

Youth / Kevin Maimann

Churchwide Climate Program Nurtures Young Advocates

THE UNITED CHURCH of Canada is preparing the next generation of leaders to pick up the mantle of tackling climate change. Last summer, 15 youths across the country took part in the denomination's first Climate Motivators program. Each student partnered with a community of faith to work on local climate justice or environmental needs.

The youth also spent two weeks at Camp Pringle in Shawnigan Lake, B.C. — including one with Moderator Rt. Rev. Carmen Lansdowne — to worship, be in nature and work to enact change and influence church policy.

Elijah Kanhai, a Winnipeg teen who was one of the 15 participants, says he would gladly return to the program this summer because it exceeded his expectations. “This was one of the most inspiring, motivational experiences of my life,” he says.

Kanhai, 15, co-ordinated surveys across Winnipeg to learn about the climate concerns of locals and church members. The surveys also measured their awareness of climate change and the relevance they think it has in their lives. Kanhai then worked with the church to make educational videos and used the information to create a workshop called Root to Rise.

“I think the reception was phenomenal,” he says. “I’ve had people come to me every time I’ve been to church since running these workshops and participating in the program, asking me questions about next steps, about what the



United Church Climate Motivators at Camp Pringle in Shawnigan Lake, B.C., last August.

program was like.” His congregation, the United Church in Meadowood, is in the midst of its own greening campaign that could include switching to geothermal energy via heat pumps.

Kyla Mills, 20, a third-year geography major who was a motivator in Halifax, saw the program as an opportunity to expand her understanding of climate issues and also share her existing knowledge and passion for the environment with her church community.

Mills organized two seminars at Bethany United in Halifax and worked with the church on a strategy to replace its 65-year-old fossil-fuel-burning boiler. “I think that getting youth involved and giving youth a space to speak on these issues is the best possible way to grab people’s attention,” she says.

Kanhai says he learned more than he could have imagined and developed many skills, such as expressing ideas in a non-intrusive manner. He contacted others and created networks, organized events and people, and brought community members together in a way that aimed to ensure everyone felt safe and valued.

“It was just so rich and in depth in so many aspects, from the support that it offered to the exploration of political

advocacy and environmental advocacy and spirituality,” he says.

The trip to British Columbia was significant in strengthening Kanhai’s spiritual resolve to continue with climate advocacy.

When the motivators boarded a ferry back from Vancouver Island after spending two weeks in nature, he was struck by the “stain” of wildfire smoke across the sky and reminded of the tragedy of the deterioration of the natural world.

“For me, the way that my faith is connected to climate advocacy is seeing all this beautiful work and seeing how it’s dying — and not naturally, not through the processes which life takes, but because of us,” Kanhai says. “I feel like all of Creation should be as one or work synchronously or in harmony. And seeing that is just so heartbreaking.”

The program was made possible by a federal Canada Summer Jobs grant. It was led by three young adult climate co-ordinators and supervised by the GO Project in partnership with the General Council office.

Students aged 15 to 19 who have experience in, or a desire to be involved in, the church’s climate response work, are encouraged to apply for the 2024 Climate Motivators program. **U**