

July 10, 2007

OttawaWatch129: The emergence of David Onley

By Lloyd Mackey

David Onley continues to advocate for people with mobility issues. Ruth Ann continues as both a musician and an organizer of substantive musical production – sacred or otherwise. Their respective interests often result in them working together and that has been happening throughout the Pandemic.

One of my colleagues in the Press Gallery, Rob Linke, who covers Ottawa for some of the Atlantic Canada papers, tipped me off this week, to a potential “story-behind-the-story”. It related to Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s appointment of David C. Onley as Ontario’s new lieutenant-governor.

Onley, as it happens, is an evangelical Christian. Linke, knowing a bit about my readership, correctly ascertained that such information would be of interest for *OttawaWatch*.

Onley is not the only recent Ontario LG to have evangelical connections. Hilary Weston, who filled the role elegantly from 1997 to 2002, is part of a wealthy Toronto family that has long standing connections with Yorkminster Park Baptist Church.

Mind you, Yorkminster Park, sometimes referred to as the closest thing in Canada to a Baptist cathedral, cloaks its evangelicalism in dignified and carefully enunciated ecclesiastical language. Nevertheless, a worshipper at YP likely often has more in common with one frequenting Ajax’s Safe Haven Worship Centre, than, say, with the good folk at the more theologically liberal-leaning Bloor Street United, just down the street and around the corner.

Safe Haven, as it happens, is the place where David and Ruth Ann Onley, and their three adult sons, Jonathan, Robert and Michael, have worshipped for the past four years, ever since moving from Bayfair Baptist, a few miles to the west, in Pickering.

Bayfair Baptist is the church to which Onley invited the young and attractive Ruth Ann a quarter of a century ago, shortly after she considerably deepened her long-standing commitment to Jesus Christ. Ruth Ann, by her own admission, wanted to look over the many eligible bachelors the church was reputed to be harboring. She ended up marrying “the guy what brung her”, even though she was a bit hesitant about polio-induced disability, which forced him to walk with arm braces or ride a scooter.

The Onleys moved to Safe Haven at the time Sam Martin, who pastored Bayfair for 26 years, moved with several hundred members to start the new church further into the eastern suburbs of the Greater Toronto Area.

The reasons for the split are not for exploring in this column. Half a decade later, the two churches are both strong, community-oriented and complementing each other in the slightly different styles through which they worship and serve.

The folk at both Bayfair and Safe Haven are reportedly very happy that their “favored son” is Ontario’s new vice-regal.

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But a reading of both David’s and Ruth Ann’s bios are worth the time it would take, to learn something about the way they have both worked at integrating their Christian faith with community service.

Since earning a political science degree from the University of Toronto, David has served in several on-air capacities at City-TV in Toronto. He gained his media foothold by writing a best-selling sci-fi novel in the early 80s. That paved the way for him to become the science and technology person at City.

His handlers, however, always played up his disability, rather than trying to hide it. That gave him the opportunity to become an advocate for the disabled and the need for their public accessibility.

For her part, Ruth Ann has built a solid career as a contemporary and country gospel singer who enjoys sharing her faith through her music. In reading up on her career, I wondered whether her evangelical-charismatic church connections might narrow her potential influence and focus.

But the eclectic lists of events at which she has sung over the past couple years is enough to disarm any such possible misgivings.

One event early in her career caused a bit of a stir. She was invited sometimes to lead the crowd in the singing of O Canada. At one particular game, when she sang in both French and English, she was booed. That was before Canada was as bilingual as it is now.

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All of which leads to some interesting tentative conclusions about the ways in which many evangelical Christian people find their way into politics or closely-related fields.

There will be some pundits who will quickly decry the Onley appointment, perhaps even suggesting that evangelical people should not be permitted into places of influence. They will argue that some such will try to push God in a way that will make others feel uncomfortable, perhaps even trying to set up a Christian mirror-image of an Islamic Taliban.

Not to worry. True, there are some evangelicals ready to blast those who differ from them, as a means to build cleavage and sectarianism. There are many more who bring both spiritual and community-service motivation to the tasks that are laid before them.

From this corner, it looks like the Onleys will fill the bill nicely.

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