

## **The Gospel Comes to North America**

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The title of this piece might suggest an essay about something that happened centuries ago. In fact, I want to describe something that is taking place now. Though it may seem absurd or amazing or both, it appears, at least from the perspective of mainline church institutions that the Gospel is just now about to find its first real home in North America.

This thought began to dawn in my consciousness in 1996, with a winter visit to the Rt. Rev. Gordon Beardy in Kenora, Ontario. I was seeking his counsel and prayers regarding the possibility of my nomination as bishop of Alaska. As the Oji-Cree bishop of a multi-cultural diocese, he would know both the pitfalls and promise of working in a church institution in a diverse population. As an honest friend, he would have some idea of my capacity to do the work with effectiveness and integrity.

Gordon warmly and enthusiastically encouraged me, but it came with a challenge: “Do you think I can start a church that believes that this is sacred land?” I asked him what he meant and, with very little explanation, he said, “If you were a bishop, you could join me in a church that would believe that this is sacred land.”

I was confused. Though Gordon’s thought and values respectfully reflect both traditional Native and Christian teaching, I had never heard him use a phrase with such a powerful traditional Native reference. Like many Native elders, though his thought and values are thoroughly aboriginal, his theology is normally phrased within the confines of a very orthodox and evangelical Christian faith. Further, the promotion of what sounded like a new church seemed completely out of character. He has always been loyal and dutiful to the Anglican Church.

I’ve thought about it a lot since that day. Time and experience have peeled off a number of layers of my confusion. Today, I consider Gordon’s words prophetic. At one level, his words confront the evil that has stubbornly refused to recognize God’s presence in this graced Land and its peoples. At another, they unveil God’s grace and sovereignty in the history and on going life of the People of the Land, the aboriginal nations. Taken together, and at both of these levels, we are inspired to expect a new future for the Native Peoples and Nations of North America.

### **The Churches of the West in North America and the Doctrine of Discovery**

Aloysius Pieris, a contemporary Asian theologian, has pointed out that the most of the churches of Asia, though they attempt to be local, are local churches of another continent. They have been “struggling for centuries to get acclimatized”. This is even more strikingly true of the churches of the West in North America. They came guided by European assumptions of cultural superiority and, with deadly consequence, by what has

been called the Doctrine of Discovery. Ignoring for the moment larger societal issues presented by colonialism, we may say that the impact of these embedded cultural themes on Christian mission has been devastating. Though the modern age of mission began with the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the colonial churches' basic operating assumptions have stunted the growth and impact of the Christian Faith among the Peoples of the Land and compromised the testimony of the churches of the West around the world.

The influential Doctrine of Discovery, providing the basis for Colonial expansion for over 500 years, presumes that Civilization is not present if the institutions of Western Culture are not available. A land that is discovered without Western institutions is considered "Terra Nullius," an uninhabited land, even if peoples and cultures are present. The Right of Discovery, then, grants to the one who discovers the right to control, exploit, and rule, in the name of a supposed beneficial progress for the discovered. Actual experience suggests, however, that as Western colonialism spread, catastrophe and discovery were hard to distinguish.

Though we may acknowledge that Western development brought some good in its wake, the good comes with a heavy price. A quick and simple review of the sad history of the European encounter with the Peoples of the Land shows this clearly. The "discovery" mentality is also related to the now familiar litany of environmental destruction in North America. Regrettably, we are now seeing this attitude exported around the world through globalization or, as Lamin Sanneh has described it, "Americanization".

Though long repudiated by most of the world's major religious, moral, and legal traditions, the Doctrine of Discovery reappears like a noxious weed in the all too frequent arguments that challenge the contemporary legitimacy of aboriginal life. Theologically, the Doctrine of Discovery has been the handmaid to the idolatrous assumption that God's presence has been confined to Western Civilization – an idea that has all but destroyed the capacity of the major denominations to grow in indigenous communities.

