

## **The Council of the North: Saving Young Lives**

### **Allen Box**

We first met in the mid 1980s as members of the Public Social Responsibility Unit of the Anglican Church of Canada. My colleague worked with a group on sustainable communities (fisheries, farms, rural Canada). My responsibility was the development of ethical investment guidelines for the Church. We shared our work to develop policy directions for our Church. They were challenging and exciting times. Those longing for social justice found great strength in the work we shared with each other through work groups such as these.

Towards the end of the next decade, the 1990s, our paths were to cross once again. My colleague's aunt was a member of my new parish. How great to meet one of my deep connections to the past and to discover where our interests and passions around the Gospel had led each of us.

And now, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Bishop Mark MacDonald was visiting St. Matthew's. In a conversation about possible work with the Council of the North, he recommended, without hesitation, that the place to join together was the project on suicide awareness and prevention among the youth of Canada's remote northern communities.

Part of his excitement centered on the recent hiring by the Council of the North of their Suicide Prevention Coordinator. Her name is Cynthia Patterson. As the moving of the Spirit would have it, our paths would cross again; for, as you have guessed, Cynthia Patterson was the colleague I was referring to above.

I had observed Cynthia's effective leadership of Rural Dignity over the years. I knew from our common experience of years ago her passion for justice for the oppressed. How profoundly wise of the Council of the North, I thought, to turn to her to coordinate this ambitious project made possible by the Amazing Grace project -- [you will remember this project in which groups across the country got together and, each participant having paid a toonie to participate, and video-taped the singing of Amazing Grace on November 23, 2008 to help with the work of The Council of the North.]

She is responsible to bring together grassroots leaders from parish communities in the north, to educate people on the issues around suicide, to provide training, to support bishops and diocesan resource teams, and to work with government, health authorities, social agencies, tribal councils and churches.

St. Matthew's was being offered the chance to participate in this exciting initiative. As we talked about it, we began calling the project Saving Young Lives.

There was no question about the need - the suicide rate among First Nations is twice that of the general Canadian public.

Young women (15-24 years) of First Nations have a suicide rate of 25 per 100,000 - the rate is 5 for the general population.

For young men, the number is 126 per 100,000 compared with 24 for the general population.

What a boost it was for the Outreach Committee when our Fund Raising Committee decided to recommend designating one half of the funds from our auction on October 23 to allow Cynthia to initiate projects in training much earlier than anticipated.

On May 9, the parish was able to join with Bishop MacDonald once again (this time as the official representative of the Council of the North), to meet my long-time friend Cynthia Patterson, and to celebrate the signing of an agreement between us and The Council to move forward in sharing a partnership that will contribute, under the guidance of the Spirit, to Saving Young Lives.

The future holds we know not what. But of this I am sure: with the inspiration of the Council of the North, with the leadership of Cynthia and her teams, with the dedication of our St. Matthew's team, God will lead us into more exciting and challenging times using the gifts we have offered to each other, to the youth of the North, and to the bringing of God's reign in our midst.

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