



New Stories to Tell: Living Ecumenism Today

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Bishop Mark MacDonald plays a Gospel Jamboree /
Credit: Allison Courey

CHAPTER XVII

The gospel jamboree: Singing a new song

This story is drawn from a conversation with Bishop Mark MacDonald, National Indigenous Bishop of the Anglican Church of Canada, about the experience of some Indigenous Christians:

The Gospel Jamboree tradition can be seen emerging in Indigenous communities from the early 1800s in the eastern part of what is called the United States. Variants of it can be found all over North America, including among the various peoples living in the lands of the Canadian North. Though it has different titles in different regions,

it has the same basic pattern: It commonly takes place in the evening, usually beginning with a shared meal, followed by a pattern of hymns and religious songs, and interspersed with personal stories and testimonies, Bible readings, prayers, and sermons. It can often go on into the very late evening. Many Western expressions of Christianity are received with a great deal more ambivalence by Indigenous peoples, as shown in the low levels of regular participation. This Gospel Jamboree tradition, however, has been for many Indigenous followers of Jesus a primary expression of their Christian faith and continues to be popular even among younger generations.

One thing that is especially interesting about this still developing tradition is that it tends to be very ecumenical in nature. Though a Jamboree gathering would usually be sponsored and hosted by the members of one particular church, it is never exclusive in that way; people from other churches are always welcome, and lots of these others would come and also participate. It is an event for the whole community, capable of encouraging quite a wide-ranging experience of unity. Again, while many of the more Western oriented forms of Christianity tended to bring and impose the divisions of European Christianity with them in their missionizing among Indigenous peoples, there is a sense in which this culturally contextual expression of Indigenous Christianity has tried to resist or transcend some of these impulses. The missionaries may have taught the people to be Anglicans or Roman Catholics and so on, but the faith of the people themselves is much more interested just in Jesus.



In their ecumenical convergence, Anglicans and Roman Catholics have been able to say boldly that “our two Communion’s are agreed on the essential aspects of the

doctrine of salvation and on the Church's role within it." While the missionaries who preached this message of salvation in Christ to the Indigenous peoples of Canada had a common Gospel, unfortunately their own prior divisions meant that they often followed up their preaching with an insistence on the importance of being aligned with the proper institutional form of Church over against others. In this, the very integrity of that Gospel was called into question. This clearly illustrates ARCIC II's *Salvation and the Church* confession that "the credibility of the Church's witness is undermined by the sins of its members, the shortcomings of its human institutions, and not least by the scandal of division. The Church is in constant need of repentance and renewal so that it can be more clearly seen for what it is: the one, holy body of Christ" (SC, 29).



*Practice for a Gospel Jamboree in the Yukon /
Credit: Talking Eyes Media*

Human failings have a serious impact on the Church's ability to live out its vocation in the world. The painful

history of Christianity among Indigenous communities demonstrates this profoundly. However, the Gospel Jamboree tradition is evidence of the truth that the Creator of heaven and earth will not be bound by these limitations and weaknesses. It is highly significant that one of the most natural expressions of faith in Jesus arising from Indigenous peoples is one that has been able to preserve something of the gift of our God-given unity in Christ. It may be that the emerging expression of Indigenous Christianity will bear the special gift of less divided response to the Gospel of Christ. This may be something that can be shared for the enrichment of all Christians. To again put it in the words of *Salvation and the Church*: “Nevertheless the Gospel contains the promise that despite all failures the Church will be used by God in the achievement of his purpose: to draw humanity into communion with himself and with one another, so as to share his life, the life of the Holy Trinity” (SC, 29).

What might this spiritual form of Indigenous resistance to the divisions within European Christianity tell us about the nature of Christian divisions?

In what other ways might the common call to seek reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples also have an effect on the unity of the churches?