

POVERTY ON TRIAL

Surviving grind of being poor takes anger and a will to fight

One member of the panel says 'society's guilty if it stands by and doesn't say a word.'

By Alison Uncles
The London Free Press

An "uncaring" society was left swinging in a tight noose Thursday night at a panel discussion that was dubbed "poverty on trial."

"The awful thing about poverty," said Roger Smith, executive director of Mission Services of London, is that "it takes away your dignity. A while, you actually believe you're guilty."

Smith said he often sees "life prematurely end" after anger is sapped by person's fight against poverty. "It's pretty darn hard, year after year, month after month . . . to walk behind a funeral casket."

Rev. Susan Eagle, a panel member, said "society's guilty if it stands by and doesn't say a word." Guilty also, she said, of pigeon-holing the poor into the stereotype of being lazy.

Eagle attacked figures in a 1990 city budget proposal that says 70 per cent of welfare recipients in London are employable. She whittled the figure to 10 per cent, saying the city's numbers include single mothers, people who have barriers to employment, such as a lack of training, and those who are medically unable to work.

"When I find someone who is poor and angry, I celebrate" because "the problem of poverty still might be solved."

TAX SYSTEM ATTACKED: Panel members in the discussion organized by the Unitarian Fellowship of London blamed what they called an unfair tax system, financing for projects inaccessible to the poor and an uncaring society for the number of people living below the poverty line.

Statistics Canada defines families who spend 62



Ken Wightman/The London Free Press

Rev. Susan Eagle makes a point during a panel discussion on poverty while Roger Smith of Mission Services of London looks on.

per cent of their income on food, clothing and shelter as living at the poverty line. In 1988, 13.1 per cent of Canadians were living below the poverty line.

Colleen Debert, president of the London Union of Unemployed workers, pegged London's figure of those who live below the poverty line at 64,000.

For one woman in the audience of about 30, struggling to rise above the poverty line has meant applying for more than \$20,000 in Ontario student loans in six years of working toward a university degree.

"It's better than the hell of being on welfare or the hell of being on family allowance," said the 36-year-old single mother of two. She will graduate this spring with a degree in social work from the University of Western Ontario. "I have this debt load, but to me it was worth it."