

Faith-based, business-funded groups boast deep ties to diplomats, politicians

Christian Embassy and Embassy Connections create informal links between business execs, parliamentarians and foreign diplomats—a model one MP says is ‘political genius.’

Marie-Danielle Smith

They’re some of the best-connected people in Ottawa, operating on a model that one member of Parliament calls “political genius.”

They aren’t party staffers, pollsters, Press Gallery members or lobbyists. They’re a small group of interlocutors whose only obvious mission is to inspire decision-makers. Not with policy ideas or political advice, but with the life and person of Jesus Christ.

Though the separation of church and state is pervasive in Canadian society, the group has an unmistakable presence in official Ottawa, and has for more than 30 years.

The Canadian branch of Christian Embassy was founded in 1984. It’s part of a network of eight such organizations across the world. The first was founded in the United States in 1975, affiliated to a larger Christian movement called Campus Crusade for Christ, or Cru.

Though the word ‘embassy’ is in its name, the Christian Embassy in Canada is not a government mission and shouldn’t be confused with the diplomatic mission of the Holy See in Canada.

Despite an unambiguous mission statement—“Our mission is to encourage political, diplomatic and business leaders, giving them an opportunity to discover Jesus, to experience His life-changing power and to inspire others similarly”—most of the group’s activities revolve around business trips and networking activities open to people from all religious backgrounds.

The network they operate in Ottawa, and across Canada, is a big one.

‘We won’t push it’

“Regardless of a person’s spiritual interest, we will seek to serve them. Even if there’s zero spiritual interest. We won’t push it,” said Robert Montgomery, an international representative who has been with the group since 1999, in an interview. “We will only go so far as the person lets us.”

Once or twice a year, they organize trips abroad for Christian members of Parliament and business executives with the help of ambassadors in Ottawa. The group’s executive director, Darlene McLean—a regular in Ottawa’s diplomatic party circuit, married to Conservative MP Harold Albrecht—recently travelled to Zimbabwe and Zambia on such a trip.

Every year, there are three or four business trips paid for by Christian Embassy, each with up to three ambassadors, to Canadian cities. Christian business executives who live in those cities organize the trips. But non-Christian businesspeople are invited to meet ambassadors too, Mr. Montgomery said.

Ottawa events include luncheons, an annual Christmas dinner and roundtable discussions. A recent roundtable featured two businesspeople who gave a talk about financial planning and how financial principles are talked about in the Bible.

Christian Embassy is funded mainly by businesses that participate in its activities. These include high-tech, agriculture and manufacturing companies, Mr. Montgomery said, though he wouldn’t elaborate, saying contributions are confidential. Some parliamentarians have made donations as

individuals, but the group does not receive funding from governments or political parties.

“We don’t want to get entangled in any of that type of stuff at all,” he said, adding the group does not engage in any lobbying.

Donations are received through a parent organization, called Power to Change Ministries, which is based in British Columbia. It is registered as a charity and, according to the Canada Revenue Agency, handles more than \$21.6 million in donations for its 11 ministries, including Christian Embassy, annually.

Embassy Connections ‘very similar’

Jerry Sherman, who directed Christian Embassy from 1996 to 2012, broke away from the group and founded Embassy Connections Canada at the beginning of 2013.

Diplomats and politicians that *Embassy* spoke to tend to conflate the two organizations because of their similar activities—or they’ll participate in events held by both of them. “We are very similar,” Mr. Sherman admitted. Both are interdenominational Christian groups with similar mandates. He said of Christian Embassy, “they’re good people.”

Mr. Sherman said he broke away from the group because of a difference of opinion with Power to Change Ministries. “I had a lot of freedom, and that was being curtailed,” he said. Striking out on its own, his group is no longer “under the authority of a group of people that are out in BC.”

Embassy Connections is affiliated with a Christian organization called the Great Commission Foundation, which assists more than 200 NGOs with legal and administrative help. Many of the NGOs run projects in developing countries, Mr. Sherman said.

Like Christian Embassy, his organization is funded primarily by businesses, from what he said is a wide variety of industries. Many business partners followed Mr. Sherman when he left Christian Embassy, he said.

Embassy Connections also organizes international trips for MPs and business leaders—three in 2015, including trips to Vietnam and Thailand, Poland and Albania and Nicaragua and Costa Rica, and five in 2014. Once a year, the group visits Washington to speak to ambassadors there who are accredited to Canada.

They also take ambassadors on business trips in Canada, a tradition Mr. Sherman said he started in 1998 when he was with Christian Embassy. The trips usually include connections with universities and opportunities for the ambassadors to promote their countries.

Embassy Connections Canada’s Ottawa-focused events happen mainly on Parliament Hill—arranging lunches for diplomats and businesspeople with MPs, committee chairs and parliamentary secretaries, and occasionally cabinet ministers, Mr. Sherman said. They held 14 such events last year.

