

Healing hydro relationships

Interfaith Task Force on Northern Hydro Development
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When we flick a light switch in Manitoba, we enter an economic relationship with people at the other end of the transmission line. Since 85 percent of Manitoba's electricity comes from the north, the relationship we enter is largely with northern Aboriginal people in whose homelands the dams sit.

Since the 1970s, many of these people have been inviting southern church groups to help heal the relationship between people at either end of the transmission line. Today, much healing is still needed.

Mixed messages

In recent years, northern hydro issues have become complex. Government and Hydro officials speak of a "new era" in the north. Hydro has given First Nations a say in new dams and allowed them to invest in those projects. This is a significant improvement over the past. But we continue to hear of deep grievances.



As hydro-regulated waters rise and fall near Cross Lake, shorelands erode, trees fall and water becomes silty. Photo by Michelle Gunderson, 2002.

In the last two years, our Task Force members have visited six hydro-impacted communities and heard from leaders of three others, including some that are now partnering with Hydro. Some voices speak of the need to "move on." Many speak of ongoing ecological harm, grave sites eroding into rivers, a God-given homeland turned dangerous, mistrust of Hydro, and, at times, frustration with agreements signed. We also hear deep graciousness, and hope for a more dignified future.

Pointing fingers

While government and utility officials must be held accountable for their decisions, ultimately we are all responsible. All Manitobans are de facto shareholders of

Hydro. And most of us live lifestyles that depend on industrial-scale energy development. Furthermore, we are part of a society in which Aboriginal people have become dependent on government, even though they are surrounded by a wealth of natural resources.

"Clean energy" seems to imply that [hydro] is harmless.... You are invited to visit my community and witness clean, harmless energy in the making. There are externalities everywhere:... water quality, erosion, floating debris and islands, despair.

— Chief Chris Baker, South Indian Lake, 2004

Healthy discussion

The Manitoba churches are in a position to promote open, non-polarized discussion of hydro issues.

- ➔ Is hydro as "clean" as the utility says? What can be done to address the severe environmental harm our Task Force has witnessed?
- ➔ In what ways is industrial hydro a climate change solution? In what ways is it not?
- ➔ Since the province collects about \$120 million annually from Hydro in "water rentals," should a rental share be granted to Aboriginal peoples who bear many unaccounted costs of producing the energy? (\$4 million worth of hydro flows south every day.)
- ➔ How do we love our northern neighbours?
- ➔ Given the sacredness and importance of creation for all of us, what is our spiritual response to concrete being poured into rivers?

Report card

The Interfaith Task Force is pushing government to do a comprehensive environmental review of Hydro's northern operations—something that the Auditor General of Canada noted has never been done. This could lead to identification of ways to mitigate damage, minimize ongoing harm and equitably balance profit motives with ecological factors. This would be an important step in addressing the unfinished business in the north and bringing healing to a broken economic relationship.

"The panel...sees an urgent need to move from a situation in which the [hydro] Project is the source of problems for Aboriginal peoples to a situation in which it is the source of solutions. The wrongs of the past must be addressed with generosity and unwavering justice." — 2001 Report of the Interchurch Inquiry into Northern Hydro Development

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