The Rev’d Dr Ellen B. Aitken, A.B., M.Div., Th.D.
1961 - 2014
Dean of the Faculty of Religious Studies, Montreal Diocesan Theological College
Honorary Assistant at
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Montreal, Quebec

This Joyful Commemorative issue for ELLEN AITKIN reflects the joyous expression of her Christianity until the hour she was gathered unto Christ. There is not a photo of her Celebrating Mass nor of her giving a Sermon: she considered both to be private between her and her Faith. She was a great friend and encourager to me personally, when Chair of the Montreal School of Theology, when Pro-dean at a Faculty of Religious Studies PhD Oral, and when at a conference she organised "Late Antique Crossroads in the LEVANT: Space, Rituals, Texts, and Daily Life." An International Colloquium in Montreal: November 1-4, 2006, at the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University, where Ellen said she enjoyed my pithy comments but could I make them gentler. That was truly Christ-like. Amen.
It is the will of him who sent me that I should lose nothing of what he has given me; rather, I should raise it up on the last day. (John 6:37)

In the early morning, last Saturday, Bill posted this message: ‘It is with great sadness that I write to tell you that Ellen died last night at midnight. It was a very peaceful passing, and it was what she had been praying for in recent days.’

Great sadness . . . a peaceful passing . . . prayer. We here this morning share with Bill in this great sadness, and, with Ellen, we have been praying - praying for God’s sustaining presence, for strength. Perhaps we have prayed for a miracle, ‘for the driving away of all sickness of body and spirit.’ Still, though it was a peaceful passing, in the end it feels as if Ellen has been taken from us . . . rudely, brutally. As she herself put it, she felt invaded, colonized by an alien guest, by what is destructive and life-denying. And in the prime of her life, she was taken away from us . . .

But now this morning, in our grief, we are invited to do something together. We are invited to do something new. We have not been passive in the face of Ellen’s illness. Indeed, in her remarkable way, she created a community of support, not just of care for her, but of and for one another. As one of my colleagues said, ‘you can tell that the person writing those journal entries on Caring-Bridge is steeped in the epistles.’ There is, in them, a courage, a candour drawing us as a body into this particular end-time, making us conscious of the jeopardy of existence, of our dependence on God, and of our membership in one another. Moreover, some of you have told me how, at her bedside, Ellen invited you to hold hands not only with her, but with one another. So we have not been passive onlookers as we have witnessed Ellen’s final days with us. We took up the tasks of writing, visiting, feeding, praying.

Now, however, we are invited to a new task, and that is, to give Ellen away. She may have been taken away from us, but we can give her away . . . to another . . . to God.

Perhaps this begs the question, did we possess her in the first place? To which, I think, only the strongest affirmative answer is possible. Ellen was ours, is ours, in the best way that persons can belong to one another. She was ours because she shared herself with us and invited us into her enthusiasms, her insight, her humour, her wisdom. She shared herself by giving herself to those transcendent enterprises that make human life worthwhile. She gave herself to those arts that ultimately are gifts of the God who made us and who made us for life. Ellen gave herself to the demanding and enriching discipline of scholarship; she gave herself to the vocation of teaching; she gave herself to the daunting challenge of leadership in academic ad-

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The Rev’d Dr Elizabeth Rowlinson with Ellen during a 2014 solidarity march in protest against Premier Marois’ Charter of Values for the Province of Quebec.

“Those two informal photos of Dr Aitken were taken on a Graduate Research Seminar in Rome in July 2011. The first is under an Olive Tree at Hadrian’s Villa where Dr Aitken was getting a little shade, and the second was taken near the Palatine Hill, where Dr Aitken was taking a much-needed rest break.” Eliza Rosenberg

Dr Aitken and Chev. Garfield Du Couturier-Nichol presenting a Student Award in the Faculty of Religious Studies in 2012 to The Rev’d (now The Rev’d Dr) Joshua Hollman, a Lutheran Pastor

The Rev’d Dr Elizabeth Rowlinson with Ellen during a 2014 solidarity march in protest against Premier Marois’ Charter of Values for the Province of Quebec.

Family, friends and colleagues fill the church.

(All but four photos in this document are by Janet Best)
administration; she gave herself to a beautiful partnership with her husband, Bill; she gave herself to the gospel as preacher, pastor and priest. And she gave herself in friendship. So Ellen did belong to us, in a way that enabled us to belong, with her, to something greater, and, I dare to say, to someone greater. For Christians who have just celebrated Trinity Sunday, it should come as no surprise that persons possess one another most fully precisely when they relinquish possession as an end in itself and magnify one another, giving one another being and voice, honour and freedom.

So Ellen was ours, and still is ours to give away. But isn’t she already in the hand of God, you ask? Why do we need to give her away? We will keep her, of course, in memory. We will recall our time with her and notice how we have been changed. It will register with us how we do something differently or see something in a different light because of what she taught us . . . because of what she showed . . . because of some thing she said . . . because of the way she was. So it is with all the departed who have been ours, and not only those who lived with a brilliance and vital energy such as we knew in Ellen - a strength and depth of character that gave her an exceptional influence. To give her away then, is not to lose her memory. It is not to cease to be influenced by her.

