



Travel to Canada  
Sacred Circle Assembly.  
May 29<sup>th</sup> – June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023  
Paulo Ueti

### A word or prayer for the Indigenous Anglican Sacred Circle

GREAT SPIRIT, whose breath I feel in the wind, whose voice I hear in the birds, whose eyes I see in the children, listen to us. You are the God of all our yesterdays, all our todays, and all our tomorrows. You know the plans you have for all your people. As we gather in the Indigenous Anglican Sacred Circle, show to the Indigenous Peoples of Canada your will for us in the life of your Church. Give to us eyes to see the sacred way you have prescribed for us. Teach us to walk in the footsteps of your son, the chief of chiefs. May our hearts beat as one with Yours. You make all things new.

May we, your church, and all creation rejoice in the new way you are preparing for us, and your church in the name of our brother, Jesus Christ.  
Amen.<sup>1</sup>

I am Paulo Ueti, born in Brazil, theologian and biblical scholar, in my country considered white. I had the privilege and honour to be invited to this Sacred Circle as a “relative” to the indigenous peoples of Canada. I came with open heart and spirit to listen, share and learn. This is some notes about my experience and perceptions of what I lived during that week.

The assembly started with the gathering of people from all over Canada plus some international guests such as Arch Marinez Bassotto, Primate of the Episcopal Anglican Church of Brazil, a delegation of 8 Maori from Aotearoa (New Zealand), Archbishop Don Tamihere included, Pihopa o Tairawhiti and Pihopa o Aotearoa and Primate and Archbishop of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia and Paulo Ueti, from USPG and Anglican Alliance (Anglican Communion Office). It was present Bishop Susan Johnson, the National Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, to which Anglican Church of Canada has full communion.

The first day early morning a fire was lit. The Sacred Fire, which accompanies every gathering of the indigenous peoples in Canada. Here the story:

Fire has always been a way of God to send a message.  
God spoke to Moses from a "burning bush".  
- Ex. 3:2-4

fire is a way of calling the people together: gathering of people into a circle for cooking, eating. warmth, companionship, storytelling, and a place of comfort. Every culture or denomination has a different concept

---

<sup>1</sup> Prayer from the Handbook for the Assembly.



or experience of fire. Please take time to visit with our firekeepers, Larry Summerton and Leland Porte and offer to give them breaks.

#### Fire

Isn't it interesting that the Jews had pillar of fire and smoke to guide them through the desert. Isn't it interesting that the Holy Spirit came as 'tongues of fire. Isn't it interesting that our works are tested by fire. A 'charcoal fire welcomed the disciples as they came back in from fishing, which was familiar. From this fire the church started, and the disciples were never the same. As we gather at this Sacred Fire may you enjoy its warmth and friendships. - Rev. Arthur Anderson

#### The Church of Canada and Indigenous Ministry

The Anglican Church of Canada has been actively involved in initiatives related to Indigenous ministry and reconciliation for several decades. The church has recognised the need to address the historical injustices faced by Indigenous peoples, particularly the impact of residential schools on Indigenous communities.

In recent years, the church has taken significant steps to strengthen its commitment to Indigenous ministry and foster healing, reconciliation, and integration. One important milestone is the Anglican Church of Canada's formal endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2019. This endorsement signifies the church's recognition of the rights and inherent dignity of Indigenous peoples and its commitment to upholding those rights.

The church has also developed several resources and documents that guide its work in Indigenous ministry and reconciliation. The Anglican Healing Fund, established in 1992, provides financial support for healing initiatives in Indigenous communities affected by the legacy of residential schools. This fund aims to address the intergenerational trauma experienced by survivors and their families.

Moreover, the Anglican Church of Canada, the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and Pope Francis have issued official statements and apologies for the role of the churches in the residential school system, the mistreatment, systematic abuse, and violence against Indigenous peoples. These statements express acknowledgement, recognition of sin, seek forgiveness, and demonstrate the church's commitment to a path of change towards healing and reconciliation.

The church has also been involved in creating spaces for dialogue and fostering partnerships with Indigenous communities. Efforts have been made to engage Indigenous elders, leaders, and theologians in shaping the church's theology, liturgy, and governance structures. Through the development of Indigenous bishops, Indigenous ministries, and Indigenous councils within the church, the Anglican Church



of Canada has sought to empower Indigenous voices and perspectives within its structures.

