



Transforming ideas into **practice** at the University of Manitoba

The idea of the university as a place where discovery and action meet carries with it great power and possibility. In the summer of 2009, the University of Manitoba released its Strategic Planning Framework, which committed us to pursuing a number of priorities important to the University and to the province, including human rights. To me, our focus on human rights is a compelling demonstration of this idea that universities are places where ideas can become practice: at the same time as researchers are seeking to advance knowledge and understanding, the University also must determine how to manage challenging situations affecting members of its community.

As you will read in this issue, the connection between Manitoba and the protection and promotion of human rights and social justice is a long-standing one. The support of alumni and friends and the expertise of the more than 150 researchers working in this field have allowed us as a university to build upon the wealth of the province's contributions thus far, and to seek out new opportunities to contribute to the global body of work in this field.

Evidence abounds of the importance of this work, both locally and globally. There can be a temptation to think that committing to promoting and preserving human rights and social justice is a simple proposition. Perhaps it is simple in principle, but it is not always easy and we do not always do it well. Though the situation here in Canada is better than in much of the world, we too have much to learn. Canada's history, for example, includes the legacy of the Indian residential schools and the harm done to First Peoples, including denial of their right to their languages, traditions and religion.

The emerging recognition of Winnipeg as a centre of learning in human rights is thanks in great part to the vision of the late Izzy Asper [BA/53, LLB/57, LLM/64, LLD/98] and the strong advocacy by the Friends of the Canadian Museum of Human Rights. Through their efforts, Canada's

first-ever national museum outside of Ottawa will be situated here in Winnipeg, and it will focus on human rights. Its establishment creates a wealth of opportunity for learning, discovery and understanding. It also has brought a great deal of momentum to the University of Manitoba's own efforts to enhance its academic and research expertise in human rights and social justice. An important component of this work is our partnership with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and our hope for learning through reconciliation. The fallout from the Indian residential school system continues to be experienced today and demonstrates unequivocally the consequences of violating basic human rights. It also serves as a sobering reminder of the importance of work in this field.

The rights and freedoms defined in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights on their face seem indisputable. There are challenges, however, relating to how to balance these rights, whether or when there should be limitations, or in matters of interpretation. For the University of Manitoba, these are not only concepts for researchers to consider, they are a reflection of the kinds of tensions that often exist on university campuses, particularly when opportunities are sought to debate issues of a controversial nature.

As I recently wrote in the Winnipeg Free Press, universities long have been places that promote free inquiry and debate, a value that is codified in the commitment they make to the concept of academic freedom. Universities want our students to explore differences, understand them and learn from them. To think freely and consider alternatives. To listen. I am encouraged that members of our community will challenge those viewpoints with which they disagree and promote their own perspectives. Allowing the exploration of controversial subjects may not always be comfortable, but is a reflection of what universities are about, and it is through these exchanges that knowledge is advanced.

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