



The Clarion / Le Clairon

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BLESSED ARE THEY

Where is God?

By Rob Bull

Montreal – There is a theory that one of the roots of theatre is worship. If that is the case, then it is only natural that **Infinithéâtre**, would take on the question of faith in life.

Their newest play – **Blessed Are They/Where is God?** – revolves around a fictional former United Church in Quebec’s Eastern Townships led by a minister who is constantly questioning his faith and is challenged by a new charismatic recruit to the community.

Infini, as it is sometimes known here, is an innovative and award-winning veteran Montreal troupe with a reputation for risk-taking, developing new writers and staging productions mainly in English, sometimes in French and occasionally even in both as well as choosing dramatic but unusual settings for their productions.



WEST BOLTON, QC – Creek United Church which has been making its presence felt for more than 125 years.

These settings have included the Darling Foundry, for example, which when they discovered it was an abandoned 19th century steel plant but now is a trendy arts centre, or le Bain St-Michel, a classic turn-of-the-20th-century indoor swimming pool.

Past productions have on occasion ended up at places like the National Arts Centre in Ottawa or in an international theatre festival in Cairo. (that’s the one in Egypt).

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 In **Blessed are They**, the theatrical focus is on relationships within an AA group at the church. The underlying theme is the conflict between the spiritual and the tendency for many in churches to put a priority on things like filling the pews and collection plates. The script resonates strongly with many United Church members who read it or attended a reading of the play.

Guy Sprung, **Infinithéâtre** artistic director and a tireless promoter of new work for the stage by Montreal writers for decades, commissioned it from screenwriter Bruce Smith. "I've known Bruce for a few years," Sprung said. "I've been impressed by his writing for television, particularly by his docu-drama about Tommy Douglas. He's very intelligent, full of curiosity. So I asked him to write us a play." He asked what it should be about and I said 'It's up to you.' "

Smith said he was struck by the contrast between what he saw of the impact of the Religious Right on current politics in the United States and what he had learned about the Social Gospel movement while studying the career of Douglas, the Baptist minister who became the father of medicare in Canada. Writing the script was not an easy process. The first version was set in the USA and both men agreed that it just didn't work. When it was moved to a small community in the Townships "the scenes started to come together," Sprung said.

Smith said, "I just threw out everything political. What I

ended up with was an awareness that some churches are full and some are empty for reasons other than the Gospel.

Eventually I concluded different types of people need different kinds of faith and that's human nature. We have to tolerate these differences and accept the power, for example, of the evangelical experience as well as all the others."

"I just threw out everything political."

– Bruce Smith, Playwright

The AA group offered a chance to develop real characters in discussion about faith in daily life between people with different requirements. "All people have so much in common and yet no two people have the same experience of faith," Smith said. "Faith has a role in everybody's life. Each of the characters is dealing with that from a different point of view. Some have a very deep faith. Others have none and some are ambivalent."

Smith does not consider himself a religious man although he is fascinated by the subject and delights in telling how he did

Bible study with Korean missionaries, engaged in dialogue with a Jehovah's Witness and examined the Book of Mormon at length with a Mormon elder. He married a Roman Catholic and he was raised in that denomination. His father John N. Smith, wrote the script for the 1993 NFB film, the Boys of St. Vincent. His daughters are being brought up in that branch of Christianity although he himself attends mass only rarely – "perhaps five or six times a year. My mother joined the United Church. She finds something that she needs there."

Smith has come to be fond of every character in the play, including, he said with some surprise, the more evangelical ones. But he has given some very good lines to Harland, the questioning minister. At one point, for example, Harland observes: "Part of faith is mystery too." Of course mystery is an important part of theatre as well.

Blessed Are They runs in historic Dawson Hall at St. James United Church, 1440 St-Alexandre, Montreal February 19 to March 8, 2009, Tuesday to Saturday at 8pm and on Sundays at 2pm, Previews February 17 and 18 at 8pm. General admission \$20. Students, Seniors (65+) \$15. Groups (6+) Previews - \$10. For reservations, phone the Box-Office at 514.987.1774 ext. 104, (fax 514.987.7281) or Email

Check out the company website at www.infinitheatre.com

General Council Executive meets in M&O

*Editor's note: From November 15th to 18th 2008 in Quebec City the Executive Committee of General Council held a rare meeting in M&O. An English-language version of the following story is available on the Conference website at <http://www.montrealandottawaconference.ca> under communications M&O 2008-12. A more detailed report appeared in the December edition of *The Sojourner*, the newsletter of Ottawa Presbytery, at <http://ewww.uccanottawa.org>*

Par David Fines responsable du Réseau des communications et Rosemary Lambie, secrétaire-exécutive de la Conférence

Sans doute pour la première fois depuis la fondation de l'Église Unie du Canada en 1925, l'Exécutif du Conseil général s'est réuni à Québec, plus précisément au Campus Notre-Dame-de-Foy à Saint-Augustin-des-Demaure. L'Exécutif de l'Église unie se réunit deux ou trois fois par année pour établir le budget national de l'Église et pour voir à l'application des directions théologiques et d'action sociale de l'Église telles que votées par le Conseil général, la plus haute instance décisionnelle qui se tient tous les trois ans. Le dernier Conseil général a eu lieu au mois d'août 2006 à Thunder Bay en Ontario, et le prochain aura lieu l'été prochain dans la ville de Kelowna en Colombie Britannique.