In terms of liturgy and worship, the Anglican Church of Canada has incorporated Indigenous spirituality and practices into its services. This includes the use of Indigenous languages, songs, and ceremonies in worship, as well as the inclusion of Indigenous symbols and art within church spaces.

The church has also made efforts to support Indigenous theological education and training. This includes the establishment of programs and scholarships specifically designed to empower Indigenous individuals pursuing ministry and leadership roles within the church.

While progress has been made, the journey towards reparation, restoration and reconciliation within the Anglican Church of Canada is ongoing. It requires ongoing education, dialogue, and meaningful action to address the deep wounds caused by historical injustices and build relationships based on trust, respect, and equality.

#### Learnings from the Sacred Circle Assembly in the Anglican Church of Canada

The Sacred Circle Assembly, held from May 29<sup>th</sup> to June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023, in the Anglican Church of Canada is a significant gathering that brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous Anglicans to engage in dialogue, reflection, and reconciliation. This assembly, rooted in the principles of respect, listening, and mutual understanding, provides a platform for learning and growth. In this essay, we will explore some of the key learnings that emerge from the Sacred Circle Assembly and their significance for the Anglican Church of Canada and beyond.

The main issue in the agenda for this gathering was to approve two documents, discussed for long time within the Church of Canada among indigenous and non-indigenous members: [The Covenant and Our Way of Life](#).

1. **Acknowledging the Truth:** One of the essential learnings from the Sacred Circle Assembly is the acknowledgment of the truth of Indigenous peoples' experiences. Through storytelling, sharing of history, and personal testimonies, participants shared about the painful legacy of colonisation, residential schools, and the ongoing impacts of systemic injustice. This process of acknowledging truth fosters empathy, compassion, and a deeper understanding of the profound injustices that Indigenous peoples have faced and continue to face.
2. **Healing and Reconciliation:** The Sacred Circle Assembly offers a space for healing and reconciliation, both individually and communally. The assembly provides opportunities for open dialogue, apology, and forgiveness. By listening to the stories of survivors, participants gain insight into the intergenerational trauma and its effect on Indigenous communities. Through acts of reconciliation, such as liturgical ceremonies, prayers, and symbolic gestures, the



assembly fosters healing and the restoration of relationships. The issue of suicide is one of the highest concerns of the participants as well as the life of youth within the reserves and regarding loss of hope and meaning for life. A strong programme to prevent suicide is being developed by the Council of the Indigenous People. [More here](#).

3. Indigenous Spirituality and Wisdom: Another significant learning from the Sacred Circle Assembly is the recognition and valuing of Indigenous spirituality and wisdom. The assembly provides a platform for sharing Indigenous spiritual practices, rituals, and teachings. Participants learn from Indigenous Elders, traditional knowledge keepers, and spiritual leaders, gaining a deeper appreciation for Indigenous ways of understanding and relating to the natural world, community, and the Divine. This recognition enhances the richness and diversity of the Anglican Church of Canada's spiritual tapestry. The assembly always recognised the “Gospel at the centre” of everything they are and do. This phrase was reputed several times during the gathering. It is a remind to avoid being hijacked by the institutional live of the church. Sometimes we spend so much time thinking about the Church that we forget the Gospel is to be lifted and lived up.
4. Decolonising Theology and Practices: The document states that ““We all agree that, by and large, there is a strong correspondence between our traditional spiritualities and biblical theology, with our Creator being the God and Living Christ of the Bible.” (p. 6)”. The Sacred Circle Assembly challenges participants to engage in the decolonisation of theology and practices within the Anglican Church. This learning involves critically examining the historical and theological underpinnings that have contributed to the marginalisation and erasure of Indigenous cultures and spirituality. Participants are encouraged to reinterpret and reshape liturgy, hymns, use of symbols and other aspects of worship to reflect Indigenous perspectives and cultural expressions. This process promotes inclusivity, reconciliation, and the honouring of Indigenous identity within the Church. A fresh [First Nations Version – An Indigenous translation of the New Testament](#) was presented during the gathering.

