

A National Tragedy: *Murdered and Missing Aboriginal Women and Girls*

Marion M. Lynn

Over the past four decades evidence has emerged of an escalating number of Aboriginal women and girls who have disappeared. Many groups and individuals across Canada have been gathering data and reporting it to police, politicians, and the media. The Native Women's Association of Canada, through the Sisters in Spirit initiative, identified 582 cases between 2005 and 2010. Since then the number of reported cases has grown to over 600. By 2013, more and more Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups and individuals have brought this tragedy to public attention. These groups include Human Rights Watch, the United Nations, the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, and the Assembly of First Nations. No More Silence is a network of Native and non-Native groups working actively to demand that the Canadian authorities bring justice to this issue. By January 2014, the latest research, carried out by Maryanne Pearce, a federal civil servant, indicates that 824 Aboriginal women are among those identified as missing or dead.

International Women's Day was first celebrated in 1911, and after 1914, it has always been on March 8. Its purpose was to draw attention to the rights of women: to vote and hold political office, to work and receive equal pay, and to have equal access to all human rights. As the struggle for women's rights developed over the twentieth century, a stronger emphasis has been placed on the rights of women and girls to freedom from violence. In Canada, as in the rest of the world, this goal has not been reached.

This year, the Aboriginal Issues Working Group (AIWG) of the Church of the Redeemer is marking International Women's Day with a teach-in so that we can become more knowledgeable about one particular

group, whom we as Canadians have failed to protect from violence: murdered and missing Aboriginal women and girls.

Four women will provide leadership for the teach-in by bringing their knowledge and experience working on the issue of murdered and missing Aboriginal women and girls. The key-note speaker will be Dr. Dawn Lavell-Harvard, President of the Ontario Native

Women's Association. Her presentation will be followed by a panel comprised of: The Hon. Dr. Carolyn Bennett, Liberal critic for Aboriginal affairs and chair of the Liberal Women's Caucus in Ottawa; Mary Eberts, practicing lawyer in the area of human rights, equality rights and Aboriginal rights; and Crystal Basi, Executive Director of the Native Women's Centre of Toronto, a leader in the "Sisters in



Spirit Vigil" and in confronting human trafficking. After these presentations participants will engage in discussions in small groups, strategizing as to next steps. Of course, there will be drumming and singing to round out the day.

The teach-in takes place at the Church of The Redeemer, Saturday March 8, from 11AM. to 3.30PM. There is no cost for participants. Registration is available online at www.theredeemer.ca

The Redeemer AIWG recently presented the Blanket Exercise designed by Kairos Canada to bring home the impact of government action and inaction on Aboriginal lands.

A discussion about the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples will take place at

the Church on Friday, April 4 with Romeo Saganash and Craig Scott, Members of Parliament. This declaration has been signed by Canada, but is not yet part of our legislative framework.



Members of the AIWG and of the Aboriginal Rights Support Group of three United Churches on Bloor Street will be holding a workshop to build a sacred drum in the spring. Drumming and song are an integral part of

Aboriginal spiritual practices. These rituals were part of the keepers of the Waters Vigil held recently at Holy Trinity, and co-sponsored by the AIWG and Creation Matters @ Redeemer. Stay tuned for details.

We hope to offer more speakers, as well as a Feast during Aboriginal History Month in June. Please speak to Pamela Thomson if you are interested in participating in the organizing of AIWG events. 