



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

May 15, 2014

## Decolonizing the Inner City: a look at Youth for Christ

**Y**outh for Christ is an evangelical Christian organization whose “Centre for Youth Excellence” received public funding based on a business plan that promised to meet the needs of local Aboriginal youth. The public funding for, and presence of this building on a key corner, continues to anger many in the inner city. This article uses documents obtained through an Access to Information request to the federal government to look back on the process that granted public funds and resources to this organization and the situation today.

Youth for Christ is part of a national and international network to help young people “make an informed decision to be a follower of Jesus Christ and become a part of a local church”. Youth for Christ Winnipeg is a “faith-based Christian organization” and began urban operations with youth at a former fire hall in the Elmwood neighbourhood. Envisioning a larger facility that would accommodate youth from across the city, Youth for Christ worked with Centre Venture, the municipal crown corporation tasked with downtown development, to acquire land at the corner of Main and Higgins to build their new facility.

Centre Venture had been approached by an Aboriginal-run credit union to locate on that site, however Centre Venture went with the plan presented by Youth for Christ and quickly moved it through the approval process. The 53,000 square foot centre, complete in 2012, is a public-private partnership. The \$14 million building is financed by public contributions of \$6.6 million, with \$3.2 from the federal government Infrastructure Stimulus Fund and \$3.4 from the City of Winnipeg. In addition to

the City funding, the City of Winnipeg gifted Youth for Christ the Elmwood fire hall building to enable them to sell the property and use the funds towards the new site. Youth for Christ pledged to raise the remainder through private funds, with \$1 million remaining to be raised.

Some would ask, what is the problem? The facility is built, operating and available for use. The problem arises with the location of the land, the emphasis Youth for Christ placed on Aboriginal youth in their business plan used to get public money, and the on-going need for funding for Aboriginal organizations today.

The loss of land is central to the cultural genocide experienced by Indigenous people and manifested in the high numbers of homeless Indigenous people, visibly seen around this section of Main Street. The corner is located in a neighbourhood with a high proportion of Aboriginal people, 62 per cent self-identify as Aboriginal. First Nations have legal rights as Indigenous peoples that are fundamentally different, and have been systematically denied access to land, education and resources necessary to advance themselves as a people. Centre Venture and the City ignored this context, did not do any consultations and moved forward instead with Youth for Christ, well-positioned to do substantial private fundraising through connections to middle class donors and private business people. The position of this evangelical Christian organization allows them to frame the “problem”, and response, ahead of Indigenous people doing this for themselves.

The business plan for the Youth for Christ centre responds to “the

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significant growth in numbers of Aboriginal youth and related challenges of integration” (sic). The centre aims to address “at risk” youth and is alarmist in its language to “redirect negative activities such as car theft, gangs, drug use, jail time and murder rates” (sic). In their application for federal funding, Youth for Christ states “We have been very intentional on addressing the growing needs within the Aboriginal youth community.” What was stated in the application is not consistent with their current message. In an interview with CCPA, Executive Director John Courtney stated that they are not targeting Aboriginal youth but are “inclusive of all kids,” aim at “integrating” youth, and do not distinguish Aboriginal youth. Why then was their case for public money focused on Aboriginal youth?

The Aboriginal community’s response to working with Aboriginal youth in Winnipeg’s inner city has been to embark on a process of decolonization, whereby Aboriginal community-based groups support cultural and historical teachings and activities. Research has proven that cultural reclamation enhances self-esteem, self-awareness and builds positive social networks. As survivors of colonization, this process is key to providing an important source of strength for Aboriginal youth on the journey toward the development of self-identity.

The large public investment in an evangelical group whose goal is to convert Aboriginal young people to Christianity—despite the reams of evidence of the lasting damage this has caused—stands in stark contrast to the central goals of the Aboriginal community, which are to support their young people in developing positive understandings of Aboriginal culture and of who they are as Aboriginal people. Youth for Christ states they have hired an Aboriginal staff person. However, this does not come close to being an Indigenous approach led by the Aboriginal community and aimed at decolonization.

Now that it is built, Youth for Christ says the facility is available for youth organizations to bring participants, but user fees apply. This is

problematic for cash-strapped youth-serving organizations, and is a barrier to youth living in poverty. If the Aboriginal community was interested in using the site, many would want to practice cultural activities like smudging. This is not permitted, which is problematic. Many buildings permit smudging onsite, and smudging is an important part of Indigenous cultural practices.

As the beneficiary of over \$6.6 million dollars in public funding, allocated on the premise that it was going to meet the needs of Aboriginal youth and collaborate with the inner city community, Youth for Christ has a responsibility for the public dollars they received, to take proactive steps to listen to the concerns from the community. The City of Winnipeg, federal government and citizens have a responsibility to hold them to account and be truly accessible to the Aboriginal community and local youth-serving organizations. If this cannot be achieved, then perhaps the public money should be repaid and invested in the many Aboriginal and youth organizations that use a decolonizing approach. We need to look no further than across the street at Circle of Life Thunderbird House, an Indigenous cultural and spiritual centre, which continues to struggle for operating dollars. Governments should provide substantial and long-term support to such organizations.

As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission winds up its lengthy and important enquiry into the tragedy of the residential schools, it is ironic and deeply troubling that Youth for Christ sits in the heart of Treaty One territory, at the corner of Main and Higgins, a silent testimony to governments’ inability to take seriously the need for truth, reconciliation and decolonization. Let us learn from this experience and not repeat the mistakes of the past.

*Molly McCracken, Director, CCPA MB.*

Thanks to:

Hugill, David and Owen Toews. 2014. “Born Again Urbanism: New Missionary Incursions, Aboriginal Resistance and Barriers to Rebuilding Relationships in Winnipeg’s North End”. Human Geography Vol. 7, No. 1 2014 69-84. (<http://www.hugeog.com/index.php/born-again-urbanism-new-missionary-incursions-aboriginal-resistance-and-barriers-to-rebuilding-relationships-in-winnipeg-s-north-end>)

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