

MESSAGE FROM THE MODERATOR

Meeting the Manitou Asinîy Stone



The Rev. Bob Faris with Leonard Weasel Traveller (Bastien) (left) and Fred Campiou (right).

By the Rev. Dr. Bob Faris,
 Moderator of the 2022 General
 Assembly

Like most people gathered in the General Assembly this year, I had no idea what the Manitou Asinîy Stone was. Then came the invitation for me to visit the Presbytery of Calgary-Macleod, that also involved me speaking at an Inter-faith Pride service, I was asked to participate in a conversation about the Manitou Asinîy Stone with Indigenous leaders as well as members of Grace Presbyte-

rian Church in Calgary, Alta., and the presbytery. I found out that the only caveat to organizing this conversation was that I would be willing to listen. It was conveyed that that was my only intention and I hope I stayed true to that promise.

I was put in touch with Chandra Mannix, a person from Grace I had never met before. She was the facilitator of the conversation, I was told. I was not prepared for the depth of commitment, passion and political acumen I was about to encounter! The project

of repatriating the Stone to Indigenous stewardship has become all-consuming for Chandra.

A bit about the Stone: it is the largest intact meteorite ever found in Canada, which fell to the surface of the Earth near present day Hardisty as much as four billion years ago. It is almost pure iron. It had great significance for Indigenous peoples and was considered to be a sacred being that was deeply connected with the buffalo hunt. It is Canada's only spiritually recognized place of healing at a meteor landing site (much like Mecca for the followers of Islam). In 1866, it was taken by Methodist missionaries who considered it to be a hindrance to the conversion of Indigenous peoples to Christianity. After being kept at a mission station for a time, it was transferred to Victoria College in Cobourg, Ont., then to Toronto when the college moved and to the Royal Ontario Museum. It was transferred to the Royal Alberta Museum in Edmonton in 1972, where it continues to be held.

When we gathered in a large circle in the basement of Grace Church, we heard that story. In fact, scientific facts about the Stone were presented from an Indigenous astronomer, Rob Car-



The Moderator, the Rev. Bob Faris (right), with Clayton Kootenay, member of the Lead Team for the Repatriation Project and CEO of the Indigenous Knowledge and Wisdom Centre in Edmonton, at the current site of the Manitou Stone at the Royal Alberta Museum.

dinal, who is a lead member of the Repatriation Project. We also heard the Indigenous wisdom about the Stone from Leonard Weasel Traveller (Bastien), former Chief of the Piikani Nation, Representative of the Blackfoot Confederacy, Spiritual Leader and Primary Elder of the Manitou Asinîy-Iniskim Repatriation Project; and from Blaine Favel, former Chief of Poundmaker First Nation, Former Grand Chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan, Leader and Visionary of the Manitou Asinîy-Iniskim Repatriation Project; and from Fred Campiou, Cree Representative for Treaty 8, Spiritual Advisor and Ceremonial Elder of the Manitou Asinîy-Iniskim Repatriation Project.

We heard how Indigenous peoples had prophesied that disaster would befall their nations if the Stone was removed, and how that indeed did happen with the decimation of the buffalo. We heard how the removal of the Stone was the removal of the focus of a meeting place that had gathered different nations to find ways to live peaceably together. We also heard the many ways in which the colonial project and mindset had destroyed traditional Indigenous ways and had ignored traditional Indigenous wisdom, to the detriment of all.

We learned of the various attempts that had been made in the past to repatriate the Stone and how they had not been successful. We also learned about how this new initiative was moving forward and the ways in which it had brought people together to

find common purpose in repatriating the Stone. We learned of the vision of a centre, designed by the world-renowned Indigenous architect, Douglas Cardinal, to be constructed near the actual landing place, where the Stone can be placed and where people can once again gather in a sacred space to seek ways to live together in peace.

I could not help but think at the time—and have continued to reflect on—how honoured I was to sit in that circle. We met in a church—a place that is considered to be part of the destructive force behind the attempted genocide of Indigenous peoples. We were privileged to meet with Elders and Wisdom Keepers and members of the Horn Society, who have responsibility for many traditional spiritual practices. We were reminded that our gathering should be centred in prayer to Creator, Creator of us all.

We could have not been invited into that circle...but we were. And we engaged in a practice of listening and learning, which took us one more step along a path that we all hope will lead to healing. At the end of our time together, we recognized that even though we did not meet in the presence of the Manitou Asinîy Stone, its gift of gathering people to find ways to live peaceably together was at work among us—a gift of the Spirit. And I believe it will continue to work among us as we respond to the invitation to bring our support to this initiative and others on the path to healing.

Meegwetch.

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