Do you want to help?

The annual Topshee Conferences are supported in part by revenue from The Father George Topshee Memorial Fund. The Fund was initiated by the Federations of Labour in the Atlantic Provinces to honour the memory of Father George Topshee (1916-1984), former director of the St. Francis Xavier University Extension Department. Others joined this drive to build a memorial fund which has recently passed the $100,000 mark. To make the Conference self-sustaining the Fund has a goal of $250,000.

Contributions to the Fund may be sent to:

Topshee Memorial Fund
Extension Department
Attention: Rita Murray
St. Francis Xavier University
Antigonish, Nova Scotia
B2G 1C0

Contributions are tax-deductible and receipts will be issued.

Extension Department
St. Francis Xavier University
Antigonish, Nova Scotia
B2G 1C0

Report of the Ninth Annual Topshee Memorial Conference

Topshee '92

Current issues and perspectives of Native People were the subject of attention for nearly three hundred and fifty participants at the Topshee Memorial Conference held at St. Francis Xavier University, June 26-28, 1992. The suggestion to focus on First Nations won applause at the close of the 1991 Conference. At that time the idea was to observe the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in America as an opportunity for non-Natives to understand the impact of European occupation on aboriginal people. During the intervening year interest in the Columbus anniversary was substituted by the concern about aboriginal rights which was being generated in the heat of Canada's constitutional debates. When the 1992 Conference convened registrants were already aware that it was time to understand and respond to issues which kept Natives so persistently disadvantaged. With the help of sixteen Native resource persons this gathering of primarily non-Native participants became enthusiastic learners throughout the conference's workshops, cultural events, panel presentations, and discussion groups.

CO-EXISTENCE SPIRITUALITY

Keynote speaker Judge Graydon Nicholas of the Maliseet First Nation invited conference participants to understand the aboriginal peoples' claim to the right to live as a people. He said that such rights were not invented by legislators but are "the law of the creator and the way we relate to one another." Judge Nicholas added, "there is, in this part of the world, a way of life that has been transmitted to those who are humble enough to learn ... a way of life that grants greater importance to the collectivity than it does to the individual." He maintained that access to that way of life is found through speaking respectfully and listening humbly.

The Judge expressed frustration with the education system that ignores or misrepresents the history of aboriginal people, and fails to teach the basis of aboriginal rights. Despite this, he sees that First Nations have begun a cultural resurgence, having learned their culture from oral traditions transmitted through elders - "most often through the women, who had the ultimate say in tribal affairs."

Nicholas said that the nature of aboriginal spirituality is co-existence, not conversion. "To preserve the collectivity, consensus is essential, and in the aboriginal culture one dissenting voice meant that there was no consensus." As he encouraged conference participants to talk and listen to each other, Nicholas suggested they might find the aboriginal type of spirituality useful.

THE ISSUES

Two rounds of eight concurrent workshops provided opportunity to consider a Native perspective on Self-government, Land Claims, Fishing and Hunting Rights, Women, Environment/Ecology, Spirituality, Justice, Language and Culture. Except for one, the resource persons for each workshop were Natives. Following is a sampling of principal points from the respective issue areas:

- There is an inherent right to ***self-government*** but there is no particular model which defines the way that self-government will work in practice. [John Joe Sark/Tom Isaac]
- Federal law has recognized at different times two types of ***land claims***: specific claims to land and resources granted by federal law, and comprehensive claims to land and resources arising out of prior occupation and ownership. [Dwight Dory]
- Aboriginal ***fishing and hunting rights*** stem primarily from the 1752 Peace and Friendship Treaty and, if properly observed, can serve as a stepping stone to the development of native people, and a solid route to self-government. [Stephen Gloade]
- ***Native women*** are working nationally to have a seat at the constitutional table and to ensure

that native womens' rights are protected under self-government. [Sara Fiddes/Cathy Martin]

- In the context of ***environment/ecology*** First Nations are recognized as stewards of the land, with responsibility to provide leadership and vision on how to preserve the planet. [Christina Meekis]

- Micmac ***spirituality*** flows from a realization that all life is sacred and must be dignified. First Nations accent community, brother- hood and the care that each individual must have for his brother. An integral part of spirituality is acceptance of each brother whatever his circumstances. [Alex Denny]

- The Native system of ***justice*** emphasizes holistic approaches and requires the accused to accept responsibility for their actions rather than to provide direct admission of guilt. [Jackie Nibby]

