

February 6, 2024

Shipra Verma
Chief Electoral Officer
Elections Manitoba
120 - 200 Vaughan Street
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3C 1T5
BY EMAIL

The residents of KeKiNan Centre
100 & 102 Robinson St
Winnipeg, MB, R2W 5M8
c/o Andy Wood
BY EMAIL

Re: Nun at KeKiNan Centre mobile poll

The Manitoba general election was held October 3, 2023. Elections Manitoba arranged for a mobile poll to visit KeKiNan Centre, a residence for 55+ Indigenous seniors, to make it easier for the residents to vote. This particular mobile poll had two workers. They spent the morning at a different location and the afternoon at KeKiNan Centre.

One of the poll workers was a nun who was wearing a habit. This was very upsetting to a number of the residents and resulted in a series of complaints to Elections Manitoba and, ultimately, a referral by Elections Manitoba to me.

I propose to set out the results of this investigation in more detail than I might normally do. Although I will refer to some of the more senior people involved by name, I will not name the individual residents of KeKiNan that were interviewed, and I will not name the nun. I believe those people are entitled to their privacy. For convenience, I will sometimes refer to the nun as Sister B, though that is not her name.

The complaints

The first complaint came in a phone call, noted by Elections Manitoba to have been made at 4:37 pm on election day. The staffer who received the complaint at Elections Manitoba recorded it as follows:

Caller said they had a nun come for the mobile poll on behalf of EM. The building has indigenous seniors as residents, and they were not happy to see a nun there and they want to be reassured that this won't happen again.

The complaint was referred to a complaint officer who called the complainant at 5:46 and made the following note:

Spoke to J... who said that after a weekend of acknowledging Truth and Reconciliation, it was a bit of a shocker to have a nun come to this residence for senior indigenous people to collect their vote (KeKiNan Centre Inc) The mandate of the centre is to provide culturally safe and

appropriate space for all who live there. Wants a follow up acknowledgement by email (not a guarantee)

That staffer then wrote an email to the complainant that said:

Thank you for notifying us about your concern regarding the mobile collecting of votes today at the KeKiNan Centre in Winnipeg.

We realize with National Truth and Reconciliation Day mere days ago, that it was alarming to have a nun arrive to collect votes from the residents.

We appreciate the reminder that the centre is there to provide a culturally safe space for all who live there and we hope you know any misjudgement on our part was unintentional.

We hope to do better in the future and thank you again for bringing this to our attention.

The Tenant Advisory Council of KeKiNan did not feel that the response from Elections Manitoba was adequate. On October 6, Andy Wood, the Elder Resident Resource Coordinator at KeKiNan Centre, forwarded, by email, a letter from the Tenant Advisory Council to Shipra Verma, the Chief Electoral Officer of Manitoba. Mr. Wood said that he had copied his email to “the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, Southern Chiefs Organization, Wab Kinew’s office, Bernadette Smith’s office, Nahani Fontaine’s office and the Indigenous Senior Resource Centre”.

In the letter, the council explained that many of the residents at KeKiNan Centre are the survivors of abuse at residential schools and were very upset to see a nun wearing a habit, which they saw as representative of residential schools.

The letter said:

On election day, you might begin to imagine our shock when one of the two election officials who came to operate the ballot box was a nun, dressed in her habit outfit. You might have some appreciation for how we felt when we went to exercise our democratic right to vote only to discover the person operating the election station also represented residential schools.

This was a very hurtful and damaging experience for many of us. The past few days we have shared stories of being triggered and re-traumatized by this experience. One person shared she felt an involuntary urge to slap the nun. Another person wondered if this was a sick joke. Another person said they had a "creepy feeling" when they saw the nun there. Just the sight of her, and the surprise of her being in our space brought back many awful memories. One elder was taken back to 1965 and held up her wrist to show scars that were left there by a nun's rod.

This person should never have been sent to KeKiNan Centre! How did this happen? Of all places in the city, KeKiNan is probably the worst place to send someone who represents, in such a visual way, a church which did such incredible damage to us and our families.

We know a complaint was made on election day and a response was offered by Elections Manitoba. We have read this response and want to tell you it feels inadequate. This feels like our concerns and experiences are being dismissed and isn't a real apology.

We are asking Elections Manitoba for a proper and full explanation as to how this happened. We are asking for an investigation into this breach of cultural safety. What steps will you take to ensure this kind of thing does not happen again? We as First Nation and Metis community Elders want to feel safe in our own home.

Upon receiving the letter, Ms. Verma called Mr. Wood and he invited her to meet with representatives of KiKeNan at a healing circle that was to take place that afternoon. Ms Verma accepted the invitation went to the healing circle with her the Director of Electoral Operations and the Returning Officer for the electoral division that includes KeKiNan Centre.

