

2013 GENERAL ASSEMBLY REFERRAL

ABORIGINAL SPIRITUALITY – A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR

(Conversation Circle, A&P 2013, p. 508-518, 16)

To the Venerable, the 139th General Assembly:

The response to Overture No. 19, 2011 re theological framework for Aboriginal spirituality is organized in the following way:

Introduction

Aboriginal Spiritualities

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Key Theological Themes

- Christ and Culture: Theological Negotiation
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- Missional Church – ‘stretching the boundaries of grace’: Theological Activity

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INTRODUCTION

Overture No. 19, 2011 was submitted by the Presbytery of New Brunswick to the 137th General Assembly (2011) requesting, “...the development of a theological framework for Aboriginal spiritualities, commending appropriate Christian worship, or to do otherwise, as the General Assembly in its wisdom, may deem best”. (A&P 2011, p. 528-29, 22)

The 137th General Assembly adopted the following recommendation:

That Overture No. 19, 2011 re theological framework for Aboriginal spirituality be referred to a conversation circle including the Committee on Church Doctrine, the Life and Mission Agency (Canadian Ministries/The Vine) and Justice Ministries (also serving as facilitator), (see A&P 2011, p. 22).

Permission was granted to the Conversation Circle by the 138th General Assembly (2012) to submit a response to the 139th General Assembly (2013) (A&P 2012, p. 377, 19, 247). Readers will note that this report of the Circle’s conversation is written in different voices. This reflects the conversational approach that the General Assembly specified in its referral and the reality that the participants contributed from a variety of experiences, perspectives and approaches. There are several commonly used terms that refer to Aboriginal people: First Nations, native, etc. The term “Aboriginal” by legal definition, includes First Nations, Inuit and Métis. In this document, both “Aboriginal” and “Indigenous” are used.

In the Confession adopted by the 120th General Assembly (1994), The Presbyterian Church in Canada, acknowledged the harm done to Aboriginal children in its care and with God’s guidance, the church made a commitment to “walk with Aboriginal peoples to find healing and wholeness together as God’s people”.

...We acknowledge that the roots of the harm we have done are found in the attitudes and values of western European colonialism, and the assumption that what was not molded in our image was to be discovered and exploited. As part of that policy we, with other churches, encouraged the Government to ban some important spiritual practices through which Aboriginal peoples experienced the presence of the creator God. For the Church’s complicity in this policy we ask forgiveness.

(The Confession of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, General Assembly, June 9, 1994, paragraph 2).

We confess that The Presbyterian Church in Canada presumed to know better than Aboriginal peoples what was needed for life. The Church said of our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, “If they could be like us, if they could think like us, talk like us, worship like us, sing like us and work like us, they would know God and therefore would have life abundant.

(The Confession of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, General Assembly, June 9, 1994, paragraph 4).

Canada has far to go before Aboriginal people are able to enjoy the abundance Canada has to offer. The National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, spelled out some of these challenges. National Chief Atleo believes that if these challenges could be fairly addressed and resolved, important steps in reconciliation would occur.¹

ABORIGINAL SPIRITUALITIES

This section of “context” for Overture No. 19, 2011 was prepared by The Rev. Mary Fontaine and The Rev. Stewart Folster. Mr. Folster is Ojibway from Manitoba and the pastor of the Saskatoon Native Circle Ministry. Ms. Fontaine is Cree from Mistawasis, Saskatchewan and is the founder and director of Hummingbird Ministries, a ministry of the Presbytery of Westminster in British Columbia. Both have knowledge and experience in their respective Indigenous traditions and remain connected to their people on their traditional lands.

The question of “developing a theological framework for Aboriginal spiritualities, commending appropriate Christian worship or to do otherwise” has been raised for various reasons including the need for Aboriginal Christians to be true to both their *Indigenous identity* and to their faith as followers of the way of Jesus Christ. Following is a definition of *Indigenous Spirituality* as provided by both The Rev. Folster and The Rev. Fontaine.

Indigenous Spirituality/Indigenous Wisdom

Mr. Folster is an Ojibway Christian pastor in the Presbyterian Church and also follows the traditional ways and way of life that he has learned through the Medicine Wheel teachings of his Ojibway Nation. He believes that there is no need to blend the Indigenous Spirituality and Christianity in worship or in the life we walk each day. He believes that we can follow both traditions at the same time and not have to lose or change any part of those two-belief systems. The Rev. Folster has lived through many trials and challenges in his youth, such as poverty and addictions and violence in the home. He credits his recovery and healing journey to the traditional ceremonies and teachings of the Ojibway Elders and to the many prayers of his Christian friends and family members.