Amazingly, the churches of the West remain perplexed that their cultural framework is neither easy nor self-evident for the People of the Land. Much of the Western mission to the People of the Land treats them, as a number of commentators have noticed, as insufficiently developed Euro-American suburbanites. They must join the church of a European Diaspora in order to achieve spiritual legitimacy.

The basic operating assumption of the colonial mission to North America has been that the land and history that produced European Christianity was sacred, having a privileged role in the development and communication of Christian faith. This privilege is so deeply ingrained in the Churches of the West that many Native people assume that Christianity and Euro-American culture are inseparable. It is hard for many, even among the Native nations, to understand the monumental change that would come from a repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery by the recognition that this North American land is sacred.

To this day, the climate and seasons of European Christianity shape the liturgical seasons of faith and worship in North America. This is so elemental that it is barely noticed, despite a growing appreciation for the way that the land based pre-Christian cultural beliefs and practices of Europeans shaped the churches of the West. Even before this awareness, the interaction of a developing Christianity with pre-Christian philosophers was, at the very least, seen as providential if not divinely ordained. The shape that non-Christian cultural influences gave to faith and practice has been normative for all who have followed in the churches of the West. In many, if not most, of these churches in North America, a basic understanding of both the history and environment of Europe, as well as its churches, is necessary to be a fully recognized practitioner of the Christian faith.

Central to the Gospel is the idea of Incarnation: the Word made flesh. Unfortunately, even an idea so central to Christian faith can be ignored when obscured by cultural idolatry. The cultural experience of missionaries could be viewed as a part of the precious legacy of a worldwide faith, if put in proper perspective. Made an idol, it becomes a difficult obstacle to living experience of faith in a new context. The Word made flesh, the living experience of the Gospel, cannot be “freeze dried” in one culture’s experience and transferred to another (hoping, perhaps, that the addition of baptismal water would lead to the production of a Western Christian on foreign soil). It is wrong to hope that the normative experience in one context will become an identical or normative reality in a new context. Incarnation means local. You can’t have an incarnational church that is not local. You can’t have a local church in the Americas that is substantially and foundationally a European export.

### **The Gospel’s Power and Promise**

Gordon’s words reach beyond a simple repudiation of cultural idolatry. Constructively, they point to a living encounter with the Gospel in a North American context. Such an incarnation of the living and active Word of God would have great impact and consequences among the First Nations and far beyond. To be sure, one of the first places to be transformed is the past, or more precisely, our reading of the past.

Though colonialism limits the capacity of Westerners to see it, God Word’s has always had a vital and prophetic presence among the Peoples of the Land. In their diverse cultures and histories, we see constant suggestions of that presence, before, during, and after the arrival of the missionaries. Before, as many missionaries noted, evidence of God’s presence was seen in the values of family and faith that echoed so surprisingly and powerfully the Gospel the missionaries carried. During their initial encounters with the People of the Land the missionaries were surprised by the hospitable reception of the central values and precepts of the Gospel by many. Some missionaries even noted that aboriginal ambivalence about some aspects of Western Christian practice often indicated a laudable allegiance to Gospel principles, present prior to European arrival in Native culture. After the arrival of the missionaries, aboriginal survival is one of the great

stories of God's deliverance, a salvation that occurred in the midst of overwhelming opposition. Further, though largely ignored and rarely understood, there have been many examples of Gospel fruitfulness with a unique prophetic capacity among the People of the Land after the arrival of the missionaries and, quite often, without their support or involvement.

Despite colonialism, the Gospel found a home with some quite unexpected promise among with the People of the Land in North America. For example, the Ojibwe Prayer Meetings of Northern Minnesota, loosely related to the Episcopal Church still provide hope and a sense of renewed aboriginal identity for close to 150 years. The Gospel has even been inspiration for some forms of aboriginal resistance to colonialism, the Ghost Dance being one prominent example, Louis Riel being another. The Gwich'in Nation of Arctic Alaska and Canada is an impressive example of Gospel based resistance to colonialism that continues to this very day.