L'exécutif compte une cinquantaine de membres élus auxquels se joignent une vingtaine de personnes, membres du personnel, personnes-ressources ou experts invités.

Pour plusieurs de ces personnes cette expérience aura été fertile en émotion. Nouveauté : tous les débats ont pu être suivis en traduction simultanée. Quelques-uns se sont efforcés de dire quelques mots en français. Stéphane Vermette, l'un des deux représentants de la composante francophone, était chargé de la réflexion théologique.

À l'ordre du jour de cette rencontre de l'Exécutif, de nombreuses questions de gestion et de routine : la situation financière (bonne mais nécessitant de la vigilance), le modèle de gouvernance, la participation des jeunes au Conseil général, une redéfinition des partenariats extérieurs, le droit d'intervention armée...

Nous avons aussi reçu les rapports du modérateur, de la secrétaire-exécutive, de la représentante au Conseil œcuménique des Églises (COE), des nominations...

Nous nous désolons qu'aucun francophone n'ait été nommé dans la délégation de six personnes à la prochaine assemblée de l'Alliance réformée mondiale aux États-Unis.

Une attention spéciale a été portée aux ministères auprès des Premières Nations. L'équipe de travail sur les ministères autochtones, après deux ans de travail, a fait une importante présentation, « Giving Voice to a Vision », quant à l'élaboration d'une vision commune des ministères auprès des Premières Nations dans l'Église unie et l'importance à leur accorder. Une nouvelle entité décisionnelle sera formée à partir de l'année 2009 et l'équipe responsable des ministères autochtones passera à de trois à sept personnes.

Les membres de l'Exécutif ont assisté à la célébration du dimanche matin, à l'église Chalmers-Wesley/Saint-Pierre dans le Vieux-Québec, lieu de culte partagé par deux paroisses, l'une anglophone et l'autre francophone, fait unique au sein de l'Église unie. Qu'il a fait plaisir aux deux paroisses de voir leur église pleine à craquer !

La prédication par la pasteure nouvellement installée Darla Sloan, sur le thème de « prendre des risques » inspirera les réflexions de l'Exécutif par après.

Une animation musicale et liturgique des plus dynamiques nous a permis de chanter plusieurs fois en utilisant le tout nouveau recueil *Nos Voix unies*.

Two QS Anniversaries

Danville, QC – Trinity United Church in this Eastern Townships community about 40 kilometres north of Sherbrooke celebrated its 175th anniversary this year. The church began in 1832 as a Congregationalist community “but I think we missed a year,” said Eleanor Besmargian. She said there was a special service with lots of out-of-towners – “about 80 people in the congregation” – she said and the guest preacher was Rev. George Legault of the Canadian Bible Society.

Nearby, **Melbourne Ridge United Church**, celebrated its 150th anniversary. That church was founded as a Wesleyan Methodist Church and held its first service in October 1858 in the building where the congregation still worships. A history of the church produced for the occasion says that it was agreed by early members “that those living closest to the church would take care of the cleaning and making fires and those coming from a distance would supply the firewood.” It goes on to say, “As in the past, our church is kept warm with our antique stoves, donated wood and our faithful fire-makers. We also appreciate those who keep our churchyard free of snow.”

Seaway Valley Church Fair

By Rev. Gwen Hermann

Chesterville, ON -- On a crisp, bright fall Sunday in October, Seaway Valley Presbytery held a Church Fair. The idea was born a few years ago, out of the Presbytery’s Vision and Transformation committee that is looking at new ways of being the church.

The Fair was held on the first Sunday of October at Chesterville, a village on the Nation River halfway between Ottawa and Cornwall. Churches from across Seaway Valley set up booths to tell others about themselves.

Nearly 200 people came to look at the booths, participate in a drumming workshop, enjoy a picnic dinner, and share in a meaningful closing worship service.

And if that wasn’t enough, in the Legion Hall there was a wide selection of music, everything from rock, pop and country to Voices United hymns.

Ray Lebeau, a member of Pendleton United Church, who attended the event, wrote in an open letter to the Presbytery:

“The numerous Church Displays were extremely well done and all those who

worked so hard to put them together deserve our collective vote of thanks. In addition there was free popcorn (a real hit with the children – big and small), hot apple cider (a real hit with the adults), coffee, tea, juice, mints, and Macintosh apples and fruit bread.”

