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Ottawa *Watch* 216: Steve Bell at the Street Level

By Lloyd Mackey

Pierre Poilievre and John McKay are still lurking around the Ottawa scene. On reflection, I would suggest that Poilievre has added a little heart to his message and McKay has emerged as a senior statesperson in the faith-political scheme of things. The Evangelical Fellow continues to bring together a number of (mainly Christian) faith perspectives, utilizing various tools to make their stance relevant.

Steve Bell was in town for the last week or so.

The versatile Winnipeg singer offered a showcase of Christian music containing elements of jazz, folk, Himalaya monk music, east Indian zither wobble (my description if not the official style label), taize and classical.

And, in most of those renditions, his group (a pianist, drummer and bassist) was backed by a fair segment of the Ottawa Symphony Orchestra, who had only had their first look at the scoring hours before the performance. The concerts, at Dominion-Chalmers United Church, drew 1,500 over the two nights.

Steve even had a little piece, powerful in its instrumentation but with no words. He had not, to that point, been inspired to put lyrics to it, so he dum-de-dum-dummed his way through. With a nod to his upbringing (he is now an Anglican) he quipped that what he was doing, at that point, was “Baptist tongues.”

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I learned from prison chaplain senior statesman Pierre Allard that Bell’s father, also a prison chaplain, used to take his son to a Calgary correctional centre with him. That is where Steve learned guitar – from the inmates.

Was the story true? It must have been. Allard is a great jail house story-teller, but he would never knowingly let an untruth pass his lips.

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One of Allard’s own best narratives is about taking his wife and infant daughter to the prison where he was chaplain at the time. As he gathered the inmates in a circle for worship, he introduced them to his daughter then passed her around the circle. Each hardened man held the little baby, then passed her on, until she was returned to her mother.

Then Allard talked quietly to the men, about how, in Jesus, they could be born anew. They could make a fresh start.

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All of which is to get to the main point: about Steve Bell's other reason to be in Ottawa.

He was an integral part of a triennial conference called Street Level, which brings together about 400 people whose lives are centred on providing Jesus' touch on the streets of Canada's cities. He was working with such as Julia Beazley, Sister Sue Mosteller, Dion Oxford, Greg Paul, Tim Dickau, John Mohan, Cheryl Bear, Bruxy Cavey, Tim Huff, Rick Tobias and ... I better stop here or I will leave out names I should have mentioned.

Through music and various other branches of the arts, through "how to" workshops and other learning tools, they shared together what they needed to do, to meet street level (inner city) needs.

One reason the Evangelical Fellowship and its other sponsors have the conference in Ottawa – just down the street from The Hill – is to make some links with the body politic.

The first evening was a banquet, attended by a fair number of politicians of all parties. One from each party was chosen to speak briefly. I will mention only the Conservative and Liberal representatives, to make a point.

Pierre Poilievre is the parliamentary secretary to the prime minister. He is a 30 something, polished, gentle, clear-speaking. And he said the right things. He talked about what the government was doing for families and communities and he noted earnestly how what the street level people were doing was even more important.

Several people commented, however, that what he said did not quite resonate with the crowd. Perhaps he needed, somehow, to convey, that he understood, at a heart level, what were the street issues.

John McKay spoke for the Liberals. He is 50 something. After talking about some of the people he meets on the street, as he walks from his Ottawa apartment to The Hill each morning, he spoke movingly about his own son, who struggles with mental challenges.

He sounded like he understood.

I pray that, in due course, Poilievre will reflect a similar depth. Both he and McKay are good people and good politicians – irrespective of party. Their connections are important in the process of helping the right things to happen, socially and spiritually, at the street level.

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