To give her away is, quite simply, to entrust her to God. We do this in the words and gestures of an ancient ritual of the kind in which Ellen felt spiritually at home. We entrust her now to God not merely by an interior work of imagination, but publicly. We entrust her to God by proclaiming God’s great gesture of love towards us. We declare our absolute reliance on God . . . our trust in God’s power to demonstrate God’s deity in the face of death and of everything that obscures God’s glory and robs life of its goodness. And so we turn to what God has shown us, to what God has done for us in the coming of Jesus Christ, and in his taking of our pain and death into himself. We look to Christ, who entrusted himself on our behalf to his God and ours, the God who gives life and being to all creation. We declare our reliance on this mystery of faith. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Ellen’s destiny was linked to this mystery early on, at least from the time of her baptism. She lived in awareness of her life in Christ, and that her death was embraced in his. She had a wonderful phrase to describe the baptismal vocation. She said we are involved in God’s resurrection work. Let us remember we are involved in God’s resurrection work.

As Ellen lay in the ICU, I saw the same intense gaze that she could bring to a meeting or a conversation. And I felt the strength of her hand, as many of us did. And I think of her hand, now emptied of its strength, but not let down; rather, held in the grip of another. I imagine Ellen’s hand held by Christ’s, that is, by the one who said, ‘It is the will of the one who sent me that I should lose nothing of what he has given me . . . and I shall raise her up on the last day.’

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Tribute Sermon - cont’d from p. 3

The Church was full with Dr Aitken’s colleagues from McGill and Concordia Universities, her family and friends and St John’s parishioners. Fr Simons gave the Sermon while Fr Schmidt and The Rev’d Dr Patricia G. Kirkpatrick of the Faculty of Religious Studies, read the Lessons. Bishop Barry Clarke gave the final Commendation.

The stalls in the Sanctuary were filled with both Montreal diocesan clergy and many visiting priests from the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts (Boston), Dr Aitken’s home Diocese. In the Choir Loft were members of the choirs of St John’s, St Matthias’ and “One Equall Musick”. Organists during the service included Federico Andreoni, William Porter and John Grew.

John Simons
TRIBUTE TO DR. ELLEN AITKEN FROM MCGILL

(Abridged by the Editor)

Dr. Aitken:

Curriculum Vitae

Dr. Aitken received her ThD from Harvard University in 1997 in New Testament and Early Christianity and a BA from Harvard University in 1982 in Folklore and Mythology in Ancient Greek. She was on the Faculty of The Divinity School at Harvard University. She held a Degree from the University of the South, with training in Folklore and Mythology, the Classics, and Religious Studies. Her last research, funded by SSHRC, investigated the Relationship between Greco-Roman Hero Cult and ancient Christianity.

Professor Ellen Aitken was Dean of the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill from 2007-2014. She had been a member of the Faculty of Religious Studies since 2004, teaching in the area of Early Christian History and Literature. Professor Aitken served on numerous committees, including chairing the B.Th. Committee in the Faculty of Religious Studies and as a member of search committees for the Classics Programme. She was a member of McGill’s Centre for Research on Religion (CREOR) and an Honorary Faculty Member of the Montreal Diocesan Theological College. She was ordained in the Episcopal Church in 1986 and had been recognized widely as a leader in both Scholarly and Ecclesial Communities. She received two awards for Teaching Excellence. The books she wrote were Loosening the Roots of Compassion: Meditations for Holy Week and Eastertide, Jesus’ Death in Early Christian Memory, The Poetics of the Passion, Flavius Philostratus: On Heroes (student edition) and Flavius Philostratus: Heroikos, with glossary, notes, and introduction.

She also edited volumes of Journals including The Bible in the Public Square: Reading the Signs of the Times, Biblical Imagination: Scripture and the Life of Faith, Philostratus’s Heroikos, Religion, and Cultural Identity in the Third Century C.E. and was Guest Editor for Questions of Mission: On Being the Church. She also published over 20 papers in refereed journals, more than 20 refereed Notes and numerous Invited Sermons.

She gave over 75 invited Lectures, organised 5 International Conferences, gave over 50 addresses and talks to Community and Church Groups. She directed over 50 MSc and PhD Students.

Ensured that McGill became a leading International University in this field through academic courses, and her enormous entrepreneurial spirit reached into the public policy realm.

An ordained Anglican Church/Episcopalian Minister, Prof. Aitken was an active participant in university life and in trying to involve the broader community in discussions about a wide variety of subjects touching on faith and religion.

Dr. Aitken and her husband were amazingly gracious in allowing us to share in their final weeks together. There was a tremendous outpouring of love and concern for Ellen from home and abroad. She was marked by faith and peace and good courage throughout the entire ordeal. What she was when she was with us – a person of great integrity, patience, wisdom, and compassion – she remained to the end. The Faculty has lost a good friend as well as one of the Faculty’s, and indeed the University’s, best friends.