Mr. Folster explains,

I think that Indigenous Spirituality is a faith system. It is a mystery and our Great Mystery, our Creator God has given us this way of life so that we can live in harmony with all of creation. Someone said that faith cannot be explained. It can only be lived and followed, and that’s why it is called faith. I agree with those folks who believe that Overture No. 19 cannot be fully answered, because it is a faith question. You cannot explain Indigenous Spirituality in English words, because faith cannot be explained. I live according to what the Elders teach me, according to what I receive from the ceremonies and according to what I can understand that Christ is teaching me.

Ms. Fontaine who grew up in The Presbyterian Church in Canada believes that Jesus brought her back to the culture of her people to learn to appreciate their wisdom and God-given gifts and to make her whole as a Cree follower of Jesus Christ. Below are her thoughts on “What is Indigenous Spirituality”.

Traditional North American Indigenous religious belief systems such as the Longhouse and Medicine Wheel teachings were developed over thousands of years before contact with European cultures. Yet literature does not recognize these belief systems as religions but as “Native Spirituality”. The belief system (or religion) of the Medicine Wheel, according to Black Elk of the Lakota Nation, is a set of complicated teachings intended to permeate every aspect of individual and community life. The teachings of the Medicine Wheel guide human life and behavior and it would take a lifetime to learn and to practice the teachings. In a sense then, the spirituality of the Medicine Wheel belief system becomes a way of life, a way of being in the world. If it is understood in this way, the term “Indigenous Spirituality” could suffice to describe the overall way of life and the way of being as taught by Indigenous belief systems. An appropriate post-colonial English term to describe the overall spirituality and teachings of Indigenous belief systems would be “Indigenous Wisdom” since the word “wisdom” in English includes the knowledge of God.

The Ceremonies – Gifts given by the Creator as expressions of the Faith

Certain Indigenous ceremonies have been incorporated into Christian worship in some of the Native Ministries of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. This section draws on the ways that Indigenous ceremonies have been

incorporated by Mr. Folster and Ms. Fontaine in their respective ministries. Aboriginal Christians across North America have been discerning this process of spiritual healing for over thirty years.

Among the ceremonies and traditions associated with Indigenous Prairie belief systems and spiritualities are the Pipe Ceremony, the Sun Dance, the powwow, the Sweat Lodge, the Medicine Wheel, and the Smudge Ceremony. These ceremonies are given by the Creator, just as the Word of God is given to the Church. The ceremonies associated with Coast Salish Longhouse beliefs include the Mask Dance and Naming ceremonies. Some of the ceremonies mentioned above are described below.

Mr. Folster and Ms. Fontaine agree that certain of these ceremonies such as the Pipe Ceremony, the Sun Dance, the Sweat Lodge and the Medicine Wheel should only be conducted by traditional Indigenous Elders who follow Indigenous Wisdom ways. For others to conduct these ceremonies would mean appropriating the belief systems or changing their meaning to suit the Christian belief system.

However, certain aspects of these traditions and ceremonies could be adapted for use in Christian worship without appropriating the culture. However, this requires some knowledge of the teachings through consultation with a learned and respected Indigenous Elder. For example, one of the practices at Hummingbird is a Silent Prayer Ceremony using cloth which is significant at Sun Dances. In this ceremony, dish cloths were crocheted by an elder and given to each person in the Circle. Everyone passes their cloth to the left and that person sits with the cloth held up to the forehead in a prayerful position and prays in silence for the person whose cloth she or he holds. Cloth in the Sun Dance tradition is given as a sacrificial gift and is usually accompanied by several days of fasting and prayer. This adapted ceremony can be held during Lent and preceded or followed by a fast.

The Smudging Ceremony

The Rev. Stewart Folster works at the Saskatoon Native Circle Mission, a ministry that serves Indigenous and non-Indigenous men and women who are living on the margins of society or who are homeless. He begins each service with a smudging ceremony, always giving a short explanation and the reason for the Smudging Ceremony for any newcomers who are attending worship for the first time. The few people who don't wish to take part in the smudging will either leave or sit in the pews outside the main circle of chairs.