These are glimpses of alternative development contrary to colonialism and seeds of a Gospel future among the aboriginal nations of North America. We see here the Gospel's stubborn refusal to become the servant of one culture's attempt to subvert another. The Gospel has a power to convey liberation that transcends the intent, capacity, and experience of its preachers. In all of this we can also see the vigorous presence of God among the First Peoples of North America.

### **A Church for Turtle Island**

Gordon's prophetic words have come to mind on a number of occasions over the last 10 years. They echo in the conversations about aboriginal justice and reconciliation within the Canadian church. These discussions have helpfully focused attention on the discrepancy between church advocacy and policy on aboriginal rights and the continuing practice of Western cultural domination within Native churches. More important has been the spontaneous, uncoordinated, and unprecedented growth of vital Christian involvement and discipleship among the People of the Land. It is significant that this has been in the wake of institutional decline and chaos, much of it related to the residential school crisis and other by products of colonialism, among the churches of the West in aboriginal communities. As these developments and their meaning unfold, we are seeing the embryonic emergence of a new church in North America.

For me, Gordon's words have never been so tangible as this last summer. At the Sacred Circle of the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples held in Pinawa, Manitoba in August, the first steps towards a church of the People of the Land of this Turtle Island (a number of tribes use this term to describe the Americas) were made. It is in this sense that I can say that we may be witnessing the birth of the first indigenous Anglican Church in North America – a church that would hold that this land is sacred.

Although it is far to early to tell whether or not the actions of the Sacred Circle in Pinawa will bear fruit – there is much that will work against it, to be sure - it is important to note the way the Circle mirrors developments in Christian mission in other parts of the

Americas and around the globe. Despite a deterioration of the power and influence of the churches of the West, internally and externally, there has been an explosive vitality developing among churches and in areas that were formerly thought to be dependent and weak. This development, dramatically evident in the relationship of the churches of the West to the churches of the global south, is also gaining momentum with the Fourth World, the Peoples of the Land.

As colonial administration ends or weakens among the People of the Land new possibilities for mission and ministry emerge. First and foremost is the growing clarity of a Gospel shaped identity unique to the indigenous nations. This resonates with a broader based renewal of culture among aboriginal peoples and consciously draws on the vital Gospel presence in some of the earlier challenges to colonialism that we cite above, like Ojibwe Prayer Meetings.

There is, with these developments, a renewal of appreciation for the God given authority that has always existed among the aboriginal nations. This authority, sometimes called sovereignty, is a direct repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery. With many, especially in a religious context, there is evidence of a unique awareness of the larger mission to humanity and the rest of Creation that this authority bears with it. This understanding of sovereignty – the authority and power to respond to the Creator’s call to serve Creation – is in sharp contrast to the understanding of sovereignty generally present among the modern nation states. We may attribute it, in part, to the translation of the tribal ethos into a modern context.

Westerners often misunderstand the tribal ethos and its understanding of community. It is common to see the word “Tribalism” used to describe an isolated and fragmented identity held over against the good of the larger needs of humanity. In fact, this fragmentation is a common result of the commodification and breakdown of both social identity and community in the process of globalization. Aboriginal life – true tribal life – is, to the contrary, a call to relational and interdependent identity with humanity and all of creation. This is a vision that is desperately needed by the peoples of our world.

The events and movements of Christian renewal we witness today among the People of the Land in North America are undirected, uncoordinated, and simultaneous, in a pattern similar to indigenous church development around the world. We witness a sprouting or spiritual vitality in myriads of patterns, too numerous to mention in a brief paper like this, but with a kind of family resemblance that has the stamp of both spiritual authenticity and authority. This renewal in aboriginal communities seems to be influencing in equal measure those affiliated with the old-line denominations, newer independent and Pentecostal congregations, and others who have no clear identification with any known Western Christian institution. Significantly, though much of the renewal is premised on a certain independence from earlier colonial and Western models, there is very little evidence of bitterness or resentment displayed towards earlier mission work.

