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OttawaWatch 118: Yeltsin, Clinton in Vancouver

By Lloyd Mackey

The irony of this particular piece is that on March 28, 2021, when I was re-reading it, the actual events took place, not in 2007, when it was written, but April, 1993, when Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton met in Vancouver. So it is 38 years ago. Yeltsin, himself, has been gone for 15 years and the other characters in the story – Bill Clinton, Brian Mulroney and First Baptist's then senior minister, Bruce Milne – are all "senior statesmen" in their own fields of prominence. And all three are sought after for counsel by many of their successors.

Boris Yeltsin's death, this week, takes me back 14 years, to April, 1993, when he and a newly-elected United States president, Bill Clinton, met in Vancouver.

This story is mostly about Clinton and, to a lesser extent, about Brian Mulroney, who was just wrapping up his decade as Canadian prime minister. It is also about the historic First Baptist Church of Vancouver and a \$600 million decision that Clinton apparently made, within its walls.

And it can be told because Yeltsin played a major role in the painful process of moving his part of the world from Soviet communism to Russian democracy.

The 1993 Vancouver Summit took place because Russia badly needed North American co-operation and money to replace a clumsy and oppressive command dictatorship with a contemporary market economy. (As subsequent experience has shown, that was a tougher job than even Yeltsin might have anticipated. And it was not really accomplished until his tough-minded, steely successor Vladimir Putin took over the Russian reins in 1999.)

I was able to cover that particular slice of the story because, at the time, I was doing journalism from downtown Vancouver, within eyesight of the waterfront convention centre where the Summit took place. And we lived in an apartment that looked down, from the 10th floor, across a parking lot, to First Baptist, where Edna and I had been members for 13 years.

When the powers-that-be had decided that Clinton and Yelstin needed to get together and Mulroney agreed to host the Summit, the White House had a decision to make about where Clinton would worship on the Sunday morning of the event. First Baptist, St. Andrews-Wesley United and Christ Church Cathedral, the three historic downtown Protestant churches were in the running.

The president, who had sung in the choir at Immanuel Baptist in Little Rock, Arkansas, opted for the church which sounded most like what he was used to. Clinton was a bit of a conundrum. He had a lifestyle that often seemed a little raw and ready – as the Monica

Lewinsky affair, still in the future, would eventually come to demonstrate. Yet he also possessed a warm and engaging faith in Jesus Christ and an eager desire to study and understand the scripture.

(After the conclusion of that affair, he was asked by some of his spiritual advisors what he did in order to avoid the repetition of future lapses to temptation. He spoke quite movingly, in response, of his resorting to the reading of scripture, meditation and prayer, during times when temptation might seem ready to overtake him. Skeptics would remind us that Clinton could be a charmer and might have simply been wearing a pietistic mask. They might be right. But I am simply telling the story and hoping that lessons to be learned are not lost on the reader.)

Bruce Milne, a powerful Scottish-bred expository preacher, had been the senior minister at First since the early 80s. When he had taken on the pastorate, he disarmed his parishioners with a little catechism trading on his ancestry. “Why do the Scots love the gospel?” he would ask. In a moment he burred the answer: “Because it is frrrree, of courrrse!”

The church had grown to close to 2,000 under his ministry, and it was easy to see why, that morning, as Milne became the United States president’s “pastor-for-a-day.”

His sermon, based on an exposition of the Great Commission, was anecdotally supported by many stories about the strength and resiliency of the church’s witness in circumstances throughout the world. It gave Clinton some obvious points of reference in grappling with the gospel’s potential impact on any nation’s foreign policy.

But it was the pastoral prayer where Milne’s sensitivity to the president and his particular spiritual and leadership needs became most obvious.

He prayed for the unborn and for women who had difficult decisions to make about carrying those unborn children to birth. It was a significant reference, because, at the time, Clinton respectfully differed with his own pastor about issues surrounding life and choice. Milne wanted, in effect, to back Clinton’s pastor in his pro-life stance.

Then, he prayed for Hillary Rodham Clinton. Yes, he used the First Lady’s full name in the prayer. There was a reason. She was not in Vancouver with her husband, because she was in Arkansas, visiting her dying father, who passed away a few days later. Milne was making a point of the importance of family to the whole process of life, politics, faith and whatever else happens to be significant.

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From a journalist’s viewpoint – particularly one who tries to provide a little analysis about the practical relationships involving faith and politics – the next few moments, after the church service proved most interesting.

Up to that point, all the press briefings coming out of the Summit had the United States committing to \$1 billion in aid to Russia's struggling economy.

And the word was that Clinton was to head back to the Summit immediately after making a quick visit to the church's child care centre to wave to the kids.

However, it took a half hour for him to emerge from the church to board his motorcade. And moments later a new press briefing said the ante had been upped and now Clinton was committing \$1.6 billion to Yeltsin.

And it was also confirmed, later, that the church leadership had been asked to free up and secure a meeting room adjacent to the child care centre, where some urgent communication with the outside world could be established.

Now it was speculation as to what went on in that meeting, but the suggestion that a \$600 million decision had been made by the president of the United States, within the precinct of historic First Baptist Vancouver, was never contradicted or denied.

It made a great story for *ChristianWeek*. And it caused Edna and I to have a sense of quiet satisfaction that we were a part of a church that so sensitively and effectively played a helpful role on several fronts, at the time of the Clinton-Yeltsin Summit.

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