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Ottawa *Watch* 361: An unlikely gold mine

By Lloyd Mackey

The one Surrey, BC, example of this kind of right-leaning, faith-based social justice, did not, unfortunately, work out. The project involving Royal Heights Baptist Church and a developer fell apart, in part because of some allegedly corrupt and money-shifting arrangements involving the church leaders.

It remains, however, that a good deal of the city-building going on in Surrey – particularly in the City Centre area, does take into account involvement by faith groups or groups of faith-motivated people – Christian and otherwise. Some of that story was told in The Church in Surrey & WhiteRock: The Untold Story – a book project spearheaded by retired political scientist John Redekop in 2018.

Human Resources Minister Diane Finley calls it a “gold mine.” Some opposition critics believe it to be little more than “budget cuts in disguise.”

The “it” refers to what Heather Scofield, writing for Canadian Press on November 9, reported as Finley’s “call for concepts”. That call, in effect, asks businesses, not-for-profits and the volunteer sector to come up, basically, with new ideas for partnering financial improvements in the lives of the needy.

It is not the first time Finley has talked about this idea. She launched discussion about it last spring at the annual Manning Centre for Building Democracy (MCBD) conference in Ottawa. At that time, the concept was pretty much a gleam in her eye. Now, she is ready, having done her due diligence, to get some in the non-government sector to make some solid proposals.

As Scofield points out, Canada is taking its lead from both Great Britain and the United States, in getting into this stuff. And *Ottawa Watch* reported on the idea, under the title of “Big Society”, three years ago, when former British Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith spoke to an Institute of Marriage and Family Canada (IMFC) meeting in Ottawa about work he was doing in Britain in developing Social Justice Centres.

Some readers will suggest that “social justice” is a fair mix of left wing religion and politics, along with the class warfare mindset that is seen to mark a substantial segment of the union movement. The response from this corner is that Duncan Smith and other innovative centre-rightists are taking back the “social justice” idea from the left.

Scofield’s story described the Finley move as a “tentative step into the realm of social financing, by which private-sector investors are invited to provide up-front money, then collect a return on projects government traditionally pay for, such as homelessness or hunger.”

The reporter quoted Finley, addressing a Toronto forum, thusly:

It is our first official step in inviting your ideas to the table that can help shape future social policy in Canada – in a new way.

It is time for us to unleash individual initiative so that those who are motivated can help others and those who need help are given the opportunity to take more responsibility for themselves.

Finley's objective is to collect ideas until the end of the year, then put out a call for proposals or identify pilot projects. In time, she hopes to encourage social partnerships among government, business and non-profit sectors.

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If I may, it is a good time to introduce another strand into this piece. It comes from Surrey, BC, just a few blocks from where we lived before moving to Ottawa almost 15 years ago. There, Royal Height Baptist Church has teamed up with a developer to put together an integrated mixed use community in which the church plays a significant part of what happens. The site is close to the SkyTrain on the western edge of one of Canada's busiest urban renewal projects, known as Surrey City Centre. The project involving the church will be called The River, named for the fact that it will be located on land sloping gently up from the banks of the mighty Fraser.

The church-developer proposal reflects concepts being incorporated into a number of similar British Columbia innovations. Often they operate under the rubric of "campus of care" projects. Some are highly successful. Others find there are bugs to be worked out before they take off properly

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That said, it could well be that Finley's thinking, based on the kinds of responses that will come from her "call", will constructively reshape the means by which the deepest human needs are met through faith-social-business-labour-government partnerships.

Interestingly, according to Scoffield, Finley's ideas received guarded support from interim Liberal leader Bob Rae and outright dismissal from NDP whip Nycole Turmel.

Turmel, who come from a public sector union leadership background, suggested that Finley's proposals were "a public relations exercise to justify new cuts to services for Canadians."

But Rae described Turmel's response as "ideological claptrap", suggesting that P-3 (public-private partnerships), by which some of these concepts can be enacted, "have a pattern of success in different provinces in different situations."

My guess is that, in due course, what Finley is doing will work, not despite union and left wing opposition but because of the willingness of those sectors to strategically collaborate. Further, it

will take on real life in direct proportion to the involvement of highly-motivated faith-based movements and organizations – many of them Christian.

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By the way, that “gold mine” reference in the headline was an obvious Finley catch phrase. It was meant to get the attention of entrepreneurial listeners. Such people might, on a first attempt, be unwilling to accept that they have both responsibility and opportunity in responding to “social justice” concepts.

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