“This translation of the good story if dedicated to the Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island (North America) – the Tribal Nations that call this land home. We pray the First Nations Version will bring healing to those who have suffered under the dominance of colonial governments who, with the help or churches and missionary organisations, often took our land, our languages, our cultures, and even our children. As our Tribal Nations work hard to reclaim what has been stolen, it is our hope that the colonial language that was forced upon us can now serve our people in a good way, by presenting *Creator Sets Free* (Jesus) in a more culturally relevant context.” (taken from the Introduction of the First Nations Version)

Our relationship with the Creation is fundamental to understand the Divine’s revelation and it is very well expressed in the Covenant:

“Our individual Nations are built on relationships where everyone within the nation and all things throughout the Land and Waters are treated as relatives. We now become a Sacred Circle, through Christ, where our



relationship to the Land and Waters and our way of being Nations is a guide and pattern for our discipleship, fellowship, and unity.” (Section II) At a time of a climate crisis, non-indigenous Christians have so much to learn from this commitment. Imagine how different the world would be if “our relationship to the Land and Waters” (whom we treat as relatives) was the “guide and pattern for our discipleship, fellowship, and unity.” (from [Jesse Zink’s blog on the Sacred Circle](#)). Jesse also wrote in his blog “I wish we could post this passage on the wall of every church”.

5. **Walking Together in Partnership: The Sacred Circle Assembly** emphasizes the importance of building authentic relationships and walking together in partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Anglicans. Through shared experiences, participants learn the value of mutuality, respect, and collaboration. The assembly encourages ongoing dialogue, consultation, and joint decision-making processes to ensure that the voices and perspectives of Indigenous communities are heard and respected within the Church. This learning promotes the building of stronger, more inclusive communities that embody the principles of justice and equality. Something very important to learn from the Sacred Circle is its way of making decisions. It is done by consensus. Also, a method used by the World Council of Churches and tried during the last Lambeth Conference 2022. According to the document *The Covenant and Way of Life*:  
“Sacred Circle uses a consensus model of unanimous decision-making derived from our experience through story, requiring great patience and respect, always placing the Gospel at its Centre as our guide. The style of gathering is to provide a place for the people to come together in respect and unity. Its governance is not to impose a way on local communities. It is to help them discover their own way to be disciples with the Gospel in the Centre of their own circles and with respect for our own local ways of gathering and governing” (page 19-20)
6. **Commitment to Justice and Advocacy:** The Sacred Circle Assembly serves as a catalyst for participants to engage in advocacy and social justice work. Participants are empowered to address the systemic injustices faced by Indigenous communities, advocating for land rights, self-determination, and the preservation of Indigenous languages and cultures. This learning calls Anglicans to actively work towards dismantling structures of oppression and to stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples, promoting healing, justice, and reconciliation in wider society.

The Sacred Circle Assembly (the content but mainly the method) in the Anglican Church of Canada offers profound learnings for participants, the Church, and society. The assembly serves as a transformative space for acknowledging truth, fostering healing and reconciliation, valuing Indigenous spirituality, decolonizing theology and practices, nurturing partnership, and advocating for justice. These learnings are essential steps towards a more inclusive, respectful, and just society, guided by the principles of love, humility, and understanding.



Thinking about Theologies in this context of contextualisation and its added value to all theological thinking and practice.

The Anglican Church of Canada, and many other churches such as the Anglican Diocese of Amazonia invited to the circle to share and listen, has been engaged in a process of learning and embracing Indigenous theologies, recognising the wisdom and spiritual richness of Indigenous peoples. During the assembly Archb Linda said that “the rest of the church needs you”. The same message was conveyed by Archb Marinez from Amazonia confirming this statement and sharing how much indigenous peoples must teach the whole church on Theology and its importance to “manage and take care of it” (cf Gen 2:15). The indigenous Maori from Aotearoa were also invited to the Circle and shared their perspectives and experience as peoples and Christians. [Here some conversations on the Prophetic Voices from their context.](#)

This journey of understanding and reconciliation has provided significant learnings that have shaped the Church's understanding of God, spirituality, and the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. In this essay, we will explore some of the key learnings that have emerged from the exploration of Indigenous theologies in the Anglican Church of Canada.

1. Spirituality rooted in the water and land: One of the fundamental learnings from Indigenous theologies is the recognition of the sacredness of the water and land and its integral connection to spirituality. Understanding profoundly this changes our way of life and the way we impact in the societies we live in. Indigenous communities have a deep understanding of the interconnectedness between people, the land, and all creation. The land is viewed as a living entity, worthy of respect and stewardship. The water is what gives life and help to shape all things. This understanding challenges non-Indigenous Christians to re-examine their relationship with the land and to cultivate a spirituality that acknowledges the sacredness of creation.
2. The sense of Community and Relational Theology: Indigenous theologies emphasise the importance of community and relationships. The concept of "All My Relations" reflects the interconnectedness of all beings and the understanding that humans are part of a larger web of life.

