

Rally against gay marriage draws 2,500: Multi-faith crowd of all ages cheers controversial Calgary bishop

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Illustration: Colour Photo: Bruce Edwards, The Journal / Opponents of gay marriage demonstrate in Mill Woods Park on Sunday.

Colour Photo: Journal Stock / (Bishop Frederick) Henry

Colour Photo: Bruce Edwards, The Journal / A rally against Bill C-38 draws a diverse crowd and a lineup of speakers from many different religions.

EDMONTON - More than 2,500 people gathered to rally against gay marriage at Mill Woods Park on Sunday, waving placards as a host of multi-faith speakers took to the stage.

Organized by the Edmonton-based Committee for the Support of Traditional Marriage, the rally mirrored a national movement to unite religious groups opposed to same-sex marriage. Muslim, Hindu and Christian leaders urged the crowd to stand up for heterosexual unions.

"The time has come for the government of Canada to use its coercive power to legislate that a couple being married must be a man and a woman," Calgary Bishop Frederick Henry told the jubilant crowd in a repeat of the controversial call-to-arms that has landed him in front of the Alberta Human Rights Commission.

"This is not a fascist statement ... this is not anti-homosexual, but it is the Christian teaching on the primordial status of marriage and family life."

One of Alberta's most vociferous critics of gay marriage, Henry is currently defending himself against two Calgary human rights complaints related to a January letter in which he equates homosexuality with adultery and prostitution and calls on the state "to proscribe or curtail them in the interests of the common good."

"An evil act remains an evil act whether it is committed in public or in private."

One gay-rights activist has called the letter "hateful and harmful," and one complainant said he is concerned that Henry is calling on the government to persecute gays and lesbians.

But the gathering at Mill Woods Park on Sunday hollered its uncompromised support for Henry and for all the other speakers who cast the issue in equally strong terms.

From fresh-faced Mennonite girls to leather-clad

members of the Soldiers for Jesus motorcycle club, Sikhs, Jews, youths and grandmothers, the crowd pledged to fight same-sex marriage Bill C-38.

"Folks, we are at war for the soul of this nation," organizer David Fletcher said to wild applause.

"Thank you Paul Martin ... you have managed to awaken a nation, a nation that is now filled with righteous anger.

"It is up to us to send a message."

The crowd, which peacefully tolerated a handful of pro-gay marriage demonstrators, waved signs that said "God's Plan For Mankind: The Family" and "God Defined Marriage."

Irma Berger, a 66-year-old grandmother of four, held a placard saying "It's All About Kids."

"God loves (the homosexuals), and we do too -- it is their sin that we hate," she said.

Sikh Tarvinder Kullar, 57, came to voice his opposition to Bill C-38.

"We are getting worse than animals," he said, shaking his head. "Our politicians should listen to the voice of their country -- male and female together is what we call the family."

Sandra Gordon came with her husband and two kids. "I just feel it is important to preserve marriage between a woman and a man," she said. "That is the way God made it."

The rally comes just two weeks after federal Government House leader Tony Valeri said his government hopes to get Bill C-38 through the committee stage and into final passage by June 23.

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Motorcyclist's death triggers transformation among surviving pals: In the months before he died, Roland Szabo had turned away from a lifestyle of parties, drugs and booze and rediscovered the peace of his faith

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Illustration: Photo: Bruce Edwards, The Journal / Young adults who lost a close friend when Roland Szabo died gather on Thursday evenings for Bible reading and prayer in the living room of a Mill Woods home.

Photo: Bruce Edwards, The Journal / Arnold and Erzi Szabo join some of the young adults for weekly Bible study.

Photo: Bruce Edwards, The Journal / A graduation photo of Roland Szabo, who died a year ago at age 21.

Photo: Bruce Edwards, The Journal / Nicole Whitelock says Roland persuaded her to give up drugs for a new faith.

Photo: Bruce Edwards, The Journal / Ray Wiens, senior pastor at Summerside Community Church, with Roland's mother.

EDMONTON - Roland Szabo was no saint -- his old partying buddies will tell you that.

But when Szabo realized that the party lifestyle he was leading was an empty shell, he didn't keep his new-found convictions to himself. In the final months of his life, Szabo would talk to friends about the peace he had found after returning to the spiritual path he'd strayed from when he left home.

"He was really turning his life over to God and talking to the kids around him about doing that," says Ray Wiens, senior pastor at Summerside Community Church.

"The last few months his life were a real testimony of a life that was changing."

Roland's remarkable transformation led some of his friends to make big changes in their own lives, lives that used to be fuelled by booze and drugs.

A few of Roland's old buddies started going to church for the first time in their adult lives. For others, the change happened later, after Roland's funeral. And it's still happening.

On Nov. 13, 2004, Roland Szabo, 21, died in the city's ninth fatal motorcycle crash of that year. The crash on Knottwood Road South in Mill Woods left a trail of debris and sorrow.

