

News about the Montréal & Ottawa Annual General Meeting

Saint-Anne-de-Bellevue, QC, May 30, 2010 -- With hundreds of delegates singing "Halle, Halle Halle, Halleluja" as young people danced and solemn children carried candles, Rev. David Fines, communicator and person in charge of French communication for the United Church of Canada, was draped with the symbolic green stole of office and installed Sunday as President of the Montreal and Ottawa Conference.

Fines replaces Rev. Neill Wallace of Ottawa. Rev. Debbie Poirier of Rawdon, QC, became president elect.

Earlier Sunday, M&O delegates revisited the controversial subject of the Middle-East. A national church meeting last year urged all United Churches across the country to "enter into consultation, dialogue, study and prayer and then to take appropriate action" toward ending the illegal occupation of Palestinian territory. It also asked them to enter into conversation as how to move the two peoples - Israeli and Palestinian - toward reconciliation.

After an intense discussion earlier in a workshop led by several Conference members who had recently been in the Middle East on official church business with both Palestinians and pro-peace Israeli opposition groups, delegates voted overwhelmingly Sunday to accept a position paper titled "A moment of truth: A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering", known as the Karois document, issued by the Council of Churches of the Middle East last December.

The Kairos document, signed by representatives of the major churches in Palestine, condemns anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, calls the Israeli occupation "an evil that must be resisted," and says that the best way to free both Palestinians and Israelis non-violently from extremists is "a system of economic sanctions and boycotts to be applied against Israel." It also says the sanctity of Jerusalem for the three great religions should be recognized. And it condemns the spread of Israeli settlements and the system of walls and barriers that accompany them. The Conference resolution says the document should be used by presbyteries, congregations and community ministries in discerning any appropriate action they may take.

Delegates also voted to urge the national church to do more consultation before proceeding with a recommendation to subject its staff to a further cut of 10 percent and once again reduce givings to community partners in Canada and abroad.

And delegates were invited to a right relations event with native peoples this autumn that is sponsored by the national church's Justice and Reconciliation Fund which supports projects by United Church groups that foster dialogue, reconciliation, and relationship-building between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.

Saturday night, in a moving and sometimes rollicking celebration with lots of enthusiastic music from a pick-up band and choir, Conference marked the ministries of five new pastors.

Andrew Hyde of Ottawa was recognized as a designated lay minister. He is Youth and Young Adult Minister for Ottawa Presbytery. Anne Montgomery, also from Ottawa and a candidate from Emmanuel United Church was ordained.

David A. Steele, Minister at St. Paul's United Church in Prescott, ON, in Seaway Valley Presbytery, is a former London bobby or policeman and ex-Salvation Army minister who was

admitted to the Ministry of Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care of the United Church.

Elizabeth Jones, Director of Studies at the church's United Theological College in Montreal, was readmitted to the ministry. And Dan Mulema, a candidate from Union United Church in Montreal where he was staff associate for a decade and known as "brother Dan," was ordained.

The theme of the three-day meeting was "Living in Right Relationships -- Vivre des relations justes -- Non Kwe Shon Ha."

The event opened with remarks by Rev. Maggie McLeod, Coordinator of the Aboriginal Ministries Circle of the United Church of Canada, who talked about the first time she realized she was different when she was a school child and a classmate called her a *dirty Indian*, and outlined the journey of exploration into her own culture and throughout her life that led her to become a United Church Minister.

Delegates heard Jeff Copenace, an Ojibway from northwestern Ontario and policy advisor to the federal Liberals, question whether we should celebrate the fact that just 50 years ago Canada's native peoples first obtained the right to vote in federal elections and that mere decades ago the country's residential native schools were closed.

"When the prime minister apologized to residential school survivors a couple of years ago, I was surprised at the impact it had on me," he said. "The schools were closed before I was born. But I was flooded with memories from my boyhood of my mother and my aunts taking me to pow wows, teaching me about our past... So many of our people were robbed of that, stolen from their communities and their families, robbed of their past."

"The aim of the schools and the system they set up was not to integrate but to eliminate. But here we are now. Just 50 years ago only 30 of us across the country had post-secondary education. Now there are 30,000."

"The problems we face are still huge," he said. "We need your help and we need your support but we are going to succeed. We are the most persevering culture in the history of the world."

But the most moving testimony came from Francine Lemay, sister of Corporal Marcel Lemay of the Sureté du Québec police who was killed in the Oka Pines 20 years ago. She talked about her "cure," her movement from bitter pain and anger over the death of her brother to a point in her life where she feels at peace and reconciled. Some of it came when she got to meet Mavis Etienne, a native resident of Kanasatake and a negotiator for the Mohawk people during the crisis 20 years ago. Etienne is working with others on a project to translate the Bible into Mohawk which the United Church supports.

Last week she brought Lemay and others to the place where her brother died. It was the first time she had been to the Pines.

"My brother has gone," she said. "I prayed for the family and I prayed to the Lord to transform this tragedy into something good. It's already happening."

As well as song, prayer, sermons and participation in worship led by native leaders within the church, delegates also were told that Canadian mining companies contribute to the serious

problems of human rights and the environment in the Philippines and that this must stop, by Rev. Shaun Friday, an official church observer of the Philippine elections earlier this month and the pastor at Beaconsfield United Church in a Montreal West Island suburb.

"Get informed and get involved," Friday said..

Pasteur Pierre Goldberger, who took part in the Moderator's exposure trip to Haiti between April 6 to 12, spoke movingly of the initial recovery of Haitians from earthquake damage and predicted a relationship between Haiti and Canada that would need at least a generation to repair all the damage.

And Gordon Lambie, a young group facilitator from Waterloo, QC pastoral charge, told youth delegates about his personal experience with Youth for Peace in Columbia.

All focused on the need for Canadian Christians to be partners with churches in the rest of the world.

Rob Bull

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