Toronto Conference Becomes An Affirming Ministry

By Julie McGonegal

TORONTO CONFERENCE VOTED overwhelmingly to become an Affirming Ministry at its 93rd Annual Meeting, held in Midland, Ont. from May 26–27. The vote means that it will work closely with Affirm United/ S’affirmer Ensemble, an organization in The United Church of Canada that describes itself as “working for the full inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and genders,” both in the church and wider society.

The decision came after two days of prayerful reflection and dialogue, with participants considering a question posed by former Executive Secretary Rev. David Allen: “As people of faith, what is God calling us to do?”

In her address to the meeting, guest speaker Rev. Emily C. Heath, an ordained minister with The United Church of Christ, linked personal testimony to her vision of an inclusive church. She recalled growing up gay and gender non-conforming in Orlando, Florida, where she returned as a first responder following the deadly shooting at the Pulse nightclub, a gay bar, in 2016.

According to Heath, we need to talk about LGBTQ issues for many reasons, among them the need to know and affirm people at their deepest level: “How can we form Christians of integrity if we tell them to leave part of themselves at the door?” she asked. Her question resonated with the theme of this year’s meeting, “Here I Am.”

Over the course of the two days, attendees envisioned how to build a church that affirms everyone, regardless of gender, sexuality, race, economic position, or other identity markers. As Sharon Aylsworth, a member of the Executive of Toronto Conference, put it, “Any marginalization is too much.”

Of the 181 ballots cast, 168 were in favour of Toronto Conference becoming an Affirming Ministry. Conference is currently working with Affirm United/S’affirmer Ensemble to plan and implement next steps. For the vision statement and updates, visit the Conference website at https://torontoconference.ca.

– Julie McGonegal is the Editor of Insight.
Planting Seeds of Friendship with Seoul Presbytery

By Martha Wood

OUR FAITH CALLS US to open our hands and homes in hospitality, and to cultivate friendships with those in foreign lands. In hospitality and friendship, members of our Conference and the Seoul Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) are coming to know one another and grow in faith.

For one week in May, Toronto Conference hosted 14 delegates from the PROK. This was the second part of an exchange between Toronto Conference and Seoul Presbytery. The first part of the exchange happened in October when a group of 16 Conference delegates travelled to South Korea.

Rev. Jessica McCrae, a Conference delegate, embraced the experience of hosting the PROK delegates: “It was wonderful to be able to welcome our friends to our home in Toronto. We rekindled friendships, prayed together, and shared the joys and struggles of being church.”

PROK delegates were shown new and different ministries within Toronto Conference. There was a day trip to the Woodland Cultural Centre to learn about residential schools and First Nations culture, highlighting the tragic history of colonization in Canada, the United Church’s role in residential schools, and the project of reconciliation with First Nations people. Delegates also enjoyed some sightseeing in and around Toronto, and an excursion to Niagara Falls.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the exchange was the conversation around Toronto Conference becoming an Affirming Ministry. The PROK delegates attended the Toronto Conference Annual General Meeting in Midland. As they sat in table groups and contributed to the discussion, they shared their insights into the cultural differences between Canada and South Korea, with LGBTQ people facing significant legal challenges and discrimination in the latter country.

Following the meeting, PROK delegates were split into pairs and welcomed into the homes of Toronto Conference delegates who had been part of the exchange in October. This gave them an opportunity to experience different United Church congregations throughout Conference. For me, this was the best part of the exchange. I was honoured to host youth pastor Jeongkyu Ahn and PROK General Secretary Rev. Mijung An. I found it meaningful to open my home to Rev. An after building a strong friendship with her in South Korea.

The exchange was meaningful to PROK delegates too. David Jeon, a youth delegate, said, “I was impressed by the liberal yet warm atmosphere of the Conference. Usually, in Korea, conservative churches are warm but not liberal, and liberal churches are liberal but not warm. I wish my church to be warmer too.”

This gathering of Toronto Conference and Seoul Presbytery of the PROK is hopefully the beginning of a long-term relationship built on sharing and growing in faith together.

– Martha Wood was a Toronto Conference delegate to the Seoul Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea.
Don Payne

Bloor Street Welcomes the Stranger  By Sue Kaiser

FRAGRANT AROMAS waft through the hall as a group of 15 Spanish-speaking women gather to practice their English conversation skills in the kitchen. Their children are in another room learning Spanish. When the food is ready and the table is set, the children take a break from their lessons and everyone sits down together to share friendship over lunch.

