**50 Years of Faith and Light Celebrated by the United States and Canadian Communities**

“The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with Joy.” Psalm 126

The 50th Anniversary of Faith and Light International was celebrated by the North American Provincial Communities via Zoom Meetings throughout the weekend of July 9-11, 2021. There was great joy in each of the six themed meetings, each lasting about two hours. Over 600 community members and leaders from 47 communities from the Faith and Light North American four regions registered for the event.

This grand celebration was held to mark 50 years of Faith and Light. Faith and Light is an international, ecumenical organization comprised of 1420 communities in 86 countries who come together at least once a month to share scripture and celebrate the gift of persons with disabilities. These communities are comprised of leaders, persons with a disability (core members), family members, and friends. There is a common theme for the year and a curriculum for each of the monthly meetings related to the annual theme. This curriculum is published annually in guidelines that are distributed throughout all Faith and Light International’s world-wide communities. Thus, we are united in our biblical content experience. Being together in friendship with the core members is emphasized as opposed to doing for, with all members having an equal say. The scripture of the day is experienced through, skits, song, prayer, craft, and food and a fun time is had by all.

Faith and Light was founded as a result of a family with two young boys, both with an intellectual disability being denied access to a parish pilgrimage to Lourdes, France in 1968. When their parents decided to go to Lourdes independently, they had difficulty finding a hotel that would accommodate them and they were forced to eat their meals in their room, so as to not upset the other guests of the hotel. The parents were so distraught over their rejection and isolation that they contacted Marie-Helene Mathieu and Jean Vanier who in turn organized a pilgrimage for individuals with disabilities, their families, and friends to occur on Easter Sunday, 1971.

On Easter Sunday, April 12, 1971 12,000 pilgrims, 4,000 with disabilities arrived at Lourdes. There was much celebration, all were unified in prayer and loudly singing halleluiah. Many were so inspired by the experience that they wanted to keep the momentum going. Co-founder, Jean Vanier then suggested “Continue meeting together in small communities, do whatever the Holy Spirit inspires you to do.” Thus, Faith and Light International was inspired on that Easter Monday.

Originally, the Provincial 50th Anniversary celebration was to occur in person in St. Louis, MO. However, due to the COVID 19 pandemic an alternative option was required. The planning committee composed of representatives from all four regions of the province decided to use Zoom meetings for the celebration. The meeting was subdivided into six sessions:

Friday, July 9: Welcome

Saturday, July 10: Session 1) Honoring Parents by USA East

 Session 2) Honoring Core Members by USA West

Sunday, July 11: Session 1) A Musical Journey Around the World by Canada East

 Session 2) Honoring the Friends of Faith and Light by Canada West

 Fiesta

The weekend commenced with much excitement. This enthusiasm prevailed throughout the celebration. **Jesus Makes Us One** was the theme of the celebration. Thus, highlighting Faith and Light’s emphasis on ecumenism and call for unity. One way this focus was accomplished was by having clergy from different faiths, such as Mennonite, Quaker, Catholic, and Episcopalian open and close the different sessions with scripture and prayer.

The number of devices logged on for each session ranged from 120-160. This included separate individuals, families, households, and groups of people on one device that gathered for the event. Most of the participants were wearing the turquoise-colored tee shirts that were generously funded through a grant from the Charles and Salome Reymann Foundation. The weekend was filled with song (many were original compositions by community members), prayer, videos, including videos of Faith and Light communities around the world, crafts, historical reflections, games, and dancing. There was a welcome greeting by Marie-Helene Mathieu, Co-founder of Faith and Light, and a sendoff by Raul Izquierdo Garcia, the International Coordinator. Additionally, several VIPs participated via the live zoom sessions such as Maria Silvia Tavares, Deputy International Coordinator; Father Jim O’Donnell, a founder of Faith and Light in the U.S; along with other longtime Faith and Light historical figures.

The entire weekend was brimming with love and joy! While it would have been wonderful to have met in person, the Zoom format may have allowed for increased participation in the weekend’s activities. Thus, allowing those for whom traveling would have been cumbersome to be present. The four regions collaborated to create an exciting, creative, and diverse program enjoyed by all. “We know that all things work for good for those who love God.” -Romans 8:28

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