



McGILL UNIVERSITY **SENATE**

An Extract from the Minutes from Wednesday, September 17, 2014

Memorial tribute to Professor Ellen Bradshaw Aitken

The Chair noted that over the summer, the McGill community was deeply saddened by the loss of two of its prominent members: Professors Ellen Aitken (Faculty of Religious Studies) and Roderick Macdonald (Faculty of Law). She also welcomed Mr. Bill Porter, the husband of Dean Ellen Aitken, who attended a portion of the meeting to participate in Senate's memorial tribute to his late wife. Senator Henderson then read the following memorial tribute, which Senate subsequently unanimously approved:

Madam Chair, I rise to invite the Senate to join the staff, students and professoriate of the Faculty of Religious Studies in remembering and celebrating the life and work of Ellen Bradshaw Aitken. Ellen Aitken came to McGill in 2004 as an Associate Professor in Early Christian History and Literature. Scarcely three years later, she became the ninth Dean of the Faculty of Religious Studies. As Dean, she passionately served the Faculty, the University and the wider Academy until her death on June 14th of this year, after a brief, but aggressive illness.

Ellen began her University studies in Classics, at Harvard University, beginning a life-long interest in the representation of the heroic in Greek Literature and Religion. A year abroad at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, began a parallel intellectual and spiritual formation in Christian Theology and Ministry. In 1986 Ellen completed a Master of Divinity degree at the University of the South and was ordained into the ministry of the Episcopal (Anglican) Church. From Sewanee she returned to Harvard, this time to the Divinity School, to take her Doctorate in Theology, graduating in 1997; characteristically her doctoral dissertation under the historian of Early Christianity, Helmut Koester, and the Classicist, Gregory Nagy, combined insights from the Christian tradition with a broader religious and cultural understanding of the ancient world. The dissertation was later published as the volume, *Jesus' Death in Early Christian Memory: The Poetics of the Passion* (2004). Ellen remained at the Harvard Divinity School as Assistant Professor of New Testament until McGill recruited her in 2004. During those Harvard years Ellen pursued her interest in religious commemoration of heroic death in a collaboration with Jennifer K. Berenson Maclean which led to the publication of a notable series of books, editions and articles on the Greco-Roman writer Flavius Philostratos.

Here at McGill, Ellen continued her cross-over research in Classics, Religious Studies and Christian Biblical Theology with a SSHRC-funded study of relationships between Greco-Roman hero cults and ancient Christianity. Even as Dean Ellen maintained a heavy load of undergraduate teaching and graduate supervision. Again and again, her

combined gifts of scholarship, administration and friendship led her into leadership roles in the wider Academy and the wider Church. Ellen was especially successful in articulating the vision of an intensely pluralist, yet deeply engaged study of religions as a necessary component of University education and research for the coming century. Ellen was deeply instrumental in facilitating the establishment in the Faculty of Religious Studies of the new Barbara and Patrick Keenan Chair in Interfaith Studies. Similarly Ellen worked tirelessly to position McGill as a leader among the thirty universities in the Faith and Globalisation network initiated by The Tony Blair Faith Foundation. In her whole scholarly career and years of administrative service, Ellen Aitken modelled the deep compatibility of critical learning with sincere faith. Ellen found time and vision to serve local Christian communities both in Massachusetts and in Quebec. As a theological educator, Ellen challenged, inspired and mentored women and men in both academic and pastoral callings. She treasured a vital spiritual relationship with the Anglican monastic Society of Saint John the Evangelist. She was strongly committed to the work of the Montreal Diocesan Theological College, the Anglican college affiliated with McGill.

Madam Chair, Ellen Aitken was a remarkable scholar of religious traditions and also a remarkable builder of meaningful community. Typically, yet specially, in the last weeks of her life she and her husband, Bill Porter, who is here with us today, opened their hearts to an astonishing range of friends, colleagues, and students from Ellen's Harvard network, from her Church and professional networks, and from across McGill. I invite the House to join me in expressing undying gratitude for the life and vision of the Reverend Professor Ellen Bradshaw Aitken.

Ian H. Henderson
Interim Dean

ian.henderson@mcgill.ca