Lebeau writes, “The evening Worship Service was indeed the highlight of the fair.

It is almost unbelievable that a service with so many participants, and with so many elements, could have come off so perfectly- without any rehearsal!

“The service included a massed choir of individual churches, carrying Banners and wearing their home church choir gowns.

“There was a Scottish piper, drums, children presenting the readings, a gathering of communion bread from all the individual churches to show our unity, with Rev. Gail Christy giving a meaningful message.”

And Robert Christy, secretary of Presbytery, wrote, “the Seaway Valley Church Fall Fair has, without a doubt, clearly demonstrated that we do see ourselves ‘Alive and Kicking!’”

Centretown United Church

From the Sojourner, the newsletter of Ottawa Presbytery

Ottawa – The sound of bagpipes called the congregation to worship as Centretown United Church gathered in worship for the first time on Sunday, September 14, 2008. A grand procession with streamers and doves, choir, lay leaders and clergy entered the sanctuary during the opening hymn.

It was filled with joy and celebration and a fitting start for the new congregation as it looks forward to the future. The service presided by our presbytery chair marked the official birth of this new congregation.

The week before, the congregations of McLeod-Stewarton and Bell Street United Churches said farewell to their separate existence. While the Bell Street congregation was having its last service in its building, people at McLeod-Stewarton heard a wonderful parable about the life of the church from Karen Fee.

The new amalgamated congregation has made its home at 507 Bank Street and the building at the corner of Bell Street and Arlington was sold to the Korean congregation that has been a tenant in the space for decades. There are currently plans for accessibility updates to the location at 507 Bank and as the congregation plans for its future it will explore whether further renovations will be desirable.

The congregation is being served through a presbytery appointment during the coming year by the Rev. Shaun Yaskiw who previously served as the minister of Bell Street.

There is both exciting potential and challenges for Centretown United as it lives into its vision of becoming a welcoming place that speaks the Gospel in a way that is relevant to peoples' lives. As in any blending of any two families, there will be the intentional work of learning to live together. There will also be the work of living into the fullness of the vision for the new church as it witnesses to the context of urban life.

The leaders of the uniting congregation have committed a great deal of energy to the process of birthing the new church. The process demanded openness and honesty, but more importantly the constant reminder that the real focus was and is God's call to faithfulness in changing contexts.

No More Toiletries

By Trisha Elliott

Ottawa — Helen Cook of Knox United Church has donated bags filled with toiletries to those in need through The Ottawa Mission, a homeless shelter in downtown Ottawa, but she's sure that it's been at least a decade.

"We're so lucky and there is such need in our community. ... We've been reaching out for a long time." Cook said.

This year, Knox's outreach committee donated 31 bags full of household items. Rather than filling the bags with toiletries, the group focused on the needs of those moving out of the shelters to live independently.

"We called The Mission and asked what they'd really like to see included in the bags," said Jean Christie, one of the project's key coordinators. "They told us about the program at The Mission that helps people move into their own homes or apartments so we decided to help."

Among the items Knox United collected were shower curtains, towels and can openers so that those reliant on the food bank can open non-perishables.

"It was easy, really," Christie said. "The congregation was generous. It worked out well."

Stories Without Borders

Art, Peace and the Middle East

By Claire Lyke

The Montreal City Mission is part of a community-based, multimedia, peace-building, youth project to develop a common language between communities in the Middle East and Canada.

Stories Without Borders is a new joint project between the Mission and the McGill University Middle-East Program in Civil Society and Peace Building (MMEP), founded in 1997 out of the belief that the promotion of civil society and social justice is closely related to peace building.

The MMEP in cooperation with its Jordanian, Israeli and Palestinian institutional partners has established eight rights-based community centres in the Middle East.

It also has MMEP fellows who are graduate students from the Middle-East in a two-year program split between McGill and their home country.

Stories Without Borders works with groups from across the troubled region to help them tell their own stories in a variety of media and listen to those of others, thus helping foster understanding and possibly peace.

McGill and the Mission have created nine groups of people between 18 and 25 to explore the use of narrative as a tool of community building, cross cultural understanding, and peace building.

These groups, one at each centre and one in Montreal, will learn to tell their story in a number of ways which they can share with other communities.

The Montreal group meets at the Mission one Saturday a month until June for workshops on the use of narrative, artistic media and creative collaboration among other things. They will explore urban dance, sound-work and editing, stop-motion video, photography, theatre and more.

In August the young Montrealers will travel to the Middle East for 10 days to meet the others. They will be hosted by groups in the Middle East, volunteer at rights-based community centres and exchange narrative work.

