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Ottawa*Watch* 357: Church on a Hill

By Lloyd Mackey

Mauril Belanger, the Ottawa-Vanier MP referred to in this piece, passed away in August, 2016. We were happy to call him a neighbor: He and his wife, Anne, lived in a condo complex across the street from us in the Beacon Hill area of Ottawa's eastern suburbs.

There were few signs of religious demagoguery, when close to 200 United Church youth commissioners and Youth Forum members and some of their “elders” appeared on Parliament Hill Wednesday (August 16).

The young people took a break from the General Council meetings, the church's once-every-three-years' legislative gathering. The Carleton University meeting site in Ottawa afforded fairly quick access for a Hill appearance.

Your humble scribe, burdened down with three major papers to be ready for month end, in connection with my Tyndale Seminary studies, begged off taking in the Carleton GC events. But when the youth crowd assembled within 300 feet of my Press Gallery desk, it provided a good opportunity for an Ottawa*Watch* word picture.

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This was an orderly event and not overtly political. It was billed as a “pilgrimage of learning and prayer”. The “teachers” stood at the microphones mid-way up the steps in front of the Peace Tower. The young people, bright-eyed, seemingly happy, cross-legged, and listening carefully, sat below them on the wide Centre Block sidewalk.

The lead “teacher” – or “elder” – was Mardi Tindal, a genial sunny-faced woman whose three-year term as UC moderator ends this Friday. She talked a little about the opportunity to learn about the political process and the ways by which young people could prepare to engage in that process.

Three five-minute talks were delivered, intriguingly, and respectively by a Catholic member of parliament whose riding abuts on the parliamentary precinct, the president of the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC) who is a major in the Salvation Army, and an El Salvadorian Baptist pastor who talked about his nation's social justice martyr, Bishop Oscar Romero.

The whole session was pretty pro-Christian in the faith's broadest sense, but appreciative, as well, of an interfaith approach. If there was any more-than-Christian bias, it was toward native spirituality. That was triggered by a prayer led by Stan McKay, a past UC moderator and the first aboriginal to serve in that post.

The high points of the 45-minute session included:

- The assertion by Ottawa-Vanier MP Mauril Belanger (the aforementioned Commons member) that United Church young people should be encouraged toward political involvement not only because “you can” but because “you must.” He included a hit on bankers who take big bonuses. But otherwise, he stayed non-partisan, suggesting that all parties would welcome the involvement of United Church political aspirants.
- The note by Major Jim Champ, (the aforementioned CCC president) who suggested that the Council, co-founded by the United Church, can be said to represent 85 per cent of Canadian Christians from 25 denominations.
- The comment by Miguel Tomas Castro (the aforementioned Baptist pastor) which referred to the Canadian national anthem phrase that prays: “God keep our land, glorious and free”. Castro, as a self-admitted non-Canadian, suggested that both the glory and the freedom could legitimately be built on the base of the “values of the kingdom of God.”

The session began with what Moderator Tindal referred to as a “flash mob”, in which the young people sang vigorously about taking “every word of every story to every corner of creation” and “live lives to testify to love.”

For the previously-enunciated personal reasons, I will leave it to other media, who were present at the General Council debates, to report on those events. There was some drama and conflict reported from there, and also, underlying, some of the kind of diplomacy that I saw demonstrated in front of the Peace Tower.

Tindal, for her part, will return, after her moderator term, to her previous work of holding retreats that are committed to “sustaining courageous leadership in all vocations,” for United Church ministers and lay people. I will try, in a few weeks, to provide a bit of a profile of the new moderator and his or her role in the Canadian faith-political interface.

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