Following is Mr. Folster's explanation of the Smudging Ceremony:

The grass of Mother Earth is the symbol of kindness because the grass is smooth, silky, and gentle. Therefore, sweet grass and sage are symbols of kindness. We are taught that we must be kind to ourselves, families, communities, nation, the residents of all nations, and to Mother Earth. When we smudge with sweet grass and sage, we are healing and cleansing our body, mind, spirit, and emotions. So, when one washes with the smoke as it rises, jewelry is removed, and the head, body, and heart are washed with the smoke. Some of the smoke may be taken into the mouth. Smudging is a healing and cleansing ceremony that prepares us for worship and ceremonies and helps us find balance. It has a calming effect. The elders also teach that smudging is another form of prayer. They say that God will see our prayers in the smoke as they rise up. Therefore, some say a prayer every time they smudge with the sacred medicines. Some may wish to embrace and use the sacred Smudging Ceremony as an additional feature of their prayer and devotional life.

At Hummingbird Ministries, when a Cree Elder conducts a Smudge Ceremony she explains what it means to her as a Catholic Christian where the smoke is equated with incense used in the Catholic Church. Ms. Fontaine does not do the smudge unless it is requested. She prefers to use sage instead of sweet grass and sometimes uses cedar and other herbs instead. She explains it as a forgiveness ceremony, where the heart, mind and soul are cleansed. In this way, it is similar to the liturgy of confession in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, with the potential for a deep spiritual experience of forgiveness. This is due to the act of cleansing and the use of the human senses for listening to the words, seeing the smoke rise up as a prayer and smelling the smudge which is made of herbs from Mother Earth that God created.

The Circle / The Medicine Wheel

The Rev. Stewart Folster and his wife, Terry, began their work at the Saskatoon Native Circle Mission in 1992. The word "Circle" in the name originated from the Circle West Presbyterian Church, where the ministry started. But in

1994, they began to worship in a circle since they were also trying to keep the traditions of Aboriginal people alive and effective in the land where they were born and raised.

Mr. Folster learns from the lessons of Scripture, the lessons of the Medicine Wheel and the lessons learned from the gifts of God's creation. He believes that the Medicine Wheel teachings can help in counseling sessions so that Indigenous people become aware of their identity as people who are connected to everything that God has created. Because these ceremonies have blessed him on his healing journey, he does not hesitate to advise people to take part in Sweat Lodge or other ceremonies and to benefit from traditional medicines that Indigenous Elders can offer them.

The people who come to Hummingbird Ministries' Circles come from various classes, cultures and religious backgrounds including Longhouse and Indigenous Prairie belief systems. The Aboriginal Christian Elders from various Christian denominations lead the way in contextualizing cultural practices for Christian worship. This is done on a gradual basis with respect for both Indigenous Wisdom and the Christian faith.

At Hummingbird Circles (i.e. gatherings), there is a Coast Salish welcome, a potluck feast and then gathering in a Circle, which is considered sacred because God is at the centre as the witness. The teachings of the Circle include equality, respect, kinship and listening. The people worship, share, sing, pray and drum in a Circle letting the Circle teach them over time. Then the people move on to arts activities which help to bring people together with First Nations people. The gatherings are usually between four to six hours in duration, allowing for plenty of time for community building and kinship building.

Even though an Indigenous Sun Dance Elder has taught the Medicine Wheel at Hummingbird, Ms. Fontaine does not attempt to teach the Medicine Wheel herself, recognizing that her knowledge is limited and that these teachings need to be taught by Indigenous Elders and followers of the Indigenous Wisdom ways. To do so would be disrespectful due to the potential of belittling a centuries-old belief system by oversimplifying it. The Medicine Wheel is not a simple theory but a complete belief system involving a life long journey.

The Rev. Stewart Folster and The Rev. Mary Fontaine agree that the teachings of the Medicine Wheel need to be taught by a traditional Indigenous believer who follows that way of life, in order to show respect to the Elders and their original teachings and to ensure their culture is not appropriated.

Drum Songs and Drumming

Mr. Folster explains that he is beginning to learn about drumming and drum songs with respect to worship.

Ms. Fontaine and the Elders at Hummingbird use the hand drums in worship and singing of Christian songs and drum songs but the drum is regarded as more than an instrument. It is a sacred instrument due to its use in honouring the Creator and due to the life of the animal that was lost in the making of the drum. She and the women Elders who use the drums are aware of the Prairie Indigenous Wisdom belief that it is considered a form of taboo for a woman to handle the drum since the drum, in Indigenous languages, is considered feminine, and likened to Mother Earth. There are some Indigenous Prairie Societies, however, who approve the handling of hand drums by older Indigenous women.