This is a regular scene at the Refugee Outreach Program run by Bloor Street United Church (BSUC), where talking with friends about familiar activities makes English conversation easier for adults who are learning a second language. The program also offers hospitality to new refugees. On a recent Saturday, a lately arrived refugee claimant was welcomed into the group with a baby shower organized by other participants.

BSUC’s Refugee Outreach Program is more critical than ever as a global refugee crisis coincides with increasing anti-refugee sentiment in much of the Global South. Francisco Venegas, a Refugee Outreach Worker, offers personal support and facilitates family activities with the help of volunteers drawn from the local congregation, program participants, and the wider community. Francisco came to Canada as a refugee from Peru, and his experience gives him deep insight into the importance of working together to welcome the strangers in our midst.

The Saturday morning language classes and support activities are part of a program participants have named “Yachayhuasi,” which translates “Knowledge House” in Quechua, an Indigenous language of the Central Andes. A group of mothers began the program five years ago, which also provides their children with Spanish lessons to strengthen family communication and resilience. Mothers and children are now better able to maintain important ties with extended family in their home countries.

Volunteers take turns leading the conversation group on topics as varied as mental health, nutrition, and world affairs. Nora McKay, a member of BSUC, meets with the group one Saturday per month. “We talk about politics, life stressors, whatever is going on in people’s lives. We all say what we feel. It is fun being with the group, and we do lots of laughing as well as talking about some serious topics. In the process, everyone’s English and overall confidence improves.”

Initially started with money approved by the BSUC congregation from a generous bequest, the Refugee Outreach Program is now an ongoing part of the congregation’s Social Justice mission, and also receives financial support from a presbytery grant. Working in tandem with local community services, the program ensures that isolated families can find the resources they need to resolve challenges, feel connected to a community, and thrive in Canada.

One single mother from Colombia with three children has attended for more than four years because she has found an encouraging group of people. She speaks for many others when she says, “My kids have made friends here, and I am 100% stronger because of the program.”

– Sue Kaiser is Chair of Bloor Street United Church’s Refugee Outreach Program Committee.
Toronto Conference’s 93rd AGM

“Here I Am”

Photography by Susie Henderson, Terry McPherson, and Kerrie Perry, with thanks to those who posted on social media.
An Interview with Bryan Buchan

BRYAN BUCHAN IS A RETIRED TEACHER, the author of several books for children, and a member of St. Matthew’s United Church in Richmond Hill. He is also an impassioned advocate for refugee rights and the adoptive father of seven children from Vietnam. He describes himself as a Christian fundamentalist—but it’s not what you think.

Tell me about your faith journey.

As a young adult, my church life was focused more on doing than on thinking or praying. I had taken on a number of organizational responsibilities as a member of St. Matthew’s United Church, but my faith didn’t have a lot of depth.

This changed when a new minister arrived in the early 1970s. He inspired me to reflect deeply on my beliefs, on the reasons for my activities. Sermons and study groups led many of us to real soul-searching, and I will always be grateful for the nudging we were given.

When the media began carrying images of the flow of refugees out of a broken Vietnam in the late 1970s, St. Matthew’s rose to the challenge, and I became co-chair of the refugee sponsorship committee. Over the next few years we sponsored six families, and all of them quickly became established.

There were many thousands of unaccompanied children in the refugee camps, and I ended up adopting some of these youngsters. I thought I was applying to take in one child, but God saw fit to bless me with seven. They have enriched my life beyond measure.

Where did that experience take your faith journey?

I guess it led to a gradual abandonment of dogmatic thinking. Yann Martel, in Life of Pi, says, “In the end, the whole of life becomes an act of letting go.” Through family and friends, I have experienced various religious traditions: Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Jewish. My two youngest sons were Buddhist.

And now I would describe myself as a Christian fundamentalist. By that I mean that I look to the Jesus of the gospels and ask what his central message is. How we act, and how closely we act like Jesus, is the true measure of faith, not the number of hours we spend in prayer or how profoundly we debate the symbolism of the Eucharist.

How has your journey shaped your view of today’s refugee crisis?

It saddens me greatly that the worldwide refugee population is increasing year over year, and is now at its historical high. So many lives disrupted, so many relationships torn apart, and so much hostility towards vulnerable newcomers.

