

Brome County NEWS



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Retiring minister recalls fighting for Aborigines

By Olivia Ranger-Enns
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Ryk Allen has been advocating for Aboriginal rights throughout his career. Having worked as Knowledge minister of the United Church for years, Allen is finally taking a breather and retiring. But before doing so, he was called upon to share his insights into the hard but rewarding work that is ministry. It's definitely a labour of love.

The call to God came early for Allen, who took part in numerous high school nature camps and who loved sports. He dabbled in a number of widely different fields (no joke: Transnational Airlines and Norte!) before applying, studying at and graduating from McGill's school of theology, earning his master of divinity. Once he was ordained in 1971, his life of advocacy began.

Sent to a Cree reserve known to locals as the Norway House in Manitoba, Allen was immediately immersed into the Aboriginal culture. Today, Norway House is home to about 5,000 people living north of Lake Winnipeg, on the banks of the eastern channel of the Nelson River.

"I grew up in Lachine, and I had already had friends from the Kahnawake reserve, but this was different," recalled Allen, who got to know the elders quite well. "It was quite the trip out there," he said, having to take a train to Winnipeg before being picked up by boat. Up in the north, the minister had a string of experiences, as he called them, leading Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals to worship on Sundays. "I'd have an interpreter who would translate my messages into Cree," said Allen, who gradually spent more and more summers out west, picking up bits and pieces of Cree. "I was never flu-

ent, but I learned enough to manage asking for food or about the weather."

(James Evans, a Methodist missionary and amateur linguist hailing from England, attempted to break down the language barrier back in the 1880s. "He developed Ojibwe and Cree scripts," said Allen. Evans' scripts were easy to learn and led to near universal literacy among the Canadian Ojibwe and Cree members within a couple years. Allen pointed out that Evans' remains are buried at Norway House.)

Sometimes, Allen would leave the bushy territory and go to Winnipeg proper to change scenery. "I was so used to using the boat that I sometimes wanted to accidentally tie up the car when I went into the city," said Allen with a light laugh.

It was at around this time, into his

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OLIVIA RANGER-ENNS

United Church Minister Ryk (short for Richard) Allen is retiring after years of advocating for Aboriginal rights.

Retiring minister

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early thirties, that Allen began visiting the old and the dying. "I would go to what they then called the India Hospital," said the minister, who to this day goes to hospitals on an almost daily basis to visit members of his congregation. "Even back then, I guess it was part of my nature," he said thoughtfully.

Allen did see some residential schools but never witnessed any abuse of any kind. "That's not to say it didn't happen," he added sternly. "I just didn't see anything. I do remember that most kids were shipped in from inner communities."

The Minister did not shy away from calling a spade a spade. "What the government did to Aboriginals was a form of cultural genocide," said Allen firmly. His soft-mannerism belies more heart, a fighter's spirit, when, at certain moments, Allen's face lights up with passion. "They were treated like red apples: red on the outside, white on the inside. They couldn't keep anything of their culture to themselves. These kids lost everything: their culture, their language, their lifestyle. They were completely deculturalized," he concluded.

But it was really at the Ministry Training Program that Allen got the chance to truly understand and appreciate the Aboriginal religion and philosophy in all its beautiful complexity. "I was training elders from their own communities to become ministers in their own right," said Allen. "That was tough. A lot of elders were wary to talk to us."

But guards fell when Allen began listening to tales of Aboriginal myths and legends addressing the creation of the world. "They were absolutely archetypal in structure," Allen remembered. "There is one particular story I have always found moving. There was once a fur trader who heard rumours that people were starving of a famine and that the women

were losing their minds. When he reported the incident to the RCMP, they arrested him and took him and the chief overland by canoe. They traveled far, and it was at the mission house that this fur trader was converted. But when he came back to his community, he had two items in his hands: one cross in one hand, one drum in the other." This duality and criss-crossing of faiths is still predominant in numerous Aboriginal cultures, according to the Minister.

It was working in Winnipeg that prompted Allen, then 34 years old, to reach out to strengthen the community. "I saw poor people knocking on my door every week, day in, day out," said Allen. "They slept under bridges and were always asking for food. So I invited all the local churches and brought a big map in front of them. I took a string and drew a circle around the most places that needed the most help, saying: we have to be able to serve these people who are surviving on panhandling." And so, thanks to the help of 25 religious communities (United, Presbyterian, Mennonite, Lutheran, etc.), Allen and his network was able to provide one meal a day for the needy. "We called it the Agape Table," he said, referring to the Christian understanding of love (agape), which can be contrasted to eros (romantic love).

In Toronto, Allen was called upon to help Aboriginals pen a letter demanding an apology from the United Church for all the transgressions of the past. "We asked for an apology about everything... the residential schools, the abuse, you name it," said Allen. He dearly remembers friends like Aboriginal artist Jackson Beardy, a prominent member of the India Group of Seven, who succumbed to alcohol abuse, probably due to his experience in residential schools. "Jackson was always interested in

giving back to his roots, in letting stories out, for which he was shamed," said Allen. "He always drank heavily, and I think this may have been because he said he always felt incarcerated."

Around the same time, Allen married his wife, Gayle Chouinard. They soon settled into the Mansonville area in 1989 and worked as ministers, both of them, until 1993. But life and work was neither always peaceful nor tranquil: in 1990 Allen was invited to take part in the Oka crisis. (Quick review: the Oka crisis flared up when the town of Oka planned to expand a golf course onto land which had been traditionally used by the Mohawk people). "We were hiding out in schools," remembered Allen. "It was quite a week for me. There were helicopters flying around everywhere, and the warriors, as the Aboriginals called themselves, were in full camouflage. You could only see their eyes. I felt like I was in a Good Morning Vietnam movie." Allen looked away briefly before saying: "I still think there are so many problems that have not been resolved when it comes to Aboriginal rights. Is self-government the best way to go? I'd say yes, but first we have so much ground to cover."

The experience really hit him hard a few years later when Allen was requested to bury an elder who had taken part in the Oka crisis. "It was really emotional, being back there," said Allen. "There was the cemetery, the same as it had been. I had gone full circle."

When asked about the future of the United Church, and of churches in tandem, Allen said that he had to stay optimistic. "My way of keeping the church alive is by changing the language," said Allen. "The language once used by the Church does not address the issues of today. That's why I don't call God He, for example," said Allen.

Coming back to the Aboriginal question, Allen did not hesitate to push for change. "At Norway House, and by association many other community centers, I saw dirt on the floors. Things are not getting better," he argued. "This was a cultural genocide, and we as ministers tried to do what we could do to get ourselves out of the colonialist and paternalistic discourse. We did what we could do." But his tone implied that more, and much more at that, can still be done.

Now, turning 71 in August, Allen is slowing down, with his last Sunday service coming up. He hopes to be spending more time with his two daughters. Along with his wife Gayle, the minister is also looking forward to visiting his two boys in Vancouver. There is Nathan, an active self-taught social worker who helps out on the East End, and Matthew, an entrepre-

neur and avid surfer. Allen remembered his 70th birthday with joy. "We were out visiting the boys, and Matthew was going to show me how to windsurf," said Allen. "But then I realized that we had passed his usual spot... and when he parked I found a tiny plane in front of us."

His face suddenly broke into a wide grin. "And Matthew, knowing that I used to fly small planes around Manitoba, asked me to take them for a spin. And I did. Before I knew it the family was packed in this plane and we were flying at 60,000 feet. It took me back 40 years to flying over Norway House," he concluded.