Coast Salish Elders or representatives typically welcome the group to their traditional territories with a drum song. When Longhouse Elders are present they sing their welcome drum song. Likewise, if Longhouse Coast Salish Elders are present, they bless the food in their traditional way with a drum song.

Ms. Fontaine respects the protocol concerning the "Mother Drum" and Hummingbird does not own one. This drum is used in powwows and other ceremonies, only by Indigenous men, unless they invite other men to join them and in some cases an older woman or a woman who is recognized as a gifted "Sacred" singer, which is rare.

Written Discourse (theology) on Indigenous Wisdom Teachings

The word "theology" often implies written academic intellectual engagement while Indigenous Wisdom is taught orally. The following is a written description of some of the teachings of Indigenous Wisdom about relationships and stewardship of the Earth as these relate to biblical passages.

The most important teachings are to be kind and caring, to pray, to share, to be hopeful, to live in community, to respect others as kin, to will peace, and to respect creation. Among the Cree Elders, the most consistent teaching is

to love one another. Loving one another as brothers and sisters across differences is the most important responsibility in life. The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) resonates with the Indigenous theology of love for “all my relations”. This tradition recalls that we come from the same source of life, that we are related, and that we are in community. The Good Samaritan helped a stranger who, in Indigenous thought, would not be a stranger at all, but a brother. The Samaritan’s actions recognize kinship relationships that defy regular human boundaries and social divisions. This emphasis on community and the kinship of strangers explains why Indigenous people have been referred to as having the gift of the science of relationships with a great will to peace. The language and social structures of Indigenous culture serve to reinforce and facilitate important kinship values.

Indigenous Wisdom respects nature and the way the Creator organized the world. Indigenous people seek to live in harmony with the created order and Indigenous Wisdom is informed and marked by strong oral teachings and values of stewardship of the earth. The following verses from Psalm 96 echo the respect and awe with which Indigenous people regard the sacred creation of God, the Great Mystery: “Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord” (Psalm 96:11–13a).

The commandment of the Christian Church ‘to love thy neighbour’ and the ‘kinship teachings’ of Indigenous Wisdom are reconcilable and so is the torn relationship between Indigenous people and the Church.

The Rev. Stewart Folster concludes: “In terms of reconciliation, I think we use too many words to contradict one another and to stall what needs to be done. First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples are hurting and all nations of peoples are hurting. So let’s stop talking so much and start doing something about filling the chasm that is separating us. If we can show and feel the love of God, we cannot hate anyone. So let’s love one another. Why not? What have we got to lose? All my relations.”

NORTH AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN ABORIGINAL SPIRITUALITY

There is much to be learned from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Christians from other traditions in Canada and around the world. The Presbyterian Church in Canada is not alone in seeking to incorporate Aboriginal spirituality into its faith and life.

For example, The Rev. Mark MacDonald, the national Indigenous bishop of the Anglican Church of Canada, is providing excellent leadership in helping the Canadian churches think through what it means to walk together on the journey of faith, healing and reconciliation. Bishop MacDonald spoke to the 138th General Assembly (June 2012). In a recent article he quotes Albania’s great mission theologian, Bishop Anastasios Yannoulatos, who says the twin goals of mission are the “incarnation of the logos (word) of God into the language and customs of a country, and the growth of an Indigenous church which will sanctify and endorse the people’s personality.”²

Bishop MacDonald argues that “this is an excellent summary of the mission vision of Indigenous ministries” across Canada. First Nations peoples, he believes, are “seeking the freedom to respond to the good news of Jesus in a way that expresses our culture fully.” Indigenous hymn-singing, governance protocols, and ceremonial times are being incorporated into the life of the church guided by Holy Scripture and the teachings of Jesus as they are received in the traditions of the church.³

This understanding of the task of mission, however, with its twin goals, belongs to the whole church. For most of the church’s history in Canada the goal of mission has included reproducing European forms of Christianity with the intention of “civilizing” Indigenous peoples. “While it may have worked for many of the past few generations of immigrants, it does not appear to be working as well with their children, who have certainly been influenced by European culture but have also become children of this great land.”⁴ In other words, the cultural form of 18th and 19th century European colonial Christianity that shaped so much of Canada’s history is not only a problem because of its approach to Aboriginal peoples and cultures, it has also often failed to capture the imagination of the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of those who brought it. In secular post-Christendom Canada we have a generation that has distanced itself from that form of Christianity or rejected it altogether.

