There is Hope

The 9th Annual Fall Rally of the Toronto Conference of As One that Serves (AOTS) celebrated the message of the 38th General Council of the United Church of Canada. David Iverson presented a keynote presentation on the Church’s response to the residential schools issue.

Five themes from the General Council were presented and discussed in workshops at the Rally. Those themes were:

- The Practice of Walking with Others // The Church and Residential Schools
- That We May Know Each // United Church Relations with Muslims
- Same Sex Marriage // The Decision to Support Federal Legislation
- The Ministry of Camping // Church Funding and Gambling Dollars
- The Value of Life // Human Cloning, The Latimer Case, Genetically Modified Foods

The Practice of Walking with Others (David Iverson)

It was noted by workshop participants that 100,000 children attended residential schools. Of claims arising from abuse at those schools, Roman Catholic schools have 70% of the claims, Anglican schools have 20%, Presbyterian schools have 2% and United Church schools have 8%. There were 13 United Church Schools.

The United Church has about 800 of the 12,000 claims made against the residential schools system. About 40% of all United Church claims are from Alberta. About 10% of those claims are for sexual abuse. The United church has settled more cases than all other churches combined. Of those
that have been settled, the church has been found to be liable for 25% of the claims with the government 75% responsible.

The United Church had been questioning the appropriateness of residential schools for some time and the church is anxious to rebuild the relationship with Aboriginal people. The church has refused to negotiate without Aboriginal people present. In this respect the United Church’s response has been unique.

**That We May Know Each Other (Emmanuel Ofori)**

There was general discussion about the common history shared by Islam and Christianity. The majority of those present felt that the initiation of such a dialogue by the church was indeed a good thing especially in demographically changing Canada.

Both religions, it was pointed out, were monotheistic. Both have strong inclinations toward peace and both recognized a similar prophetic tradition. Both the Qur’an and the Bible include narratives about Adam, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon and Jesus.

One principle that was discussed was the necessity for both religion to recognize each other in a spirit of conversation and not conversion. Clearly, in Canada the issue of “Islamaphobia” was an important one to deal with. The General Council document, “That We May Know Each Other” is needed because it makes a contribution to understanding and not hysteria.

**Same Sex Marriage (Brian Perkins-McIntosh and Heather Burton)**

Sexuality is a profound topic and one that many find hard to discuss. Many people are anxious to learn more about the General Council’s decision and the issue of same sex relationships generally. A number of concerns were raised:

- support for same sex relationships is against Biblical teaching
- support for same sex relationships is not the business of the church
same sex relationships are an issue of justice and compassion for those who are gay and lesbian and their family members

the “golden rule” should rule

While there was significant amount of discussion and disagreement about the issue, there was joy that the climate for the discussion was a safe one and that there was respect for divergent views. There was great interest in how this discussion would be carried out in local congregations. A spirit of listening was clearly necessary. It was felt that these workshops were a brave and worthy model.

The Value of Life (Jim McKibbin)

There was considerable discussion about this topic and a number of divergent views were presented.

One school of thought asserted that society failed the Latimers. What purpose is served by keeping him in jail? Still another said we couldn’t judge him. We were not in his place.

Another indicated that it was the right decision – for him. He killed out of his suffering not his daughters. Only God can determine who lives and who dies. What about the next situation? Where is the line drawn? What about the interests of the child? He had options that did not include killing her.

Some people felt that there should be more control over physicians, who often exercise control over life. There are other issues besides biological and medical science. Miracles do happen. Many people provided evidence of faith recoveries and the spiritual movement of God in trying and desperate circumstances.

A number of people recalled instances where psychiatrists said there was no hope for a severely disabled individual – instances where the psychiatrists were proven wrong. What is NORMAL! What can we do to adjust this understanding? The church has taken a positive step against “ableism” as well. Before the disabled were locked up, "outcasted", hidden. We are all God’s children.
The Ministry of Camping (Beverley Burgess)

The subject of camping is one that us near and dear to the hearts of men in the Toronto Conference of AOTS. Many men from AOTS clubs have been active supporters of the four Toronto Conference camps through sponsorship of the “Youth to Camp” program, the Camping Opportunities Fund and by actively working to renovate and maintain existing camping facilities.

While the General Council passed a strong motion to financially support the ministry of camping it rejected a motion that the church drop its opposition to seeking support from organizations like the Trillium Foundation, which is funded by gambling dollars.

Clearly the issue of gambling dollars is an important one. While there was general agreement that the church had made the right decisions there was concern that the issue of gambling dollars needs to be more fully investigated. What exactly is the government doing with all the proceeds received for these various gambling endeavors?