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CANADIAN CIVIL RIGHTS PIONEERS CELEBRATE FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN PRESIDENT

Canadian Unitarians have special reasons to celebrate Barack Obama's inauguration as President of the United States. Although many people of faith marched with Dr Martin Luther King Jr at Selma, Alabama in 1965, there were more Unitarians involved than any other religion outside the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. And a surprising number of those Unitarians either hailed from Canada or subsequently went on to make Canada their home.

Among the Canadians who were there are Arthur Hughes of Vancouver, Reverends Felix Lion (emeritus Victoria First Unitarian) and J. McRee Elrod of Victoria, Rev. Fred Cappuccino of Ottawa, and Rev. John Hanly Morgan (then minister at Toronto First Unitarian) of Toronto. "A carload went from First Congregation in Toronto," said Jeannette Morgan, the minister's wife.

Unitarian Arthur Hughes told the Vancouver Courier what it felt like to be among 25,000 marchers supporting the last leg of Dr King's march to Selma. "If you can visualize standing at Granville and 16th, looking north down Granville Street, seeing the road jammed with people carrying banners eight abreast as far as the eye can see, you'll have a good picture of the march," said Hughes.

Historically, many Unitarians and Universalists were outspoken abolitionists from the mid-1700s onwards, including such luminaries as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Julia Ward Howe and Louisa May Alcott. Unitarians actively participated in the Underground Railroad. In Boston, the Rev. Theodore Parker kept a pistol in his desk to protect the escaped slaves in his congregation.

But Unitarians also had a very contemporary reason to support Dr King at Selma: two Unitarians had died violently at the hands of Alabama racists. Rev James Reeb died after he and two other ministers were beaten with baseball bats shortly after their arrival in Selma. And lay woman Viola Liuzzo was shot and killed while she was driving African-American volunteers to Dr King's march. In response, the Unitarian-Universalist Association called all its clergy to join Dr. King in a giant protest march. Led by UUA President Dana Greeley, over half of all active UU clergy responded and joined on the march at the Raymond Petis Bridge.

Among the clergy who answered that call were ministers in Canadian congregations, who were still part of the Unitarian-Universalist Association at that time. (The Canadian Unitarian Council became an independent organization in 2003.) And most of the ministers from Canada arrived in cars full of their congregation members.

So when Barack Obama takes the oath of office on January 20, many Canadian Unitarians will be overjoyed at the fulfillment of the dream that they helped escort to the Alabama seat of power, more than forty years ago.

The Canadian Unitarian Council/Conseil unitarien du Canada (CUC), is an association of forty-nine congregations located across Canada with 5,100 individual members. Arising out of the

work of outspoken reformers and dissenters within the Christian tradition five centuries ago, the Unitarian movement today includes Universalists and flows in a broad religious stream augmented by Humanist, earth-centred, Buddhist and other progressive beliefs.

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