In short, learning about the gospel from our Aboriginal and Indigenous sisters and brothers may help the whole church to be renewed by the grace of God. Together, we are being called to develop an understanding and practice of Christian faith that will reflect the richness of the gospel in 21st century Canada.

Another example of Indigenous Christians providing leadership to the rest of the church is found in the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies (NAIITS). Its chair, The Rev. Terry LeBlanc, was the recipient of the E.H. Johnson Award at the 136th General Assembly (2010). NAIITS exists “to address topics of present concern in Native North American ministry and mission.” They work in the areas of evangelism, discipleship, leadership development, and contextual and missional theology by bringing together a Christ-centred biblical faith with Native North American points of view. They produce a journal and regularly host conferences to address the issue of how the Christian gospel is to be understood and lived in relation to Aboriginal spirituality and teachings.

The issue is also broader than North America. There is a network of Indigenous Christians and theologians worldwide looking at issues that are common among Indigenous peoples who have received the Christian faith. Many of the issues are similar, for example, to those in sub-Saharan Africa where Christians are working to understand the relation of the Christian message to the culture of African Tribal Religions (ATR). The Akriba Christaller Institute in Ghana, founded by Kwame Bediako, owned and operated by the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, and supported with funds from The Presbyterian Church in Canada, is an advanced graduate research institute on theology, mission and African culture. Bediako was one of the first theologians in Africa to take the African experience seriously and set it within the context of the entire narrative of the Christian tradition. By doing this, he moved beyond the older divide of Christianity in Africa between those who replicated European forms of Christianity and those whose Christianity was so localized and contextualized that it was unrecognizably Christian.

The purpose of citing these examples is to illustrate that there is a wide-ranging discourse in Canada and in the global church from which we, as Canadian Presbyterians, can learn a great deal. There are common themes that emerge: identity, mission, Christ and culture, to name but a few. In response to this overture, we do well to encourage the ministers and elders of our churches in this ongoing conversation and to become familiar with this literature. By so doing, we will find ourselves not simply in a conversation about how Aboriginal spirituality and teachings relate to Christian faith, but we will find ourselves in a conversation about the very meaning of the Christian gospel and what it means to be a church that participates in the mission of God today. In other words, this conversation has the potential not simply to help us address our relationship as Presbyterians with Aboriginal people; it has the potential to contribute to the renewal of our church.⁵

KEY THEOLOGICAL THEMES

The most familiar answer from the Westminster Shorter Catechism says that the chief end of human life is “to worship God and enjoy God forever.” Worship is central to the life of the church. It has also been a site of ongoing discussion. We worship God, but we always do this at a time and place in a social location as people who are shaped by host cultures. That means that when we worship God, we borrow words and music and customs and practices and technology from the world we inhabit.

At one point, this ‘borrowing’ produced the ‘organ controversy’ in our denomination, when some of the most thoughtful members of The Presbyterian Church in Canada questioned the appropriateness of using the ‘devil’s kist of whistles’ in worship. At least one new congregation was founded, Stanley Presbyterian Church in Montreal, as a result of the controversy. In more recent years the term ‘worship wars’ has been used to describe animated discussion about music and instrumentation and technology that is appropriate to Christian worship in this time.

The critical question of which thought forms, music, practices and customs from a host culture can be incorporated into Christian expressions of gratitude and praise to the Triune God in worship is not new. The question arises in the Bible as Christianity moves out of an exclusively Jewish milieu into an incredibly diverse Gentile world. Augustine, in North Africa at the beginning of the fifth century, writes about borrowing thought forms from his world and rendering them serviceable to the worship of the Christian God. Negotiating which thought forms and practices are amenable to the use in Christian practice and the worship of the Triune God has been ongoing in the history of the church. It has ordinarily been worked out locally by the people of God in specific times and places. These negotiations at their best have sought to be both faithful to God, as God is made known in Jesus Christ witnessed to in Scripture, and relevant (engaged, comprehensible and connected) to specific cultural contexts.

Overture No. 19, 2011 has created an opportunity for us to reflect on some theological principles that can guide The Presbyterian Church in Canada, as we negotiate faithfulness and relevance in our own time.

