

MULTI-FAITH LEADERS IN A CROSS-CANADA CONVERSATION WITH THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RIGHT HONOURABLE JUSTIN TRUDEAU

Gathering some 480 multi-faith people from across Canada to a Zoom meeting with the Prime Minister was a phenomenal achievement by the co-hosts, the Canadian Council of Churches, the Canadian Interfaith Conversation and the Canadian Multifaith Federation. This, indeed, occurred on December 3, 2020 around the theme, “The Contribution of Faith Communities in a Pandemic”.

I was heartened that the Speakers included representatives from most of the faith communities represented on our Religious Social Action Coalition and that RSAC directors, George Powell and Haseen Khan were able to attend, in addition to myself as Coordinator. The Rev. Faith March-MacCuish, Executive Minister for the Atlantic Region of The United Church of Canada (office and home in St. John’s) also was an attendee.

The multi-faith speakers were as follows:

Rabbi Debra Landsberg, Past President of the Toronto Board of Rabbis, Co-Chair of the Canadian Rabbinic Caucus;

M. le Cardinal Gerald C. Lacroix, Roman Catholic Primate of Canada;

Pandi Roopnauth Sharma, President, Hindu Federation of Canada;

Rev. Dr. Rhonda Britton, Vice-President, Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada;

Imam Dr. Hamid Slimi, Immediate Past President, Canadian Council of Imams;

National Indigenous Archbishop Mark MacDonald, Anglican Church of Canada;

Rev. Dr. Bhante Saranapaia, Urban Buddhist Monk, Founder of Canada: A Mindful and Kind Nation;

Commissioner Floyd Tidd, Territorial Commander, Salvation Army;

Gobinder Singh Randhawa, Past Chair, Ontario Sikhs and Gurdwara Council (OSGC).

Deloria Bighorn, Chairperson, National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of Canada, provided the closing prayer blessing. Although not one of the speakers, the new General Secretary of The United Church of Canada, the Rev. Michael Blair, was a participant. Other speakers included: The Honourable Philomena Tasai, Minister of Labour and The Honourable Bardish Chaggar, Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth. The moderator of the event was Pastor Peter Noteboom, General Secretary, Canadian Council of Churches. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau spoke at the beginning and ending of the event, as well as appreciative comments after each speaker.

The emphasis of each faith representative was primarily on the “social services” offered by their respective faith community, understandable, given that they were speaking in relation to the CoVid pandemic. In reflecting on this, George Powell stated: “Faith-based organizations provide services to the less fortunate that save governments hundreds of millions of dollars each year”. The missing ingredient, however, was the lack of call to action to the Government re social justice and related social policy. At the end of the event, all attendees were invited to share questions and concerns with the Prime Minister in the chat panel. This gave me the opportunity to thank the Prime Minister and to request that he and his government implement a Guaranteed Livable Income. (I am aware that, at least,

a couple of others did also). General Secretary Noteboom assured us that all of these questions/comments will be collected and submitted to the Prime Minister (in fact, this has already occurred). And, upon query, MP Rob Oliphant, one of the event organizers, shared that all questions and comments offered in the chat box will be forwarded to appropriate people either in the Prime Minister's Office or in a Minister's office. We may not receive a response but he assures me that all will be "listened to".

Personally, I was strengthened that our Religious Social Action Coalition was recognized as a vital multi-faith group for participation; the sense of multi-faith connection across Canada was awe-inspiring. Now we need to move all of this forward through poverty elimination in our province and country.

"Diversity is our strength", Prime Minister Justin Trudeau affirmed in his appreciative remarks. I would add: Multi-faith diversity and unity around our common cause of poverty elimination are our strength and our "doable" goal.

Marion Pardy (Very Rev. Dr.)

Coordinator, Religious Social Action Coalition of Newfoundland and Labrador