

Quebec Jehovah's Witness challenges bylaw

By Idella Sturino

MONTREAL (CUP) — Jehovah's Witnesses in a Montreal suburb can once again breathe easy — at least for now.

A temporary agreement reached in Quebec Superior Court Nov. 21 between the religious group and the town of Blainville prevents the municipality from enforcing its anti-solicitation bylaw against the group. At the same time, Jehovah's Witnesses can only knock on their neighbours' doors at certain hours of the day.

The agreement comes after Blainville police, in response to residents complaints, began enforcing the bylaw three weeks ago. As a result, 17 people — including an 85-year old grandmother — have been handed \$250 fines for performing their door-to-door ministry without a permit or outside of weekday business hours.

The anti-solicitation bylaw, which regulates all forms of door-to-door solicitation, has primarily been enforced against Jehovah's Witnesses.

According to Blainville police chief Albert Stringer, that's because the only complaints police have received have been about the Jehovah's Witnesses, who some residents say knock on people's doors too early on weekend mornings.

"We enforce the bylaw and respond to calls from citizens, but we're not chasing after anybody," Stringer says, insisting that if he were to receive a complaint about the Girl Scouts, he would enforce the bylaw in the same way.

Last week, a group of Jehovah's Witnesses decided to seek an immediate injunction against the bylaw and asked the Quebec Superior Court to quash it.

"We feel that this bylaw was enacted in bad faith and with the intent to stop our work, to discriminate and control us

in our ministry," Alain Beauchemin, regional spokesperson for the Jehovah's Witnesses in Quebec, said.

But Blainville mayor Pierre Gingras denies that the bylaw was meant to single out Jehovah's Witnesses. "We're not targeting one religious group," Gingras told the Montreal Gazette last week.

Still, Beauchemin says the bylaw is a veiled attempt to curb Jehovah's Witnesses activity because it lists visits of a religious nature among the forms of solicitation to be regulated. According to Beauchemin, everyone knows it's the Jehovah's Witnesses who make door-to-door religious visits, which are an integral part of their religious practice.

"It's part and parcel of our religion," Beauchemin said, pointing to passages in the Bible which describe how Jesus and his apostles traveled door to door to preach the gospel.

Whether or not the bylaw's intent is to prevent Jehovah's Witnesses from performing their door-to-door ministry, the group argues it is unconstitutional, preventing them from practicing their religion and infringing on their freedom of expression, as enshrined in the Canadian and Quebec Charters of Rights and Freedoms.

At last Friday's hearing, the Quebec Superior Court denied the group an immediate injunction against the bylaw, but ruled that it cannot be invoked against Jehovah's Witnesses until a Dec. 12 hearing when the court will decide how to proceed.

The group's lawyer, Glen Howe, is confident that the battle against the bylaw will be successful.

"[The city] is trying to take away rights that have already been given," he said.

Howe adds that the courts have consistently ruled that the rights and freedoms

protected in the Charter belong to everyone and are a two-way street. Jehovah's Witnesses have the right to preach door-to-door, and individuals have the right to decide for themselves whether or not to

listen, he says.

Aside from seeking the bylaw quashed, the group also plans to seek punitive damages from Gingras. Each member will seek \$25,000 in damages because they believe the bylaw was implemented in bad faith and in direct contradiction of clear Supreme Court rulings which upheld the constitutional rights of Jehovah's Witnesses.

"We want to send a strong message that if, as a duly elected official, you use your democratic power to force minorities to do something wrong and against the Charter, you have to pay the price," Beauchemin said.

The group has several important precedents on its side, including a 1959 case in which the court ordered former Quebec premier Maurice Duplessis to pay over \$50,000 in damages to restaurateur Ron Carelli. Carelli had posted bail for several Jehovah's Witnesses and, in return, had his liquor license revoked.

Ironically, comparisons between the Blainville bylaw and the Duplessis-era of Quebec politics, known for its intolerance of minority groups, have been made by several observers.

Beauchemin notes that while young members of the community are surprised by

the current conflict in Blainville, the older generation remembers other cases of what they say is discrimination against Jehovah's Witnesses in Quebec.

There are currently about 35,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in the province, most of them in the greater Montreal area.

CUP Briefs

Deadline looms for B.C. abuse survivors

By Chris Morabito

VICTORIA (CUP) The B.C. government is not doing enough to reach out to victims of abuse at a provincial residential school for the deaf and the blind, charge advocates of former students at the institution.

According to the group Silent No Longer, the government's efforts to find former students who suffered sexual abuse at Jericho Hill School is seriously lacking.

The group is angry about the upcoming Nov. 30 deadline for the Jericho Individual Compensation program, through which victims of sexual abuse at the school will be financially compensated.

There have been close to 170 applications made so far to the compensation program. No one knows, however, just how many former students who suffered abuse are out there.

An application has been made to the provincial cabinet for an extension on the deadline, but a decision won't be made until Nov. 26.

This decision angers parents and former students who say physical abuse was rampant at Jericho Hill and included such violence as slamming children's hands in doors, impeding their ability to communicate with sign language.

Parents say loss of education should also be compensated for, saying it was impossible for children to effectively learn under the conditions of the school.

The compensation program is offering rewards ranging from \$3,000 to \$60,000.

Education coalition continues to push for student aid reform

By David Cochrane

OTTAWA (CUP) — A coalition of seven national organizations representing students, professors and administrators is continuing its campaign to get the federal government to revamp its delivery of student aid.

The post-secondary education groups presented a series of proposals to the Special Senate Committee on Post-secondary Education on Nov. 20, building upon other recommendations made earlier this year.

Last January, the groups released *Renewing Student Assistance in Canada*, in which it proposed that the federal government introduce targeted grants for disadvantaged students, create a work study program and provide tax relief for students.

Last week the coalition renewed these calls and added a few more items to its shopping list. These include: allowing graduates the option of suspending payments on their student loan principal during the three- to five-year transition period from school to the labour market, providing needy borrowers with a reformed and more graduated version of the present interest relief program during that period and providing borrowers who still can't make payments after the transition period with a targeted debt-reducing grant. The coalition also suggested that the debt repayment period be limited to no more than 15 years.

The coalition was formed about a year ago out of concern over alarming increases in student debt. Statistics Canada reports that average debt levels for students who borrow will reach \$25,000 by the end of next year, up from just \$8,700 in 1990.