Christ and Culture: Theological Negotiation

The recognition that keeping faith with the God of the Gospel as well as embodying worship in specific places and times requires ongoing theological negotiation is very important. Christian imperialism and imposition have often been the result of the church falsely believing that this negotiation is done once and for all or that a particular group of Christians have settled it for all others. It has been the case in the past that the church has assumed that European thought forms and practices provide the normative cultural carrier of the gospel. This attitude and the actions sponsored by it have done great harm; for this churches have rightly apologized and repented.

The biblical materials on early Christian worship, while prescriptive and authoritative, can be really quite low-level where it comes to the shape and particular form of worship, e.g., “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). In our own tradition, while we do have The Book of Common Worship, it is not laid on as a requirement and there is, in fact, a great variety of expressions on the ground across the country and in Reformed worship around the world. John Calvin believed there was a ‘church’ wherever the “Word is rightly preached and heard” and “the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ”. Later Reformed confessions added the mark of discipline, but none of this is prescriptive of a singular right form or right expression of Christian worship.

‘Inculturation’ is the term missiologists use to describe how the Gospel and Christian worship go local for the sake of communication and cultural connection. On the other hand, missiologists use the term ‘enculturation’ for the times and places where the Gospel and Christian practice have simply been assimilated to the prevailing culture chameleon-like. Sometimes we aim at relevance and hit redundancy. Sometimes we lean toward the culture so far, we fall in and so have nothing to say that people don’t already know from elsewhere.⁶ Missiologist Darrell Guder writes of mainline Protestant Christianity in North America: “Churches have become so accommodated to the American way of life that they are now domesticated, and it is no longer obvious what justifies their existence as particular communities.”⁷

Christians Learn from Other Christians (a ‘teachable spirit’): Theological Humility

Non-Aboriginal Christians who participate in Indigenous worship services are provided with an opportunity to experience the unity of the body of Christ across cultural and ethnic boundaries. New insights and a more profound appreciation of the Gospel often take place when we learn how it is embodied in a culture other than our own. Sometimes our own failings are exposed by a more faithful embodiment of the good news. Observing both similarities and unique worship practices can provide a window on one’s own experience of worship. The attachment of Indigenous peoples to the land as a gift of God and the sense of the Spirit as all pervading may well help us all to recover a sense of the same from the longer and broader Reformed tradition. It could be an important critical resource as the dominant culture begins to rethink its relationship to the land and the role of humans as ‘tenders’ of God’s garden (i.e., an ethic of care and stewardship rather than domination).

The use of senses other than hearing in Christian worship is encouraged by Indigenous practices such as smudging, drumming, the passing of the prayer stick and the talking stone involve tactile engagement and deliberate encounter with others in worship. What’s more, the talking circle involves a more ‘porous’ experience of Christian fellowship and could be a resource for a less ‘individualistic’ buffered experience of Christian communion.⁸ It is important to acknowledge that some Indigenous practices are contested in First Nations congregations and so are a matter of ongoing negotiation (e.g. the use of tobacco and wine at communion). And yet, while the topics may be unique depending on the culture, the experience of theological negotiation has a long history in the Christian church. The attempt to remain connected to a culture in an engaging and relevant way and to keep faith with the gospel requires ongoing prayer, engagement with the Bible and with tradition and communal discernment.

Missional Church – ‘stretching the boundaries of grace’: Theological Activity

A variety of missional church theologians have encouraged the Christian church to rethink its understanding of church (its nature and role) and mission in the light of the action of God in the wider world. The basic insight is that the Triune God is at work in the whole, wide world. God’s mission is not to the church but to everyone and everything. The church is an agency that gets caught up in the great move of the missional God in creation, redemption and consummation.

The Church in the book of Acts is not a proactive church; it is a church that prays, trying to discern where in the world God is already at work and then to get with God’s program. The breathless church of Acts tries to keep up

with what God is already doing. Early Christians went out to participate in God's ongoing mission to the world. At many stages the predominantly Jewish community was surprised, shocked, delighted, even converted (Acts 10-11, 15) to discover where God was already at work in the lives of communities other than their own and what God's prior action required of them. Learning involved humility, prayer, the illumination of the Spirit and thus eyes of faith to recognize God already at work among people who were not like them – ethnically and culturally. When Peter reported in Acts 10 and 11 that God was doing great work among people who were not like 'us', the Spirit pushed the whole infant church in an ethnically inclusive, Christ-centred-without-definite-edges direction. "If then God gave them the same gift God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11:17). God is at work in the world, in all the nations. And every single one of them brings gifts for the expression of gratitude to God. We all face the same challenge of keeping faith with God and the Gospel and of offering up our gratitude in ways that include and engage the people who worship Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A CASE STUDY OF TRADITIONS FAITHFULLY WOVEN TOGETHER