Afterwards, the final products will be exhibited in Montreal, elsewhere in Canada and in the Middle East.

Claire Lyke is Youth Programs coordinator at the MCM

Educational Opportunities at UTC

Women in the Christian

Tradition: a course given by Dr. Rowshan Nemazee, Fri/Sat. March 27-28 & Fri/Sat April 24/25, 2009 Discussion will focus on the ways in which formidable women from Biblical times to the present have responded to the gospel message by challenging the church, restructuring socio-religious and familial roles, articulating their subjectivity, negotiating with tradition and formulating women-centred theologies and aesthetics.

And

Jesus: The Misunderstood

Jew: a course given by Dr. Amy Jill Levine, Fri/Sat April 17/18, 2009. Dr. Levine is a Professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt University. From a Jewish and feminist perspective, her numerous publications address Christian origins, Jewish-Christian relations and sexuality, gender and the Bible.

For more details and registration information, check the College website at www.utc.ca or contact Mike Ryneveld, UTC registrar, at

(514) 845-2042, ext 205 or (toll free) 1-888-849-

Building Communities at Street Level

By Alain Spitzer

Montreal — Community is a word that repeatedly occurs in conversations about poverty and is frequently over-used.

Far too often, it is no more than a convenient “catchword” tossed out to justify the need for additional financial support.

But over the last three years at the **St. James Drop-In Centre** in downtown Montreal, I’ve had the luck to gain some insights as to how a community can occur and also have been able to spend some really significant moments with some very special people.

One of my favorite writers, Father Henri J. M. Nouwen, a Dutch theologian and writer beloved by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike, is known for his insights about community. Nouwen, who taught at Utrecht, Yale, Harvard and Notre-Dame universities, spent the last 10 years of his life as a chaplain at Daybreak, a l’Arche community near Toronto, where he put his ideas into practice working and living with the intellectually handicapped.

And he said, “*Community can be experienced, where people can live together without fear of each other, and where learning can be based on a creative exchange of experiences and ideas.*”

Since October 1985 the **St-James Drop-In Centre**, on the third floor of St. James United Church, has catered to people dealing with combinations of issues related to homelessness, mental illness and addiction. It

such as legal services, hospitals, community clinics, and detox centres.

But at the **Centre** we are about more than offering services to the urban poor.

We are also about building community at the most basic level. It is a daily challenge that never quite ends. And it is a two-way process (between the members and the staff) based on respect and equality.

‘Community can be experienced, where people can live together without fear of each other, and where learning can be based on a creative exchange of experiences and ideas.’

– Father Henri J. M. Nouwen

The notion of “a two-way process” is something that many people have a hard time getting their head around. In fact it’s generally a lot easier to create a one-way process in

which one group gives and the other receives.

was founded by and now is independent of the church. Between 9 am and 5 pm Monday to Friday, the **Centre** offers basics such as hot nutritious meals, access to a showers, and clean clothes. We also provide counseling, crisis intervention, monitoring of medication and assistance with welfare. We help find housing, accompany people to medical and other official appointments and liaise with outside agencies

But if it’s not collective or mutual, how can it be *communal*?

To build community, we should understand that all of us can receive and all of us can give. In the inner city, however, most of us are unable to actually do this.

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When was the last time that people in the same downtown area actually got together to help each other?

The fact is that our broader society does not always promote such values.

There is more emphasis on status, titles, individual fulfillment and wealth than on our responsibilities for each other.

So if it is already difficult to build community in mainstream society, imagine how hard it can be to do so “on the street.”

And yet on a daily basis, all of us here at the **St. James Drop-In Centre** try to connect with

the most basic values for humanity (being human?).

We try to watch out for each other and we support each other.

Of course the employees continue to provide the bulk of the support.

But at the same time, much of the work is still accomplished by our members: food preparation, food deliveries and purchases, cleaning tasks, laundry etc.

It is a dynamic of mutual respect, which requires a great deal of courage on the part of all the participants.

Courage in this context is not the absence of fear but rather the absence of “self.”

And to build a true community spirit we need to develop a courageous society.

At the **St. James Drop-In Centre**, we are striving to create this courageous community that is, I find, typically spoken about more often than seen.

Alain Spitzer is executive-director of the St. James Drop-In Centre. This article is an edited version of one that appeared in the Centre's autumn newsletter.

More information can be found on the Centre's website at www.stjamescentre.ca

The Clarion/Le Clairon is inserted three times a year in The United Church Observer to “tell our story and share our faith so as to further God’s purpose” in the Montreal and Ottawa Conference.

Our next copy deadline for the May 2009 issue is March 29th., 2008. The next meeting of the editorial board will be on March 30th in Montreal at St. James United Church.

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The Clarion is also available on the M&O Conference website at <http://www.montrealandottawaconference.ca>