This evening at 6, at a worship service at his church at 6608 28th Ave., Pastor Wiens will ask people in the congregation to stand if their lives were changed by Roland Szabo.

He expects a good number of people will be on their feet, a testament to the genuine changes that Roland helped bring about in so many lives.

"We've had about 25 young adults come to the

church and commit their life to Christ as a result of that," said Wiens. "Their lives have changed quite dramatically from the lifestyle they used to have."

As an example, Wiens noted that two young adults baptized only two weeks ago referred to Roland as having triggered a renewed commitment in terms of their spirituality.

The Journal got a glimpse of those changed lives at a recent Bible study at a Mill Woods home that is owned by Arnold and Erzi Szabo.

Not long after Roland's funeral, his parents invited their son's old friends into their half duplex for a weekly Bible study. But soon the numbers became just too great.

The couple solved the dilemma by buying a bigger house and renting it out to some young adults from Summerside. But each Thursday evening, the sprawling two-storey house in Mill Woods becomes Bible study-central for Roland Szabo's old circle of friends.

Mrs. Szabo, who attends the sessions, pointed out that most of Roland's old pals had no church background, and many of them were mired in self-destructive lifestyles.

"But they knew Roland, they knew who he was and his Christian background," she said.

"And they saw the difference of their lifestyle versus his, especially in the last year when Roland and Arnie (Roland's older brother) came back home and changed their lives."

Mrs. Szabo is delighted something so positive has come of her son's death.

"These kids were drug addicts and alcoholics before

and now they have no part in it," she said. "They have totally cleaned up their lives."

Charlie Molnar, 28, and Nicole Whitelock, 22, are prime examples.

In separate interviews at last week's Bible study, Molnar and Whitelock confided that prior to Roland's death, their lives essentially revolved around bars and parties.

In Whitelock's case, she used to be heavily into cocaine. Roland, who by then had turned away from the empty party lifestyle, persuaded her to give up drugs, and try church instead. She did.

"(Roland) was the type of guy who took you at face value," said Whitelock, a second-year student in social work.

"He didn't give a crap what your history was. He liked you for you, even if you were drinking ... He wanted to get to know you as a person."

At Roland's funeral, Whitelock wept as Pastor Wiens challenged the large contingent of Roland's friends in church to look at their own lives and at what they were doing. Whitelock did, and soon after was baptized at Summerside Community Church.

Molnar also grieved at the funeral and recalls doing his soul-searching. In his earlier life, drinking and getting into fights at bars were almost a way of life.

"The older you get in bar fights, the less people's feelings are important," he reflected on that earlier period of his life. "From fists you go to bottles, you go to knives, baseball bats. It just gets wilder."

Molnar was baptized at Summerside on Jan. 6, 2005, the same day as Roland's two younger brothers.

Since he has started reading the Bible and thinking about the message, Molnar said he is more into being a watchful figure to his younger friends.

"I used to worry about what's going to happen. Now I just put my faith in God and say: 'Hey, whatever happens, happens.' "

Ronnie Szabo, 19, who was baptized the same day as Molnar, said his brother's death definitely served as a wake-up call to a lot of people.

As hard as it is for him to say it, Ronnie believes that something drastic, like the terrible loss of Roland, was probably needed to kickstart the beginnings of change in the lives of some of his brother's friends. Wiens agrees.

Tonight at Summerside Church, Wiens will touch on the sorrow that still surrounds Roland's death. But the focus will be a celebration of the new life that's come out of that death.

Says Wiens: "One person died, but out of that one person's death, there have been many lives touched and many lives changed. And that's what we'll celebrate."

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Saturday night fever -- in church: New worshippers drawn to spirited evening services

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Illustration: Photo: Ian Jackson, The Journal / All the signs point to a big event every Saturday night at Summerside Church in Mill Woods.

Photo: Ian Jackson, The Journal / Jesse Whitnack says his life has been changed by attending Summerside Community Church on Saturday nights.

Photo: Jimmy Jeong, The Journal / Doug Weibe, a worship leader at Summerside, belts out a praise song during Saturday night church.

Photo: Shaughn Butts, The Journal / Tim Wray lights the candles before the monthly Friday evening service at Calvary Lutheran Church.

Photo: Shaughn Butts, The Journal / The Wray family leads the Shout! service with Joanna on piano at Calvary Lutheran Church.

Photo: Ian Jackson, The Journal / Pastor Ray Wiens, founder of Summerside Community Church, believes if Edmontonians want to party Saturday nights, they can find one in church.

EDMONTON - Some folks don't make fundamental changes in their lives until after they've seen the writing on the wall.

For Jesse Whitnack, it was the writing on the roof.

A few years ago, Whitnack's attention was drawn to giant lettering on a sloping church roof on 66th Street in Mill Woods announcing Saturday evening worship.