Anamiewigummig: Kenora Fellowship Centre is a mission of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. The centre was built in the early 1960s on the banks of the Lake of the Woods in Northwestern Ontario. It is near the location where the Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School was built. The centre is a holy place; it is a refuge, a sanctuary, and place of hospitality for people disenfranchised by poverty, addiction, and cultural or social alienation. It operates as a drop-in centre and works with partners in the community to support some of the most vulnerable people in Kenora.

The majority of those who come to the Fellowship Centre are Aboriginal and have had their lives deeply scarred by the effects of the policies and practices of the government and churches of Canada that sought to assimilate Aboriginal peoples into a dominant European culture. Tragically, the process of assimilation all too often included physical, psychological and sexual abuse, and the loss of cultural identity and a secure sense of self. Some who visit the centre were students or residents at the Cecilia Jeffrey School.

On Sunday afternoons, guests and staff of the centre gather with members from the neighbourhoods of Kenora for intimate, vibrant, and authentic Christian worship. Some people see the centre as their primary worshipping community because the community is welcoming and the worship is vibrant. Elements of traditional Native spirituality are thoughtfully and respectfully woven together with scripture readings, prayer, observance of the church year, and celebrations of the sacraments of Holy Communion and Baptism. In addition to the preaching led by The Rev. Henry Hildebrandt, a Native Elder may smudge or teach about the goodness and order found in God's creation in ways that enhance the worshipers' understanding and experience of the holiness and all-encompassing grace and love of God made known in the reconciling ministry, life and death of Christ.

The singing is joyful and the fellowship among the worshipers is marked by a deep concern for one another. There is a meal served after worship; as in the early church, the soul and body are fed when the community gathers to worship. Moments of grace, redemption, healing, and reconciliation abound in these services of praise. Once, the Churches encouraged the Government to ban some important traditional spiritual practices through which Aboriginal peoples had experienced the presence of the Creator. Now, in many places across the country people of all backgrounds have their faith nurtured by the rich blend of traditions marked by integrity and faithfulness as communities worship God in the beauty of holiness and the spirit of truth.

CANADA AND THE CHURCH TODAY

On behalf of the people of Canada, the Prime Minister, The Right Hon. Stephen Harper issued an apology for the Indian Residential Schools system on June 11, 2008. At the international level, the Government of Canada joined many other governments when it became a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in December 2010.

As The Presbyterian Church in Canada looks to the future, it is also addressing aspects of its past. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was established as a component of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The Presbyterian Church in Canada is a signatory to the Agreement. The TRC was formally established on June 1, 2008, to address the legacy of residential schools. After 1925 The Presbyterian Church in Canada operated two residential schools. The Presbyterian Church in Canada is deeply committed to the TRC and to its mandate. Presbyterians are working with representatives of other denominations, with Indigenous organizations and with TRC officials in planning the TRC's national events. Through the Justice Ministries'

Healing and Reconciliation Program, Presbyterians across Canada are building connections with Aboriginal people. To date over 60 local projects have been funded through the Healing and Reconciliation Program. Presbyteries where the national events take place, are committing financial resources. Presbyterians are attending Truth and Reconciliation's community hearings.

The face of Canada has changed dramatically in the past generation. In 2006, 16.3% of Canadians self-identified as a member of a visible minority. By 2031, this percentage will increase to 30.6%. Eighty percent of the immigrants who arrived in Canada between 2001 and 2006 came from the global south.⁹

Aboriginal people comprise 3.8% of Canada's population enumerated in the 2006 census, up from 3.3% in 2001 and 2.8% in 1996 (Aboriginal people include First Nations, Métis and Inuit).¹⁰