A survey of the various expressions of this renewal reveals that, from the human side of its genesis, the motivating and inspirational factors that accompany it are dynamic and multiple. First, there is a collective sense of obedience to a unique and timely mission and vocation among the People of the Land. This mission begins with a focus on the Word becoming flesh, being inculturated in contemporary aboriginal life. This incarnational presence, despite its highly local context, is related and a vital part of a broader spiritual message and destiny addressed to “every family, language, people, and nation”. This dramatic expansion of mission results in a sense of responsibility for all humanity and all of Creation, a clear imperative in Scripture that is given too little attention in recent Western missions. There is, along with this broad sense of mission, a sincere desire to deepen communion with other Christians and cultures, not to separate from them. The paradox of a growing sense of aboriginal identity is a more intimate sense of world community. But with this sense of global membership and leadership, there is, with great passion, a commitment to reconciliation and healing among the People of the Land – a reconciliation and healing that a growing number of aboriginal Christians recognize can’t happen apart from the fulfillment of the Gospel in Native Life that is quite separate from the colonial church system.

### **Marks of a North American Church**

What will be the marks that this venture is succeeding, both liberating for the People of the Land and transformational for the Church as a whole? What will be the critical factors for the creation of a North American home for the Gospel of Jesus? I believe there are 7 touchstones:

1. A robust awareness that God has, is, and will be present among the People of the Land.
2. A recognition that God has acted definitively in the survival of the Peoples of the Land. Their continued life, despite centuries of often deadly and vicious opposition is a sign of God’s Grace and Judgment. Their on-going life is a prophetic act of witness against the materialism and avarice of our age.
3. Along with 1 and 2 is a related denunciation of the Doctrine of Discovery and an end to measuring aboriginal church development by Western models.
4. The boundaries of Native church life should reflect and respect the boundaries of the People of the Land. The churches of the West must do more than affirm the authority and validity of the First Nations as it relates to other Nations and States. They must recognize it among themselves.
5. The Spirit of God has and will develop leaders among the People of the Land.
6. The Land is Sacred and a gift from God. We must recognize sacred place, history, and ecology. All people are here to tend and care for Creation in the service and power of the Creator. In addition, as the pattern of seasons and geography have shaped the experience of prayer, faith, and service since the beginning of the revelation recorded in Scripture, so must the Land of the Americas shape the pattern of Christian life in the Americas.
7. The spiritual and moral authority of the aboriginal nations of the Americas, especially as they relate to their own, must shape the decision-making and the actual shape of these factors. This discernment must be both tribal and consensual, not imposed from above. This will demand flexibility and creativity. The shape of the relationship of the People of

the Land to the churches of the West must be up to them, but promises a pattern of community that, of necessity, call all to transformation.

### **The Promise of Gospel Transformation**

If an Anglican Church of the aboriginal nations of North America fulfills its promise, it may lay a serious claim to being the first and highest profile truly indigenous witness to the Gospel to North America among the historic mainline churches from Europe. It would be a church that holds sacred this land; its history – both prior to and since the coming of the colonial powers. It would also hold sacred the future of God's Gospel in this Land and among its Peoples. Its development is radically placed in the power of the Gospel, which unveils God's presence and, thereby, opens the door to repentance and new life. We may say, then, that in the Gospel, we see the Word of God, living and active, revealing the presence of God in the land and its Peoples prior to the introduction of Western civilization and, since that time, in the survival of the aboriginal nations despite 500 years of oppressive and destructive colonialism. This revelation calls all of the churches of North America to repentance and new life, breaking down the walls of enmity and creating the way for us to become the true Church, together.

Throughout this paper, we have paid some attention to the larger context in which these developments among the Peoples of the Land will be received, both locally and globally. A Church for Turtle Island would call the whole Church to transformation. Locally, the churches of the West in North America would need to face some of the internal barriers that keep it from true growth. They must deal with the log in their own eye before taking out the speck in the eye of others. Globally, we may anticipate that the realization of a truly North American church would enrich all of the local churches. Once again, we would see that, perhaps more than anything else, the Gospel thrives on translation. Nothing is lost in translation; a new world is gained.