- Sixty-six percent of aboriginal languages are at risk. Survival of Native ***language and culture*** requires the provincial school system to have Micmac Language and history taught by Native people. [Peter Christmas]

When participants gathered in small discussion groups to reflect on what they had gained from the workshops they expressed appreciation for the Native resource persons. Among the observations and insights made by participants were:

- surprise about how little some participants knew about Native issues, and how much still had to be learned;

- concern that the limited treatment of Native issues in the public education system is the cause of misconceptions and misinformation;

- acknowledgement that Native people as they strive to achieve self-government might have to resort to civil disobedience;

- the spirituality of Native people is a unifying factor which transcends all aspects of their lives;

- that non-Natives who don't understand Native culture are likely to fear it or treat it as unimportant;

- that their presence at and participation in the Conference is itself evidence of participants' changing behaviour toward Native people;

- Native people are asking to be free to do things their own way; a condition which the dominant culture must not block.

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

Three residents of the neighbouring Afton Reserve presented a glimpse of their life story before an hour-long plenary session of the conference. Each told how it felt to grow up as a Native in a predominantly White society. Their remarks prompted some other Native persons to add their particular stories and thereby to contribute to the climate of understanding and respect which was steadily building as the conference proceeded. Later that day Rita Joe of Eskasoni read some of her poetry and sang one of her compositions before an audience which responded with standing applause and tearful appreciation. Participants also had opportunity to view three films featuring aboriginal artists; some participated in a Native drumming, dancing, and chanting demonstration; and many visited a special exhibit of Native arts and crafts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION

The concluding portion of the Conference encouraged participants to consider ways in which popular organizations could learn about Native issues and work with Native people. Three panelists presented suggestions from their respective expertise relating to co-operatives, trade unions, and church organizations:

- As a spokesperson for ***Co-operatives***, Syd Pobihushchy drew attention to the parallel values of Native and co-operative cultures with their common principles of equality, fairness and mutual interest. He urged credit unions and co-operatives to put their organizations at the disposal of the Native community as it strives to be understood and to achieve social justice.

- On behalf of the ***Trade Union Movement***, Dick Martin compared the patience of Native people as they wait for land claim settlements with the role of labour as it works to achieve benefits for workers. He demonstrated how the Native case is taking an unreasonably long time to be heard; and that Canadian Labour is actively trying to intervene to speed up the process. Martin also urged Unions to assist the job of "beating down racist attitudes" and to "establish dialogue with aboriginal groups in their respective areas."

- Mary Boyd illustrated the potential for ***Church*** to assist the cause of Native people with the example of action taken in 1975 by the Churches in connection with the MacKenzie Valley Pipeline. She said "they came to realize that the massive energy developments earmarked for the North were too important to leave to governments and corporate executives ... and entered the debate to express their solidarity with aboriginal people." Ms. Boyd observed that the cause of Native people can be integrative for Canadian society: "Native leaders are holding out images of the future which are more inclusive than those of provincial and federal politicians."

In groups representing respective sectors of popular organizations, participants created a range of suggestions they might pursue following the Conference. For example:

- establish ways to engage in dialogue with Native people;

- credit unions can create special loan policies to support co-operative initiatives on Reserves;

- form a speakers' bureau on Native issues;

- educate non-Native communities about the circumstances of Natives;

- be sensitive to the importance of being invited to assist Native causes;

- take measures to include reliable accounts of Native history and culture in the curriculum of the public school system;

- have Churches examine their own land ownership in relation to Native land claims;

- engage support from politicians and the press for Native issues;

- acknowledge and name the racism in one's own community;

- invite Native people to participate in popular organizations;

- develop programs of affirmative action so Natives come to occupy positions of influence;

- form networks and coalitions with Native organizations to support specific issues.

ON TO AFTON

Nearly one hundred participants took advantage of an open invitation extended by the nearby Afton Reserve to "come out and visit." When the Conference was over early Sunday afternoon they travelled to Afton and received a most hospitable welcome. They were treated to a meal and to conversation with Band members. They enjoyed good humor and learned of the specific difficulties and ambitious plans of one group of aboriginal people. And as they made their way home participants might well have been reminded of Judge Graydon Nicholas' admonition : "Once you become aware of aboriginal rights, a new duty falls on your shoulders because now, the message has to carry on."

Topshee Memorial Conference

June 11 - 13, 1993

Women and Violence

St. Francis Xavier University
Antigonish, Nova Scotia