The Presbyterian Church in Canada includes members and adherents from many countries. At least 20 languages are spoken during worship in Presbyterian congregations every week (e.g. Arabic, Cantonese, Cree, Efik, English, Filipino, French, Ga, Hindi, Hungarian, Igbo, Korean, Mandarin, Ojibway, Portuguese, Punjabi, Spanish, Taiwanese, Twi and Urdu). The Presbyterian Church in Canada is blessed by the many languages spoken and by the many cultural traditions which enrich our common, but diverse, worship experiences as faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Language, culture and tradition inform worship and spiritual practices. There is a diversity of music and musical instruments; electric organs, pianos, guitars, a variety of percussion instruments, wind instruments and on occasion, bagpipes will be heard. The liturgy in Presbyterian congregations varies. Some worship services include dancing, ecstatic experiences, kneeling or standing for prayer, practiced silent meditation, and smudging, among other practices. Some congregations follow the common lectionary, some follow other patterns, some use no set structure or readings. The form and frequency of the celebration of the sacraments is set by each congregation in light of local needs and traditions. And it belongs to presbyteries to ensure that matters related to worship within their bounds are rightly and properly conducted. This diversity, all to the glory to God, is to be celebrated. Regardless of the different forms of worship found in the congregations of The Presbyterian Church in Canada;

We worship almighty God, the source of all life.
With thanks we acknowledge
God's wisdom, power, faithfulness, and love.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son,
and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now,
and ever shall be!

(Living Faith: A Statement of Christian Belief, p. 6)

In the Confession we acknowledged that, "In our cultural arrogance we have been blind to the ways in which our own understanding of the Gospel has been culturally conditioned, and because of our insensitivity to Aboriginal cultures, we have demanded more of the Aboriginal people than the gospel requires, and have thus misrepresented Jesus Christ who loves all peoples with compassionate, suffering love that all may come to God through him. For the Church's presumption we ask forgiveness." (The Confession of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, General Assembly, June 9, 1994, paragraph 4).

In 2014 The Presbyterian Church in Canada will acknowledge the 20th anniversary of the Confession. This will be an opportunity for the church to reflect on its journey in truth telling, and to act by seeking reconciliation and in restoring right relations with Aboriginal people. In light of the Confession, and as part of the important continuing journey of healing and reconciliation, it is vital that in humility the church embrace the great diversity of joyful expressions of worship found in God's creation.

Recommendation No. 1 (adopted, p. 16)

That the theological principles articulated above be commended to the church in its ongoing journey with Aboriginal people, and that the prayer of Overture No. 19, 2011 re theological framework for Aboriginal Spirituality be answered in terms of this report of the Circle's conversation.

MEMBERSHIP

- The Rev. Stewart Folster (Director of Saskatoon Native Circle Ministry; {appointed by Canadian Ministries' National Native Ministries Council}).
- The Rev. Mary Fontaine (Director of Hummingbird Ministries; {appointed by Canadian Ministries' National Native Ministries Council}).
- The Rev. Dr. Richard Topping (Professor of Studies in Reformed Tradition, St. Andrew's Hall; {appointed by the Committee on Church Doctrine}).
- The Rev. Dr. John Vissers (Principal Presbyterian College; {appointed by the Committee on Church Doctrine}).
- The Rev. Ian McDonald (Associate Secretary, Canadian Ministries).
- Ms. Joan Masterton (Program Coordinator, Canadian Ministries).
- Mr. David Phillips (Program Animator, Healing & Reconciliation, Justice Ministries).
- Mr. Stephen Allen (Associate Secretary, Justice Ministries {Acting Facilitator}).

PROCESS

The Conversation Circle met on September 21 and September 22, 2012 and by phone on February 4, 2013.

RESOURCES

Resources relevant to the overture were circulated prior to the meeting in September. Quotations cited in this document are referenced in end notes. These and other resources that may be useful to readers seeking to broaden their understanding of Aboriginal spirituality are provided in a separate document.

End Notes:

1. Atleo, Shawn A-in-chut, *Thirty years later: Section 35 Still Necessary Path Forward*. Speech presented in Ottawa on November 12, 2012, available online at www.afn.ca.
2. Mark Macdonald, "The gospel finally arrives", *Anglican Journal*, Vol. 138, No. 9, November 2012, p. 2.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. See Ross Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church* (IVP, 2012), p. 37-39 on the distinction between 'inculturation' and 'enculturation'.
7. *Missional Church: A Vision of the Sending Church in North America* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 78.
8. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap, 2007), p. 37-43. A bounded or buffered self can frequently disengage 'with one's whole surroundings, natural and social'. A porous self inherently lives socially and there is a deep sense of the spiritual forces that impinge on life.
9. Statistics Canada. *Projections on the Diversity of the Canadian Population, 2006 to 2031*. Catalogue no. 91-551-X. Available at www.statscan.gc.ca/pub.
10. Ibid.