in his administration — will respond to the invitation positively.

“I have travelled through the Downtown Eastside daily on a bus for 25 years, and I don’t see change. In fact, I see things worsening,” said Beasley, who is a member of the United Church. “It would appear that the organizations, governments of various levels and those who care about the Downtown Eastside have struggled and have not found solutions.”

Beasley said he saw in Pope Francis an opportunity to bring focus to the issue of homelessness and despair, not just in Vancouver but elsewhere.

“I have watched with great interest and amazement as a non-Catholic person the grace and humility, but focus, that the current Pope Francis gives to the marginalized,” he said.

Graves, who calls herself an “Anglo-Catholic,” said she was captivated by Beasley’s idea. She has watched, equally, as efforts have often failed in the Downtown Eastside, and she believes a lot of this is because the solutions do not reach into what she believes is the real problem.

“I believe that this visit is necessary because overwhelmingly, the depths of poverty and homelessness are a spiritual problem. It is a spiritual problem of people who have wealth and power,” she said. “It is caused by greed and by disdain of the poor and every time that we see a person thought less of, that person’s life is shortened.”

Graves believes that a visit by Pope Francis would change not the disenfranchised of the Downtown Eastside and First Nations reserves, but those with wealth and power who can make a difference.

“I think it is everybody’s job to minister to the poor. I think where the Pope has particular influence is being able to minister to the rich and the powerful. They need the ministry most,” she said.

Beasley and Graves have received powerful support from other faiths, as well. In late February, the signatories — including members of First Nations communities, Muslim and Jewish faiths, the Anglican, Catholic, United Church and Alliance Church of Canada — gathered at St. James Anglican Church in the heart of the Downtown Eastside. There, watched by Father Matthew Johnson and Peter Elliott, the dean of Christ Church Cathedral, eight people signed the letter.

“Vancouver is one of the world’s most beautiful cities with much wealth — yet its urban core (the Downtown Eastside) has large growing numbers of persons who are homeless and who have mental disabilities. Many are indigenous peoples from remote reserves, often from communities of great despair. Our governments, churches and social agencies have not struggled hard enough to find solutions,” the letter states.

“Your presence and message will bring a spotlight internationally to those concerns and we are confident will start a dialogue towards resolution through engaged leadership from residents, governments, churches and social agencies. Ideally that visit would occur in the

months of May to September, perhaps when you are next in North America.”

The group specifically invited the Pope to walk the Downtown Eastside and engage in discussions and break bread with residents and others; visit an urban and remote reserve in Canada, and celebrate a mass from a barge in English Bay “surrounded by indigenous canoes.”

They also are asking for an act of reconciliation between indigenous peoples and Christians by inviting the Pope to be transported to the barge by one of those canoes.

Mufti Aasim Rashid, a representative of the Muslim community, said he signed the letter acting on a view that interfaith communities need to do more than speak platitudes about solving community issues.

“I feel very strongly about this. The interfaith platform in the world right now is very big but it will only become beneficial and useful to us if we use it to work on issues that affect all of us,” said Rashid, who until recently was the director of religion/Islamic education for the B.C. Muslim Association.

“We have to step beyond the dialogue aspect of interfaith and turn it into something much more powerful. And it is very powerful. Once we understand the issues that are affecting all of us in society — whether it is crime or homelessness or domestic abuse or drugs, these are issues that require the cooperation of everyone. As far as religious figures are concerned, there is a greater calling than just tending to our congregations and giving them spiritual advice and counselling.”

Rashid said the Pope, as one of those influential religious figures, can help move the dialogue on homelessness.

“In my mind, the objective is to tackle homelessness. He is an influential person. If bringing him over here and perhaps opening up a channel for dialogue, then I am all for it,” he said.

Rabbi Philip Bregman said all of the letter’s signatories have a common goal of wanting to better their community. In Pope Francis he sees a messenger.

“The idea of inviting this cleric, the head of the Catholic church, to Vancouver, and that this invitation is not simply coming from the Catholic church and from Christians, but is coming from individuals across a broad spectrum says a lot as to who we are as a city and who we are as a community,” said Bregman, the executive director of Hillel B.C., the largest Jewish student organization in Western Canada.

Others who signed the letter — in addition to Beasley, Graves, and Rashid — were Rabbi Philip Bregman of Hillel B.C., Susan Tatoosh, the executive director of the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society, Kevin Gillese of the Roman Catholic Church, Cheryl Bear Barnetson of the Nadleh Whut’en First Nation, and Karen Giesbrecht of the Alliance Church of Canada.

Pope Francis, who has built strong interfaith relations, has earned Bregman’s respect. “As a Jew and a rabbi, I know that when the Jewish community centre was firebombed in Buenos Aires, he was one of the first, if not the first individuals to get there and condemn it. From a

Jewish point of view he has demonstrated time and time again his willingness and real desire to engage in dialogue.”

That, he said, lends weight to why inviting the Pope to weigh in on Vancouver’s intractable homelessness and poverty issues is so important. He pointed to the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics as an example of how the city failed on that score.

“Unlike the Olympics, which was a spotlight on the city in which we tried to ignore the weakest and most vulnerable members of our society, this is bringing a world player into the city with the spotlight on the most vulnerable in our society,” Bregman said. “While the focus is on homelessness, it is my hope that it will become more than just a sound bite, that we will take it seriously, as a rallying point, where we have people come to the city.”

Beasley said the group couriered the letter to the Vatican directly. But as added insurance they asked for assistance from the Catholic and Anglican churches. Archbishop Michael Miller of the Vancouver Diocese, agreed to deliver a copy through his Catholic Church channels. Elliott delivered a copy to Archbishop David Moxon, who is the head of the Anglican Centre in Rome and the Anglican representative to the Holy See.

“We wanted our letter to go in through the front door of the Vatican, as a message from a group of ordinary, but concerned people,” said Beasley. “But we also appreciate the fact that the Catholic and Anglican Archbishops agreed to make sure the letter reached the Pope through their channels as well.”

The original letter arrived last week. The group has not received a reply yet.