After that meeting, on October 11, 2023, Ms. Verma wrote a second letter to KeKiNan Centre. Her letter said:

Dear Elders and Management of KeKiNan Centre,

Further to your letter dated October 5 and our meeting on October 6, I am writing to reiterate and confirm our commitments to ensure a nun in a habit is not in your home to deliver voting services. Your perspectives are invaluable and will shape how our organization moves forward.

I thank the Survivors who spoke with us. Hearing how this incident has impacted you has made it especially clear that we need to do better. I appreciate the guidance you offered on Friday.

As discussed, we are committed to a collaborative approach to ensure something like this never happens again.

We will work with you to ensure culturally appropriate voting officials are present in future elections.

We will work with you on recruitment initiatives to create more awareness of election employment opportunities for Indigenous youth.

We will work with you to provide more election education for youth through our *Your Power to Choose* workshops.

Thank-you for your time in expressing your concerns and ideas on how to better move forward. We will continue to learn and get better at serving our community with your assistance. I close by repeating my sincere regrets and apologize for this occurrence.

On October 12, the Chief Electoral Officer received the following email from Pam Munch, the Executive Director of the Indigenous Senior Resource Centre (Ms. Munch had been one of the attendees at the meeting with Ms. Verma)

Good Morning,

Thank you for response on the commitment Elections Manitoba is making to ensure culturally appropriate voting practises will look like going forward.

We noticed that the investigation process we talked about is not included in this letter. The Elders have concerns after learning the nun had showed up for her interview with Elections Manitoba wearing street clothes and only referring to herself as B . . . There was no indication that she was nun prior to her being placed at Kekinan. The Elders would like an investigation as to see if she was a real nun sent by the Catholic church or was she someone impersonating a nun and was aware that the Elders all had past traumatic experiences in the residential school systems. The threat was real for the Elders as they now are having to process the painful experiences they were subjected to. If the Catholic church was involved then the Elders have a right to know. You may not think this is important to pursue however for the Elders it's a part of their healing process.

We await your response.

The letter raised a concern about whether the nun had been sent to KeKiNan by the Catholic Church or whether the nun was really a nun at all. If either of those concerns proved to be valid, there would likely have been a breach of the Elections Act. Accordingly, Elections Manitoba referred to matter to me.

It appears that these concerns were based, at least in part, on the understanding that the nun had worn street clothes when she went for training at Elections Manitoba and only wore her habit on voting day. That is information KeKiNan got from the Returning Officer that Ms. Verma had brought to the meeting. As discussed below, however, that information was incorrect.

The investigation

KeKiNan

On receipt of the complaint from Elections Manitoba, I arranged for the matter to be investigated. The investigator and I met with representatives of KeKiNan Centre on November 17, 2023. We explained to them that our role was simply to determine whether there had been a breach of the Elections Act

Nearly all of the residents we met with had had traumatic experiences with nuns going back to their childhoods, many of which related to residential schools. They each emphasized how hurtful it had been to have a nun, a symbol of such traumatic events in their past, be sent to act as the polling officer in an Indigenous seniors residence. The hurt was magnified, they said, because this election was their first opportunity to vote for an Indigenous leader who was likely to become the Premier.

The residents did not appear to be angry with the nun herself but with what they felt she represented. At least one of the residents said the nun had been nice, and no one suggested she had behaved inappropriately. No one confronted the nun or asked her to leave. The only comment that was made in the nun's presence was made by a gentleman who, when he saw there was a nun at the polling station said "Are you kidding me!". He said that the nun did not respond.

Andy Wood was at this meeting and told us he overheard the nun in the hallway speaking to one of the residents. He heard her say words to the effect of "Well, I hope it wasn't all a bad experience". He did not hear the rest of the conversation, but wondered if the nun might have been referring to the

resident's experience at a residential school. If that was so, the residents all felt such a comment would be very disrespectful and inappropriate.

The residents had several suggestions for Elections Manitoba. They said:

1. They hoped that this never happens again
2. They think there should be some better cultural or sensitivity training for poll workers
3. They want an opportunity to have the poll staffed by a KeKiNan resident or residents
4. They would like youth poll workers if possible

These are all important matters, but they are outside my role of investigating possible breaches of the Elections Act. When I asked the residents what they would like to see as the result of this investigation, they said they would like to know what the nun was thinking when she came to KeKiNan in her habit. I told them I would try to find out.

The Returning Officer

The investigator spoke with the Returning Officer on November 20. Although she had said at the meeting at KeKiNan that she thought the nun wore street clothes prior to election day, she told our investigator that she really didn't remember. What she did recall was that she saw two nuns dressed in habits entering the building where the orientation was taking place, and she felt that one of them could have been the nun that went to KeKiNan.

The RO thinks she would have seen the nun on election day before she went to KiKeNan. She said that she simply did not think about the fact that seeing a nun might revive some of the traumatic experiences of the residents, she didn't think about the fact that this person was a nun and she didn't think about the fact that KeKiNan was an Indigenous seniors residence.