Refugees are no more and no less valuable in God’s eyes than anyone else. They are the neighbours Jesus speaks of in the gospels. Like the Samaritan, we have a responsibility to love our neighbours. One planet, one race, one worldwide community.
Counterbalancing Canada 150

By Brian McIntosh

Art can be a clarion call to justice, a catalyst for reconciliation and healing. For Chris Harris, a hip-hop artist and activist who served as the main staff organizer of the Four Directions Festival held in Toronto last June, “The power of art, as an exhibition of culture and the longing to express human emotions of both joy and struggle, is unsurpassed.” That, he adds, is why the four-day event, which brought people of all cultures together in a quest for harmony and reconciliation, was “so important.”

Funded by the Toronto Arts Council, the City of Toronto, Toronto Conference, and various other donors, and supported by numerous arts organizations and performers, the festival was a project of the Restoring Relations Working Group, an alliance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners, including the Living into Right Relations Circle of Toronto Conference.

Conceived over a year ago as a counterbalance to the Canada 150 celebrations, the festival evolved into a cross-cultural exchange of truth-telling and intercultural education based on the sacred circle teachings of Indigenous peoples. There were acknowledgements of the land and the presence of Indigenous ancestors, as well as educational programming, alongside a diverse set of performances, at every event. The festival began in the East on June 16, at Dentonia Park, moved to the South on June 18, at Daniel’s Spectrum in Regent Park, then went to the West on June 19, at Shaver House at Broadacres Park, and culminated in the North at the Toronto Centre for the Arts on June 21, National Aboriginal Day.

“This festival was a different and important way to tell the real truth of history, and seek healing and harmony,” said Council Fire’s Andrea Chrisjohn. “We will continue to work together, with the churches and everyone, to restore right relations.”

– Brian McIntosh serves on the Living into Right Relations Circle of Toronto Conference.

Tech Talk

By Catherine Rodd

Welcome to Insight’s technology column. Please email your questions to the Editor.

Q: When we launched our church’s website in 2012, we put a copyright notice on the bottom. Someone said we should update this notice annually. Should we?

A: Yes, unlike books that carry copyright notices when they are published, website notices need to be updated annually. In other words, yours should say 2017. If you haven’t updated it since it went live, people coming to your site will think the content is old, and that they can use it freely. Current notices mean people know they need permission to use your material. The style should read: Copyright (or the symbol) 2017, followed by the name of the United church, location (city, province, country), and contact email (info@churchname.ca).

– Catherine Rodd is the Executive Director of Communications for The United Church of Canada’s General Council Office.
New Chapter for Conference’s Executive Secretary

“When in Doubt, Ask David.” That’s the advice Toronto Conference President Rev. Audrey Brown received when she began her new role. The phrase “ask David” has resounded—with great love and respect—in the hallways of the Toronto Conference office for many years.

Rev. David Allen was first called to a Conference staff position in 1989 and was Executive Secretary for over 20 years. On August 1, David took up a new position as Project Manager for implementing the remits. His presence in the Conference office is already deeply missed, including his institutional memory, his ability to weigh all sides of an issue, and his generosity, humility, and wisdom. We thank David for his many years of faithful service to Toronto Conference; he has guided us through some challenging times, steadying us with his prayerful support and practical knowledge.

In the words of President Audrey Brown, “David has led Toronto Conference through many changes, joys, and challenges. I can only offer my heartfelt blessing to him in his new task, and simply say that when The United Church of Canada was deciding who might lead us through the process of the upheaval that is structural change, it is no wonder to us that their choice was to ‘ask David.’”

We pray for God’s blessing on David as he begins this new chapter. We are deeply grateful that he will be working with the church “to make this transition,” in his words, “the best and most faithful it can be.” We also warmly welcome Rev. Jody Maltby, former Conference Minister for Vision and Mission for Living Waters Presbytery, as incoming Executive Secretary. Please keep both David and Jody in your prayers during this period of transition.

September 24: The Great Lakes Water Walk, co-sponsored by Toronto United Church Council, will take place on the Toronto waterfront. The Indigenous-led ceremonial walk to protect and honour nibi (water) is an invitation to pause and reflect on what we can do individually and collectively to ensure the health and well-being of our waters. Everyone is welcome. For further information, see: http://greatlakeswaterwalk.ca/ or email Kim Wheatley, GLWW Indigenous Culture & Protocol Director, at wheatleykwewag@gmail.com, or Lucy Cummings, GLWW Interfaith Outreach Coordinator, at director@faithcommongood.org.