

Sharing Turtle Island

by Susan Woods

What began as Ted Bigelow's idea to celebrate Canada's 150th year of Confederation instead grew into a four-part series honouring the First Nations of Canada. Already the Anglican Church of Canada, in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was encouraging congregations to learn about the history of our aboriginal peoples, so the time was right. Ted was joined by Deb Woods and Susan Woods in mapping out a series of events based on the following: "We seek to build a respectful understanding between Indigenous and mainstream people by learning about Indigenous history and traditions and celebrating Indigenous spirituality."

Julie MacLeod developed a stunning flyer that was used on posters and flyers and distributed throughout the wider community as well as our church connections. The title, Sharing Turtle Island, came about through our understanding that Aboriginal people all over North America referred to the continent as Turtle Island. Legends abound about this fundamental belief.

The first event was the Blanket Exercise, arranged and performed by local Kairos volunteers. In this exercise, guests from the audience were placed on blankets in a circle, representing aboriginal people pre contact in North America. As Europeans arrived and took over land and resources, the native population was forced to give up more and more of their blankets until they were reduced by 90% of their population and allowed to live only on a small portion of the continent. This was a dramatic depiction of how our First Nations were treated.

Gertie Beaucage, an Ojibwe Elder from Nippising First Nation opened with the Creation Story and how the Aboriginal peoples relate as a part of the natural world. She spoke of the culture of the first inhabitants of Turtle Island prior to contact in 1492. There were no political boundaries then and aboriginal peoples in large numbers inhabited all of North America. Gertie introduced the guests to "smudging", the practice of burning leaves (sage, tobacco, sweet grass and cedar or other medicines) to produce an aromatic smoke, which participants were invited to waft over their eyes, ears, and head to indicate willingness to watch, listen, and learn with openness.

Jeff Monague, a former chief of Christian Island First Nation and currently Warden of Springwater Park talked about treaties and current issues, noting that an important land treaty will soon be completed in our County that will bring a measure of justice to local First Nations. He spoke about the generational results of residential schools. His wide-ranging presentation included very moving testimony about his personal life story. The audience reacted with a standing ovation at the end, indicative of our appreciation for his sharing.

Indigenous Spirituality was the topic for Hector Copegog, another Ojibwe Elder, this time from Christian Island First Nation. He spoke about the Creation Story and, because he had been educated by nuns on Christian Island, he was aware of the coincidental similarities to Christian teachings. He introduced the legend of the Seven Grandfathers, whetting our appetites for more native spiritual history. He spoke proudly about maintaining his Ojibwe language in spite of painful punishment for speaking it at school.

From the beginning we decided that we would ask no entry fee or sell tickets, but rather accept free will offerings. After expenses, we cleared nearly \$1,000 and will be able to pay for the Culture Cards that were given away to guests. As well we will, on behalf of St. Thomas Church, make a contribution towards youth education at Springwater Park.

All three individual speakers placed their personal stories within their talks, thus reaching out to each of us with warmth, humour, and, importantly, the truth. We are most grateful to them and to Kairos for being part of a successful and important project. We also thank the Barrie Area Native Advisory Circle who developed the Culture Cards. BANAC is home to the vital work of both Gertie and Hector.

The Barrie Native Friendship Centre is sponsoring a Pow Wow on June 10 and 11 at Springwater Park. Everyone is invited to attend this exciting feast of Indigenous culture. The Pow Wow seems a fitting climax to Sharing Turtle Island and we hope many of our guests will attend.