Recently released from prison, Whitnack was trying hard to go straight. Although he'd started to turn his life around and was going to church, Saturday nights were always a danger zone. Typically, it was a time spent drinking or getting high with buddies.

On a whim, Whitnack checked out the writing on the roof at Summerside Community Church at 6608 28th Ave. and checked into Saturday night worship.

It was a good move.

In an interview, the 34-year-old journeyman plumber said he really enjoyed the high-energy music and was put at ease by the fact most worshippers were his age or younger.

But what really touched Whitnack was the way a couple of complete strangers came up and invited him to join them for card games at someone's place after worship.

"It was a very weird experience for me," said Whitnack, who only a few weeks earlier had completed a prison term for trafficking hard drugs.

"You know you belong to a church when God meets you at the door. And that's what happened at Summerside: God met me at the door; welcomed me with both arms."

He added that the worship service on Saturday evening and the socializing that goes on afterwards is great for someone like him with an "addictive personality." As long as Saturday evenings were at his disposal, there was always the danger that he might slip up and step over onto the wrong side of the law again.

"Summerside gave me another option," said Whitnack, who added that the church has helped him so much he's introduced a former inmate friend to the Saturday night church.

Not so long ago, weddings were about the only thing that happened in churches on Saturday. Similarly, in our parents' day, everything ground to a halt on Sundays.

Today, and in Alberta for longer than most provinces, Sunday is just another day. Except when it comes to organized Christian religion.

Roman Catholics have for some time had the option of attending mass on Saturday afternoons. Protestant churches like the Anglicans and Lutherans hold midweek services, largely attended by staff and seniors. Evangelical churches often have midweek prayer meetings.

While Sunday remains the day for worship, more churches are experimenting with new forms and new times for worship, in an effort to draw more people.

"It can be stressful getting up early for church Sunday morning," observed Whitnack. "You're always in a hurry; you're always late. Saturday night just seems more convenient."

The success of Summerside with its Saturday night

worship has prompted some of the larger evangelical churches in town to offer Saturday night services of their own - usually upbeat services aimed at the young. Other churches are considering the move.

Pastor Ray Wiens, Summerside's founder, said he deliberately chose Saturday night because he wanted to reach into the community. This Easter Saturday, Summerside will celebrate its third anniversary.

Worship in its leased building begins at 6 p.m. and generally lasts an hour and a half. Services are lively and may include guitars and drums, occasional performances by a drama dance group called Quest, maybe a PowerPoint presentation by Wiens or a movie clip that's relevant to the message.

"The theme in our worship is celebration," said Wiens, who moved here from Whistler, B.C. "We take the view that life is good and God is good and we need to take every opportunity that we have to celebrate goodness."

The celebrating doesn't end with the final Amen. Most churchgoers get together after worship for group activities like swimming, going to the gym, watching movies or just enjoying a meal and conversation. Social activities often run late into the night.

Another experiment that's proved a big hit at the church is for several people in the congregation to go on a several-day hiking trip in the mountains in August.

Whitnack's hearty endorsement of Saturday night church is in sharp contrast to some of the gloomy things Pastor Wiens heard when he brought up the idea with local clergy.

"Nobody will come to church on Saturday night because they're busy doing other things," one minister bluntly told Wiens.

"In Edmonton, Saturday night is party night," another skeptic observed.

Rather than be deflated, Wiens said he decided that if Edmontonians want to party on Saturday night, "We'll bring that party into the church."

As a result of its success, Summerside plans eventually to build a church on 40 acres of land it owns near the city's southern boundary.

Another local church that's experimented with different times and different forms of worship is Calvary Lutheran at 10815 76 Avenue.

In addition to its 10 a.m. Sunday service, Calvary Lutheran holds a 9:30 a.m. Thursday service as well as something called "the Shout service" once a month on Fridays.

Shout evolved from a group of young adults who wanted to spice up the normal way of doing church. It's held on the second Friday of each month, starting at 8 p.m.

Church employee Daena Winchell said the service, which includes contemporary music, gives a greater opportunity for individuals to share what God is doing in their lives.

"It's been wonderful because we try to pick a new person from within the church," said Winchell, the church's director of evangelism. "A lot of times they're people who you wouldn't hear from or somebody who doesn't normally speak in public very much."

While the service hasn't been a great tool of outreach, church youth director Tim Wray said it's popular with young people. It also gives those who work or can't attend for other reasons an alternate time to attend church.

"Any time you can gather a group of people to worship, that's important for our faith life and who we are," said Wray, recently involved in a Shout service with his three sisters.

Although Shout has raised eyebrows with some traditionalists who think guitars and drum kits belong in bars, Wray said the unique service has been well received for the most part, and by seniors especially.

"They just love to see young people embodying faith and the church," he said.

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