

## How a Settler Church Will Adapt

A First Nations elder would begin a teaching by indicating where he was from and who his relatives were. I used to be from the York Pines Church. I was the teaching elder in that congregation from 2007 to 2016. It is a privilege to address friends from York Pines on their 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary and to offer a Gospel word to the greater fellowship called, “York United Ministries.”

The question, “Where are you from?” really is designed to open us up to our status as either a “settler” or a “newcomer.” My roots on my father’s side are in the province of Quebec when in 1822 John Carson and his wife emigrated from Enniskillen, Ireland and settled along the St. Francis River, north of Sherbrooke. The question “Who are your relatives?” helps me to understand that conversion can occur in family systems. The Carson’s were Church of Ireland Anglicans, but Hermon, my grandfather, converted to Congregationalism, probably in the year 1894. In time he would become a minister of that denomination. In due course he helped to form the United Church of Canada. As a commissioner to the first General Council in 1925 he signed the Basis of Union. Here is the Commemorative booklet that each delegate received. As we approach the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this denomination in 2025 it might be timely to consider what new conversions will occur.

For example, in this book published in 2019 entitled, “The Theology of the United Church of Canada,” there is a chapter entitled, “The Holy Spirit,” and it is written by Adrian Jacobs. I met Adrian at the Five Oaks Education and Retreat Centre in the fall of 2019. (Five Oaks is not far from Brantford.) In the list of contributors Adrian is described as a lifelong carrier of Indigenous Knowledge, that he is the Keeper of the Circle at the national Indigenous Training School of the United Church at Beausejour, Manitoba and that his identity is in the Turtle Clan of the Cayuga Nation of the Six Nations Haudenosaunee Community. When we met at Five Oaks, Adrian was close to his birthplace.

Adrian’s words could lead to a conversion. He sees the New Testament as a preamble, not a prescription, for other cultures. The Hebrew spirituality of the Bible and its contextualization into a Gentile world especially by St. Paul is a gift that is offered to future generations. Each new receiving culture is left to ponder this gift and its treasure as it decides what the New Testament means for them. The gift of the Holy Spirit who is with us, as Jesus was with his disciples, is easy for an Indigenous audience to understand, says Adrian Jacobs. The question for a settler church is how the Holy Spirit will help it to adapt on Turtle Island where there are geographies and genealogies unique to this place.

This adaptation will extend to the “newcomers” in our midst. Again, from the book, The Theology of the United Church of Canada there is an article by HyeRan Kim-Cragg entitled, “What are

People For?” There she suggests that the Korean view of the human person can help us understand the idea of interdependence. HyeRan, now a professor at Emmanuel College, Toronto, says that the word for human is made with two characters. This character is the word for person. (Show image.) It suggests that being human means finding support from others. To lean on others is to be truly human. And the other character depicts a door with an opening through which the sun shines. (Show the image.) Thus, to be interdependent is to be a human who leans on others and who allows the sun to shine through the boundaries of his/her gates. HyeRan concludes saying that an intercultural church with an interdependent mindset will correct the dominant attitude that mission is a one-way communication. It is a two-way listening for the evidence of the Spirit in that culture. For instance, the United Church commissioned an Inter-cultural Ministries Survey in 2019. Seven hundred and four people participated including both lay people and ministry personnel. Respondents were recruited through social media, e-newsletters, Observer advertising and word of mouth. The questionnaire was available in both English and French. The fieldwork was done exactly two years ago. Of those responding 68% had both parents born in Canada; 13% had one parent born inside Canada and one parent born outside of Canada; 19% had both parents born outside of Canada. The Survey concluded that while people across the church enthusiastically support the denomination’s intercultural commitment and that while locally, people report that they are on their way to becoming an intercultural community, things can take a turn for the worse when personal perspectives and experiences are shared. Many admitted that they were not comfortable with “difference;” while those who felt marginalized stated that discrimination exists, and feeling “safe” in the church is not always a given. (Story from my experience at the Supper Program on Tuesday evening and experiencing assertive and even verbally abusive behaviour from a First Nations’ person. And Adrian Jacobs himself becoming assertive when he calls the church stand in the pain of dispossessed people in lands of restoration and reparation.

