

## Catholics and Mennonites Create Bonds of Friendship

Ordinary Catholics will be meeting with ordinary Mennonites in Manitoba this summer. They will be talking with Indigenous people and about how we can move together toward reconciliation with Indigenous people.

The 5-day conference is organized by **Bridgefok**, an international movement of Mennonites and Catholics who work together for Christian unity, by creating bonds of friendship. The Winnipeg gathering will be held July 25-28 at the Canadian Mennonite University – only the second time in Canada since *Bridgefok's* founding in 2002.

The theme of the conference will be “Toward a Just Peace: Indigenous Settler Reconciliation through Friendship”. There will be a rich mixture of teaching, prayer, Christian ritual and indigenous ceremony. But the heart of the gathering will be the personal sharing of the participants, indigenous and settlers.

*Bridgefok* has often been described as “a community of peace-minded Catholics and sacramentally-minded Mennonites”. Over the years, their gatherings have explored practises such as baptism or how we read scripture. One year the conference reflected on the Communion of Saints, following the apparent healing of a Japanese Mennonite through the intercession of the founder of a Catholic religious order that began in northern Italy, but now has monasteries as far away as Japan.



For the past several years, the focus has been “Building a Just Peace”, which has led the participants to examine questions of racism and inequality. This year’s theme of Indigenous-Settler Reconciliation was inspired by the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission** and the release, in 2015, of its 94 Calls to Action.

The Catholic keynote speaker will be Sr Eva Solomon CSJ, an Anishinabe (Ojibway) woman and a sister of St Joseph. For many years Sr Eva has been part of a movement to develop an indigenous Catholic church in which First Nations and Métis people can feel more at home. The Mennonite keynote speaker will be Steve Henrichs, director of Indigenous-Settler Relations for Mennonite Church Canada.

Canadian Mennonites have taken seriously the work of reconciliation with their indigenous neighbours and have been leaders in finding ways to make reparation. For many years, the Mennonite Central Committee and many Mennonite families would donate the equivalent of 10% of their monthly Hydro bill to a community trust of the Pimicikamak Cree Nation, whose territories were ruined by northern hydro development in the 1970’s. In Laird, Saskatchewan, Mennonite and Lutheran farmers realized that the land they live on was the territory of the

Young Chippewayan First Nation, which had been illegally seized by the federal government at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1977, Laird residents signed a covenant with the descendants of the band, committing to work together to obtain a land claims settlement for the Young Chippewayan Nation. (*Reserve 107*, an inspiring film about the development of this friendship, can be viewed on YouTube.)

The conference will open on the evening of July 25 with a staging of a play called, *Discovery: A Comic Lament*. As the title suggests, the play finds unexpected humour as it explores the “Doctrine of Discovery” and the oppression of Indigenous Peoples that the Doctrine made possible. The play asks, “How did the land we live on come to be under our feet?” and “How do people of faith respond when we acknowledge that the land we live on was unjustly and sometimes even violently emptied of indigenous peoples?” The performance is open to the general public. It will be held in the Chapel of the Canadian Mennonite University. Tickets are \$20 and may be purchased online at <[www.eventbrite.ca/e/discovery-a-comic-lament-tickets-56829521629](http://www.eventbrite.ca/e/discovery-a-comic-lament-tickets-56829521629)>. Parishes are encouraged purchase rows of 5 or 10 seats.

### **What is the Doctrine of Discovery?**

In 1493, one year after Christopher Columbus landed in the lands we now call the Americas, the King and Queen of Spain persuaded Pope Alexander VI to issue a series of proclamations to give legal justification to Spain and Portugal’s invasion of those far-away lands and the exploitation of the people who were “discovered” there. The pope wrote,

“...That in our times especially the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself. ...[W]e ... assign to you and your heirs and successors, kings of Castile and Leon, ... all islands and mainlands found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered towards the west and south....”

These papal bulls were the first in a long line of laws and court decisions that monarchs and settler governments would write, establishing in European law the rights of European colonizers over lands and peoples from Africa to the Philippines to the Americas. For example, in 1823, in a unanimous decision, the US Supreme Court decided "that the principle of discovery gave European nations an absolute right to New World lands." They further determined that the indigenous people of those lands had only a right of occupancy, which could be abolished.

The effects of these laws are still felt today. When Canadian governments and corporations construct hydro dams or pipeline without the consent of the indigenous peoples on whose territory the project will be built, the Doctrine of Discovery is still in play. The recent decision of the Manitoba government to construct a power line to the United States without compensating

or even negotiating with the Métis, through whose traditional lands the line will run, is an example of how the mindset that gave rise to the Doctrine of Discovery still influences the decisions of corporations and governments today.

### **Welcome, Bridgefolk!**

The first annual *Bridgefolk* conference was held in 2002, at Saint John's Benedictine Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. The monks of Saint John's or the sisters of the nearby St Benedict's Monastery in St Joseph continue to host the conference every second year. Given that southern Manitoba is home to the world's largest concentration of Mennonites, it was inevitable that *Bridgefolk* would find its way to our province.

Newcomers to the dialogue are always welcome and people of all faiths may attend.

Registration information may be found online at [www.bridgefolk.net/conferences/bridgefolk-2019/](http://www.bridgefolk.net/conferences/bridgefolk-2019/).

### **Local Committee**

Laura Funk and Gilbert Detillieux have been married for 13 years. Their marriage has been a history of ecumenical dialogue. Laura, a Mennonite, and Gilbert, a Catholic, navigate daily the differences between their two faith communities. In their home, their discussions have mirrored many of the themes that have been at the heart of *Bridgefolk* conferences.

Some of the differences have been very personal. Gilbert and Laura often attend each other's home church. However, "a thorn for Laura", according to Gilbert, "has been the perspective of each church around communion. In the Mennonite tradition, anyone who is baptized, may receive communion. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the approach is that you have to be in full communion when you receive".

Still committed to learning from each other's tradition, Gilbert and Laura are heading up the local planning committee for this year's *Bridgefolk* Conference in Winnipeg.