‘Good example’ of diplomacy

Events held by both groups are well-attended by foreign diplomats. At Christian Embassy’s Christmas Dinner in December, 66 countries were represented. And representatives from more than 55 countries attended the Embassy Connections Thanksgiving Dinner.

Jang Min Choi, South Korea’s defence attaché, said he suggested Christian Embassy



Christian Embassy international representative Robert Montgomery. Embassy Photo: Marie-Danielle Smith

organize an English Club for the spouses of military attachés. Between five and seven spouses attend each week.

“Angela, my wife, is a founding member,” he said. “It has continued for more than two years, with many spouses of non-English-speaking countries, since the first class in my home.”

The class, taught by Christian Embassy’s Susan Imbrock, has never involved religious content, he added. “The spouses have not only learned English, but also built strong friendship. I think that the club becomes a good example of very productive diplomatic meetings.”

“They’re such a tight-knit group,” Mr. Montgomery said. “Even other diplomats don’t enter into that group.”

Other English classes are offered to other diplomats and do incorporate Christian teachings. A curriculum developed by Mr. Montgomery teaches English using the gospel of Luke, from the Bible’s New Testament. Some participants are from non-Christian backgrounds, and atheists have participated too, he said.

“It exposes them to stories of Jesus, so we get to inspire them with the person and values of Jesus, but we do vocabulary, we do grammar, we do pronunciation,” he said. “It opens up the discussion. We have lots of fun.”

‘Very warm’

“I didn’t really, up to now, meet a group like this,” says Elida Petoshati, the ambassador of Albania.

Ms. Petoshati said in an interview that she has participated in business trips with Embassy Connections and also mingled at Christian Embassy’s events in Ottawa. She considers members of both groups her friends.

“Because of the Christian dimension they have, they are very, very warm. And it’s something I truly appreciated,” she said.

Fuad Didic, a counsellor with the Embassy of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Ottawa, first made contact with Christian Embassy in 2005. He joined a weekly class that paired English conversation practice with readings from the Bible.

“I gained remarkable insight in the holy scripture of the Bible, and to say honestly, it was a blessing for me,” said Mr. Didic, who is a Muslim. He said the class helped him realize how close people from different religions can be.

He left Ottawa in 2008 to go on posting to Japan, but came back in 2014 for a second posting to Canada and continued to maintain his ties to Christian Embassy.

Like Ms. Petoshati, Mr. Didic made valuable connections through the group. Events are a “springboard for me to get business cards.”

“It was very interesting to learn how people succeed in their work but didn’t sacrifice their faith and didn’t sacrifice having some kind of ethics and morality,” he added.

While some diplomats are wary of the group—one ambassador replied to *Embassy*’s interview request saying they avoid being associated with any religious organizations—there’s a sense that most of the diplomatic community doesn’t take issue with the fact it is faith-based.

Mr. Didic admitted some colleagues are “very reluctant” because they may fear that Christian Embassy has “some kind of secret agenda.” But, he said, “I found that the Christian Embassy has credibility. People are very warm... many colleagues get in touch with them.”

If diplomats say no to invitations because of the faith element, Mr. Montgomery said, “We respect that. We understand that there are people who feel uncomfortable with that, or that it’s not important to them.”

“Every colleague, and you know, [members of these groups themselves] are people that are bound by the values of dialogue and understanding, religious pluralism,” Ms. Petoshati said. “This is the world we’re looking to have.”

‘Post-religious hangup’

That’s an opinion shared by John McKay, a Liberal MP who has attended events organized by both Christian Embassy and Embassy Connections. He said there’s a “Western, secular, post-religious hangup” about avoiding groups that are associated with a particular religion.

“I frankly think that Western legislators who are either non-faith-based or antagonistic to faith need to kind of get their heads around the notion that the rest of the world takes their faith very seriously,” he said in an interview, offering the Middle East as an example. “The more opportunities that faith groups have to interact with each other, possibly the greater the chance is that there’ll be understanding.”

Besides, he added, you don’t get the sense that people from these groups are “beating someone over the head with a Bible”—it’s “low-key, pretty discreet.” Still, he said those parliamentarians who are attracted to these interactions are the ones who, like him, take their faith seriously.

David Anderson, a Conservative MP, has gone on several trips with Christian Embassy with his wife. They pay their own way, he said. Mr. Anderson is chair of Canada’s parliamentary prayer breakfast. Partnering with Christian Embassy, he travelled to Moldova to help organize a similar event there.

“That isn’t a country where you would normally, in the past, have seen something like that take place. And a couple of the members had enough courage to put it together,” he said.

“One of the reasons I’m involved in the political process is because I think it’s important that we maintain a faith component in our discussion about our culture and our society,” Mr. Anderson added. He said he believes Christian Embassy and Embassy Connections are “geared to encouraging members of Parliament, trying to help them do a better job.”

Mr. McKay doesn’t see the groups as having a particular agenda beyond getting legislators, businesspeople and diplomats talking. “The way that they go about it is actually quite a good idea, because the three communities frequently don’t interact with each other,” he said.

“They have a model that I think is political genius.”

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