So, how does a settler church adapt to the comeback of First Nations’ peoples and the presence of one in five people who are newcomers to Canada? And the answer is that we adapt because Jesus prays that we adapt. In John 17 Jesus prays for the first disciples and he prays for those who believe through their word. His prayer is that that they will be protected in the divine name that God has given the Christ and that they may be one as God and Christ are one. For a length of time being one meant being assimilated. But the pushback from assimilation is teaching the settler church that there can be oneness through adaptation. For example, the motto on the crest of the United Church, “that they may be one,” has been adapted twice. In 1980 the name of the church in French was added, L’Église Unie du Canada. In 2012 the background of the crest was changed from blue to the four colours of the Aboriginal Medicine Wheel: yellow, red, black and white. In addition, parallel to the Latin “Ut Omnes Unum Sint” – that all may be one - there are the words in Mohawk, “aw-gway-nyah day day waw – nay renh” “ Akwe Nia’Tetewa:neren,” which translates, “all my relations.” As relationship is found in the divine name, so in the Indigenous worldview relationship and community are basic. Community is not

to be created with an emphasis on how community will serve the individual. Instead, there is a oneness to “all my relations” which embodies seeking each other’s good, dwelling among human and non-human beings, and having faith in the Creator who is over self. The goal isn’t assimilation, but an appreciation that the Holy Spirit will teach peoples and nations how to follow Christ. The City of God that descends out of heaven and is united with earth at the end of the book of Revelation (21:24 & 26) has the kings of the nations, entering through the Temple’s twelve gates along the four sides. From an Indigenous perspective each nation, each unique world-view has a special theology expressive of the heart of that nation. It takes God the Holy Spirit to be the teacher of such diversity. Being taught by such a Teacher should help the settler church become humble. We are being converted when we leave behind attitudes of assimilation, either overt or hidden, to experience other followers of Christ as peoples and nations living out the motto, “all my relations.”

The gift of the New Testament for the society yet to be built on Turtle Island is found in that powerful prayer of Jesus in John chapter 17. My concern is that we can miss its power because we forget that there is a struggle between God and evil. The last Sunday of Easter and the first Sunday in Lent are like book-ends to the teaching of what Jesus accomplished by seeing himself as the means of achieving the unity that saves. On the first Sunday of Lent in the wilderness after fasting for forty days and forty nights (Matthew 4: 1-14) we read that Satan tempts Christ with the thought to feed the multitudes; become an all-dominating king, or to leap from the highest pinnacle of the temple and to survive. Now on the last Sunday of Easter, Satan returns. Jesus prays, “Holy Father, ... I am not asking you to take them, meaning his followers, out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one” (17:15). The struggle with the evil one continues, but now God has the help of you and me because Jesus is convincing us to understand the world on God’s terms.

Normally, what the world wants on its own terms is security. What God wants is that we hear the voice of the True Child of God, the Christ, and live. The temptation story is found in the Gospel of John not directly, but indirectly, as it is woven into the dialogue of the Gospel book. In John 6 the people wish to make Jesus, king (6:15); they then demand of Jesus that Jesus feed them always (6:34) and then in chapter 7 Jesus’ brothers demand that Jesus go to Jerusalem (7:3,4) to the Temple and show himself to the world. People want to make peace with Jesus, but on their own terms. As on the first Sunday of Lent so on the last Sunday of Easter making peace with Jesus on one’s own terms is to be against God.

Christ prepares himself for his work of salvation by contemplating that the Father is in him and that he is in the Father (17:21). This is to put himself in the centre of divinity. This place is

diametrically different from the place where he is about to end up: on a cross, crucified between two thieves, on the periphery of life. But that is the place where the holiness of God and the love of God are

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united. Yes, God is holy, set apart from the unholy and the profane. But God is also love and love expresses itself by approaching that which is unholy. The holiness and love of God are in tension, but in the person of Christ they are united. This tension-filled unity is the heart of the Christian faith. Imagine how we are being sanctified in the truth when we believe that God in Christ has overcome the world (16:33), and especially so when we believe that we are all mysteriously one.

The gift of the New Testament forces a monumental decision upon a culture. Conscious of divinity: will it cling to the dimension of normal experience and be tormented by its inadequacy? Or will it, in holy fear and love, risk receiving the prayer of Christ: yes, there is a Creator and Redeemer; yes, God's terms with the world will entail an arduous zeal that extends to selflessness and self-surrender, and yes, Christ does pray for settler, Indigenous, newcomer that all will be protected from the evil one. For me this means that followers of Christ will not so depart from the way of truth and grace as to be overcome by unbelief. For me this means that there are conversions yet to be embodied. May it be so! Amen!

Respectfully submitted, the Rev. Ross W. Carson