

Christian Labour Association of Canada celebrates 50 years of growth¹

by Alan Doerksen

In its 50 years of existence, the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC) has seen tremendous growth, but has also faced more than its share of obstacles. But as three CLAC leaders point out, the association has stayed true to its Christian roots, despite changes going on outside and within it.

Harry Antonides was on staff with CLAC for 35 years, from 1962 to 1997. But his involvement started with the very beginnings of CLAC, back in 1952, when he was a member at the local level in Sarnia, ON. At CLAC's recent national conference in Kelowna, B.C., Sept. 2 to 4, Antonides was chosen to become a member of CLAC's national board.

Reflecting on CLAC's 50 years of history, Antonides admits, "When we started 50 years ago, in 1952, we weren't sure we were going to make it That was a very difficult beginning."

One of the first obstacles CLAC faced came in 1954, when an application for certification for the employees of the Ontario company Bosch and Keuning was denied on technical grounds by the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB). That board went out of its way to point out that it felt CLAC's constitution was discriminatory because it was based on Christian principles, reports the *Guide*, a CLAC publication. Later on, CLAC was also denied labor union status by B.C.'s labor board.

Key turning point

But a key turning point for CLAC came in 1963, when Supreme Court of Ontario Chief Justice J.C. McRuer overturned the OLRB decision, and granted CLAC trade union status in Ontario. "There was no legal evidence on which the Board could base its findings that the union was discriminatory within the meaning of the statute," said McRuer at the time.

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“That was a major breakthrough,” asserts Antonides. If CLAC were to start now, rather than 50 years ago, he doubts if it could get a similar court decision in its favor.

Another difficult point for CLAC came in 1958, when most of the national executive committee of CLAC proposed a constitutional amendment that would meet labor board concerns but water down the union’s basis, reports the *Guide*. The amendment was defeated 32-18, and several CLAC leaders, including general-secretary Frans Fuykschot, resigned. Later that same year, Fuykschot helped start a rival union: The Christian Trade Unions of Canada (CTUC).

But in an unusual reversal, CLAC and CTUC were reunited in 1979. Antonides sees that reunion as a very positive thing – something rarely seen when churches or denominations split.

Battlescars

Ray Pennings, who has worked with CLAC for the past 11 years, also sees the 1963 court decision as an important turning point for CLAC. Pennings has just moved on from CLAC to become the chair of the Work Research Foundation (WRF). CLAC has faced many battles over the years, Pennings asserts, “and we all have battlescars to show for it.”

Opposition made them better

“We had a period of very sustained opposition in the 1990s,” notes Pennings. “Other organizations tried to knock us down.” One example was an Internet website which made slanderous statements about CLAC. But on March 19 of this year, the B.C. Supreme Court declared that such statements made against CLAC on a website are defamatory and slanderous, reports the *Guide*. The decision sent a clear message that CLAC will take action against those who publish lies about it.

Such opposition “had the effect of making us better,” observes Pennings.

Over the years, CLAC has grown considerably, and its identity has changed in some ways, says Antonides. At its beginning, CLAC focused on “building a

Christian foundation. Now most of the effort goes into doing a good job as a union rep” for specialized businesses and trades. CLAC has gradually put more work into training of stewards, retirement plans and benefits for its members, he adds.

True to Christian roots

But Antonides asserts that CLAC has stayed true to its Christian foundation. “There is continuity, I say.” CLAC is still “able to provide leadership with a Christian worldview as an alternative” to what he calls the “dog-eat-dog” mainstream labor movement. CLAC “tries to break through the hostility between labor and management.”

Called to co-operate

CLAC’s Christian perspective makes it distinct from other labor unions in Canada, says Antonides. “We believe the Christian faith addresses all issues of life – how we relate to fellow workers, to employers. They’re called to co-operate, and to share the benefits and rewards of labor fairly.” CLAC also believes “that work can be experienced as a meaningful, rewarding activity. All work should have some measure of responsibility and reward.”

Pennings observes that CLAC started from a European model of a labor union, but “to implement that in a North American context [was like] putting a square peg in a round hole.” But CLAC has adjusted and improved over the years. “We do a better job today than a decade ago,” says Pennings.

CLAC has stayed true to its Christian identity, asserts Pennings. “I think in terms of Christian values, they run front and centre.” This is reflected in regular employee training sessions “exclusively focused on worldview,” he explains.

Comparing CLAC to mainstream unions, Pennings says, “Fundamentally, the approach CLAC takes is workers are partners in the enterprise, working together with employers to make the ‘pie’ bigger. Many unions are preoccupied with drawing a line in the pie.” Rather, CLAC wants “a fair division of the rewards of that pie.”

CLAC is not confrontational like some other unions. “It takes a lot more skill to solve a problem than to fight,” says Pennings.

The past 11 years in particular have been “a time of remarkable growth,” says Pennings. In that time the union has grown from 8,000 to nearly 30,000 members. “The reason we’ve grown is we provide quality service to our members.”

A major player

John Sutherland, CLAC’s B.C. director of public affairs, notes that “in some sectors, we’ve become one of the major players.” Examples are the Save-On stores in Alberta – all of which are represented by CLAC – some commercial construction businesses in B.C., and long-term care homes in Ontario.

Although CLAC’s strong Christian worldview is “certainly intact,” Sutherland says the union has “become less dependent on the Reformed community.”

Sutherland sees one distinctive of CLAC as being “our view of social justice. Social justice from a mainstream union point of view means getting more for their members, and being an agent for change in society.” Often that means a left-wing agenda for mainstream unions. CLAC is “non-partisan, politically,” he adds.

Another CLAC distinctive is “we feel it’s possible to grow unions and management together in partnership.”

Originally, CLAC did a fair bit of theorizing related to the labor movement. But since the Work Research Foundation (WRF) was set up and registered as a charitable organization in 1974, it has taken over much of CLAC’s research and educational work. Since then, CLAC has held some joint conferences with WRF, which have produced several books, observes Antonides.

A duty to be faithful

Looking ahead, Antonides asserts that CLAC has “a duty to continue to be faithful to our Christian starting point. We have to pay a lot of attention to that.”

One challenge CLAC faces is attracting younger people into its ranks, he notes.

Another one is “continued growth and the challenges it brings,” says Sutherland.

To mark its 50th anniversary, CLAC has held celebratory events last spring in B.C., Alberta and Ontario. From Sept. 4 to 6, CLAC held a national stewards conference in Kelowna, B.C., which included a celebration of CLAC’s 50 years and “a special emphasis on what has sustained us for 50 years,” says Sutherland. CLAC has also recently published a special 50th anniversary issue of the *Guide*.