

Tenth anniversary of covenant celebrated by McClure United and Holy Spirit Catholic churches

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

SASKATOON - Holy Spirit Roman Catholic Parish and McClure United Church celebrated 10 years of a covenant relationship during a joyful celebration March 7, 2010 in Saskatoon.

The covenant between the two faith communities includes ten pledges for concrete action, including coming together for shared prayer; exchanging preaching, music or other worship ministry at least once every six months; sharing Sunday bulletin and bulletin board materials; planning joint educational activities; sharing in joint social justice action; and promoting and celebrating fellowship through social gatherings.

A covenant spirit of shared life was embodied in the Sunday afternoon celebration at McClure United, with a combined choir, speakers from both faith traditions, a homilist from yet another tradition, and symbols speaking to the unity forged between the two communities.

Elizabeth Nickel of Lakeview Free Methodist Church provided the homily, reflecting on the prayer of Jesus before he died that his followers would be one, recorded in John 17. It is possible to love each other because of God's abiding presence in his people, she said, noting how difficult it is to love even those in our own faith communities. Unity can be achieved when as members of the body of Christ we "look to our living head" and keep our eyes on Jesus, she stressed.

During the celebration, the covenant and its pledges were read by Heather Desautels, Rose Rogers, Rev. Bill Shank, and Doreen Hickie.

Beneath a banner depicting a covenant rainbow stretching between symbols of the two Saskatoon faith communities, Rev. Ron McConnell of McClure United and Rev. Lawrence DeMong of Holy Spirit Parish together took a flame from a Christ Candle, lighting covenant candles representing each community.

Representatives from the two communities -- Heather Desautels, Mae Schreiner, Ted Easton, Thelma Shortt, Rowena McLellan, Julie Muir, Carol Pek, and Rev. Dale Morrison -- then distributed the flame from the covenant candles to all those assembled for the celebration.

Morrison was pastor of McClure United 10 years ago when the covenant was

launched, while Rev. Bernard de Margerie was pastor at Holy Spirit. Headed to France to lead a retreat, de Margerie sent greetings to the celebration.

Rev. Sandra Beardsall, ecumenical representative of the River Bend Presbytery of the United Church brought greetings and blessings on behalf of Rev. Deb Walker, chair of the presbytery.

Beardsall described herself as a “doting aunt” to the covenant relationship. “Although I am only occasionally involved in the day-to-day living of your covenant, I am always interested in its life and progress. I am enormously proud of you, and I brag about you wherever I go, especially in ecumenical circles,” she said. “I include a copy of the covenant as required reading for courses at St. Andrew’s College, and while I do not carry a picture of you around in my wallet, I do carry a copy of the covenant prayer card.”

In living, loving, serving and praying together in this covenant relationship, members of the two faith communities have modeled their “freedom in the gospel,” Beardsall said.

It is a “freedom to open yourselves to the other, to believe that there is a way to understanding, to unity, to love across ancient chasms of mistrust,” she said, noting that the communities have stood as an example. “You admonish all of us to claim our gospel freedom. The freedom to seek to know and to learn from our neighbours, whether they live across our parking lot or across the world.”

She quoted from a sermon preached 350 years ago by an Anglican priest Simon Patrick, preached at the baptism of an infant son of a Presbyterian minister, a daring act of ecumenism in its day. “In 1658, the Reverend Patrick preached: ‘we are not baptized into this or that particular opinion but into the belief of the gospel and into the Church of God, and therefore should love all the disciples and followers of our Lord and embrace all of every persuasion that live godly in Christ Jesus. And therefore let us live with them as confederates, as those that are tied together in the same bonds, united in the same covenant.’”

Diocesan Administrator Rev. Ron Beechinor of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon noted that the sacred commitment of the McClure-Holy Spirit covenant was five years in the making, and is now 10 years in the celebration. “The communities of McClure and Holy Spirit have taken the passionate prayer of Jesus the night before he died – the prayer in which he expressed to his Father, his overriding desire that all people would be one – and you have given flesh to that prayer. Thank you.”

Beechinor noted that the incoming bishop of Saskatoon, Msgr. Donald Bolen, is “gifted in his commitment to Christian unity.” The bishop-elect’s experience has included years of ecumenical dialogue through his work at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome.

Beechinor added that the night before his ordination, the bishop-elect has chosen to have an ecumenical prayer service at St. Paul's Cathedral. "I know the man, and I know he would not be making this commitment, inviting people of all Christian denominations together in prayer, if it wasn't an invitation coming deeply, deeply from his heart," Beechinor said, expressing the hope that the ordination of Bolen as bishop will be another way in which God will bless ecumenical efforts in the community.

Linda Westcott, chairperson of the McClure Church Board, also spoke, bringing greetings from Joan Brown, who worked extensively on the covenant when it was formed.

Westcott noted that the covenant is always in the background for the two faith communities. "I was surprised when someone new to the community commented that the covenant was unusual. For me and perhaps for you it is a wonderful blessing that the covenant is taken for granted. We are so comfortable with it, and with one another now."

Having identical banners on the walls of both churches is a "sign of our being at home in both churches," she added. The twin banners were designed by Mary Davidson from McClure United Church and Peggy Hergott from Holy Spirit Parish, working with a Joint Steering Committee. Quilting of the two banners was done together by members of both congregations.

"God has truly blessed us with this opportunity to be in such a unique arrangement," June Rivard, vice-chair of the Holy Spirit Parish Council, said of the 10-year-old covenant.

"We have studied together, we have prayed and worshipped together and socialized side by side. During this time we have seen the face of God in the people of McClure and we have grown in our own faith journey because of their witness. We have come to see that there are more similarities amongst us than differences," Rivard said.

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