Sister B

The investigator and I met with the nun, whom I am calling Sister B, on December 12. She came with her brother for support. Prior to our meeting, the investigator had spoken with her on the phone. She told him she was anxious and nervous as the result of the complaints about her and asked if she could have something in writing, in advance of our meeting, outlining the areas she would be asked about. The investigator agreed and sent her a letter. When Sister B came to our meeting, she had written answers to the questions she understood we would ask.

Sister B told us that she had worked elections in the past, always wearing her habit and always without incident. She enjoyed meeting people, felt it was a way to help the community and was happy to earn a little extra money.

We asked her if she was wearing her habit on the orientation day and she told us she was. She said, and her brother confirmed, that she wears her habit every day, and has always done so since she became a nun.

Sister B. remembered the orientation meeting and that she was one of the few people there who was able to drive on election day. That was why she was picked for KeKiNan. Her mobile poll was to go to the Salvation Army in the morning and KeKiNan in the afternoon.

We asked her if she was aware that KeKiNan was home to a number of Indigenous seniors and she said she was. We asked her if she thought her habit might upset anyone there and she said she did not. In fact, she said she had been there before. As she explained it in her written answers:

I had dropped in on the spur of the moment as I was passing by one day on foot two years ago. (I had heard that it was a retirement home for Indigenous people, and I have an extensive background of nursing home administration. I was simply curious about the layout of the home, and hoped someone could give me a brief tour.) I ended up having a wonderful visit with the caretaker and an older female resident, and came away quite intrigued by some of their life stories. The lady actually invited me to return to take part in a weekly class they had at the time (beadworking?) but my schedule changed shortly afterwards and I was unable to return on those particular days. About a month later, Christmas was approaching, and I returned with a box of chocolates for the lady.

Sister B told us that, on election day, having had these experiences she was actually looking forward to meeting some of the residents again.

In her written answers, as well as in our meeting, Sister B described her recollection of events at KeKiNan. After describing her duties, which involved checking IDs and marking each name off on a list of eligible voters, she said:

[My duties] left very little time for additional interaction. Two, maybe three voters had either forgotten to bring their ID or else had inadequate ID, but good-naturedly said they'd slip back to their rooms to find their documentation, and they did so without issue. One interaction was a bit unusual, but again good-natured: A man brought in a rosary, and smiling remarked that it had been given to him by a nun, and he would like me to have it. As a teaching professional and a medical health professional, I am well aware that gifts are usually to be declined unless quite small. My initial reaction was surprise, then as I was about to decline it, my immediate next thought was that this could be seen as rude rejection of a kind gesture by an Indigenous gentleman. I therefore simply smiled and thanked him, saying that this was a beautiful gesture, and that the very first rosary I prayed with it would be for him and his family. He seemed very pleased by this comment. I immediately resumed my duties.

After voting hours were over, we packed up, and a female resident pleasantly offered to bring us the cart to transport our things to the car. This same lady held the door open as I returned the cart, and all parted on smiling terms. Two other residents were sitting outside the building, and bid pleasant adieus. I left believing that all had gone very well that day.

I have to add this: Almost the first person I met that day at KeKiNan was the Resource Coordinator of KeKiNan, Mr. Andy Wood. He kindly showed my colleague and me where to set up our polling station, and I saw him passing in the hallway once or twice more that afternoon. At no time did he even hint that there was any consternation in KeKiNan Centre

about my presence. If he had, I most certainly would have requested replacement immediately by Elections Manitoba.

We asked Sister B. if she recalled someone saying anything like "You've got to be kidding!" She did not but said that could easily have happened. Had it happened, she doesn't believe she would have realized the comment was directed at her, or at her presence there. We also asked Sister B if she had a conversation with anyone at KeKiNan in which she might have said "Well I hope it wasn't all a bad experience". She had no recollection of saying that, though she couldn't say she didn't, but she is confident she was not involved in a conversation about residential schools.

After our meeting, Sister B. sent us a copy of her vows, demonstrating that she is, in fact, a nun.

The Voting Officer Ballot

The investigator spoke with the person who worked at KeKiNan with Sister B. She said that she did not notice anything wrong that day. It was not until the Returning Officer called her a few days later that she understood there had been an issue for some of the residents.

Conclusion

Having met with, or heard from, everyone involved in this matter, I am satisfied that everyone is being honest and telling the truth as they understand it to be. It is clear that some of the KeKiNan residents found Sister B's presence triggering and caused them to relive trauma they experienced in their youth. It is also clear that Sister B intended no harm and in fact had reason to think, on the basis of her previous visit, that she would be welcome at KeKiNan. Perhaps out of politeness, no one said anything to Sister B. while she was at KeKiNan, and both she and her fellow election worker left feeling the day had gone well.

This is not a case of anyone having committed an election offence and so I will be closing my file. I understand Elections Manitoba is committed to providing culturally appropriate voting services as outlined in their letter dated October 11th.

Yours truly



Bill Bowles

cc. Sister B.