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OttawaWatch 108: On a cold day in February

By Lloyd Mackey

I re-read this piece 15 years later, ironically, on the day of the fourth election in two years, in the State of Israel. It is a bit early to know the results, but, whatever, the continuing tensions between the Israelis and the Palestinians will undoubtedly continue – along with all the complexities of Middle East politics.

Early last week, I was out for my daily constitutional walk around downtown Ottawa, almost freezing to death, when I encountered James Lunney, Conservative MP for Nanaimo-Alberni on Vancouver Island.

“Hi, Lloyd,” he called out to me cheerily, in a fashion that was impossible to avoid, despite the frigidity of the atmosphere.

As nearly as I can recall, he continued in this vein: “I hear you are going to Victoria later in the week.”

“Yes,” I responded warily.

“There is a very special night on Saturday, for Christians on Vancouver Island to honor Israel.

“Be there!”

Not to be one to try crossing swords with the venerable chair of the House of Commons Canada-Israel Friendship Committee, I agreed that if at all possible, I would be at the event.

It took place last Saturday night, February, 10, in the Victoria Conservatory of Music building – which, for many years was the landmark Metropolitan United Church on the edge of downtown Victoria. A total of 530 people attended, a count verified by Conservatory officials, who charge rent according to the number of human being actually occupying the seats.

A pretty straightforward news story about the evening appears on this week’s www.canadianchristianity.com and will also show up in the March issue of *BC Christian News* website. My purpose, in this *OttawaWatch* is to provide some interesting background to the event and the purpose behind it.

Earlier this year, Lunney became integrally involved in the plans for the Victoria event, as well as in three other similar sessions in Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver. Those three were spearheaded by David Demian, leader of Watchmen for the Nations, which gets

involved periodically in what he describes as “reconciliation” initiatives. In recent years, that work has focused on building rapport between Christians, on one hand, and Israel and the Jewish people, on the other.

In that effort, he has been joined more recently by Kenny Blacksmith, an Ottawa-based evangelical First Nations leader, who has been encouraging a closer relationship between Canadian aboriginals and Israeli leaders. That relationship-building will include soon-to-occur visits to Israel, from a number of Canadian First Nations leaders.

In preparation for those trips, Demian set up the Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver events, each attracting close to 1,000 people, of both Jewish and Christian persuasion.

Demian teaches that the healing of many of Canada’s difficulties is contingent, in part at least, on the building of reconciling relationships between Canadian Christians and those they influence politically, on one hand, and the Israeli state and Jewish people, on the other.

The Victoria event was organized on a slightly different basis.

Bill and Edie Southword, a Victoria lawyer and his spouse, have been active volunteers, in recent years, in building relationships between Christian and Jewish people.

When Lunney – as a Vancouver Island MP – approached the Southwords about organizing a stop on the Demian tour, they suggested an approach that was more inclined toward friendship-building than a specifically spiritual or worship event. Bill Southword indicated to me that he is quite comfortable with Demian’s relationship-building work, but believed that Christians and Jews on Vancouver Island are not quite ready for its somewhat more intensive nature.

He told me that Demian graciously agreed to end the official tour in Vancouver and release the two Israeli politicians, Ran Cohen and Eliezar Sandberg, for inclusion in a Victoria event.

And that was the occasion toward which Lunney was congenially and pointedly directing me on that cold Ottawa street, just before my February “working escape from winter” to Victoria.

Cohen and Sandberg are part of an organization known as the Knesset Christian Allies Caucus, which is a spinoff of the Knesset (the Israel parliament) – just as the Canada-Israel Friendship Committee is associated with and made up of members of the Canadian House of Commons. There are, in fact, many such friendship committees. They facilitate opportunities for members of parliament to both examine the policies of other nations and build friendships with their leaders.

Something Cohen said to me captured my attention in the context of my visit to the Victoria event.

“If we could, we would like to build friendships with Muslims, as well,” he told me.

Just a short sentence, issued almost off the cuff.

But it represented, for me, one of the potentially-complicated challenges for Christians, as we attempt to deal with tensions among the strictest and most isolated parts of the various religions.

The issue is shaped by the question: “How do we get along with people whose religious beliefs are different and, from our perspective, not correct – yet, at the same time bear authentic and winsome witness to our own faith in Jesus Christ?”

With the Jewish people, it is seemingly somewhat less complicated, because the Bible tells us that God blesses those who bless Israel. There is no such biblical injunction favoring the Muslims or Sikhs – in part because the Bible does not speak into or out of the cultures in which those two religions exist.

But surely the same biblical and relational concepts that many people are applying to Christian-Jewish collaboration can be applied, within context, to those other groups.

True, there are some Muslims who would like to drive the Christians and the cultures which surround them in western society, into the nearest handy ocean.

But there are others who would like to reach out, building of relationships which will make it possible for people of differing cultures to live side-by-side, whether in North America, the Middle East, India or China.

I know that I am writing these words in a place where it is relatively safe to express them. But I hope they plant an idea or two among some Christian leaders, about Christian communication in our complex world.

How is all that for an appropriate St. Valentine’s Day message?.

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