“It must be understood that we initially experienced God through our own languages, cultures, and worldview. For example, in Cree, God the Creator means *'The One Who Made Everything'*; there is no word for 'reconciliation' in Inuktitut as behaviours/relationships dwelt only in the realms of partnership, friendship and inclusion; important ceremony included traditional regalia; kinship meant all of **Our Relatives** including animals, birds, creatures of the waters and spirits; in Cree the concept of 'authority' does not imply hierarchy but rather means only that it is conferred by others, often just for a period of time.” (The Covenant and Way of Life, page 5)

This sense of community and relational theology challenges the individualistic tendencies often found in Western Christianity and encourages a sense of responsibility towards one another and the wider community (the whole creation). The creation is not a resource but source of abundant life. The emphasis on community and relationships calls for a reevaluation of hierarchical



structures and a shift towards a more inclusive and egalitarian understanding of the Church.

3. Oral tradition and storytelling: Indigenous cultures have a rich tradition of oral storytelling (this challenges our western thinking of use of time for instance), which serves as a means of transmitting knowledge, history, and spirituality from one generation to another. Indigenous theologies highlight the power of storytelling as a way to connect with the Divine and to convey complex theological concepts. The Church can learn from this emphasis on oral tradition by incorporating storytelling into liturgical practices and theological education, recognising its transformative potential in shaping faith and fostering community.
4. Respect for diversity and inclusivity: Indigenous theologies emphasise the importance of honouring and respecting diversity. Indigenous communities encompass a range of languages, cultures, and spiritual practices. The Church's engagement with Indigenous theologies invites a broader understanding of diversity and inclusivity, challenging the tendency towards uniformity and assimilation. This learning encourages the Church to celebrate and embrace different expressions of faith and to create spaces where diverse voices are heard, valued, and integrated into the life of the community.
5. Healing and reconciliation: Indigenous theologies offer profound insights into the processes of healing and reconciliation. These theologies recognize the impact of colonization, forced assimilation, and the legacy of residential schools on Indigenous communities. They call for a holistic approach to healing that encompasses spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical well-being. The Church learns from Indigenous theologies the importance of engaging in acts of repentance, seeking forgiveness, and working towards reconciliation. This learning challenges the Church to address the systemic injustices faced by Indigenous peoples and to actively participate in the healing process.
6. Holistic spirituality and holistic mission: Indigenous theologies emphasize the interconnectedness of spirituality, justice, and care for the earth. They challenge the separation between the sacred and the secular and call for a holistic approach to spirituality and mission. This learning invites the Church to recognize the inseparability of worship and action, spirituality and justice, and faith and care for creation. It compels the Church to engage in transformative action that addresses the socio-economic, political, and environmental challenges faced by Indigenous communities and the wider society.

The exposure and the exploration of Indigenous theologies has yielded profound learnings that have reshaped the Church's understanding of God, spirituality, and relationships. The recognition of the sacredness of the land and waters, the profound sense of community and relational nature of theology, the power of storytelling, the celebration of diversity, the call to healing and reconciliation, and the emphasis on holistic spirituality and mission have all contributed to a more inclusive, respectful, and just expression of Christianity. These learnings invite the Church to engage in ongoing dialogue, listening, and action, as it continues its journey towards reconciliation, understanding, and the building of a more just and inclusive society.

A way forward to me and other relatives on this journey



These learnings and experiences resonate with many narratives from the Bible. We are all relatives and we all belong to each other. We are created to take care and to flourish as image and breath of the divine. Even when we sin we, together, find a way back to the community and to the restoration of life and path.

It is my hope that the Anglican Communion Office and USPG (the two organisations that I represent in this gathering) work together alongside the Indigenous Council and the Church of Canada, Brazil and New Zealand, Aotearoa and Polynesia to foster links of solidarity and strengthen the advocacy for indigenous, environmental and territorial rights and identities. The Anglican Indigenous Network is strengthened by the presence of indigenous from all parts of the Communion and the commitment of our Instruments of Communion to listen, walk together and be present in the struggles for land, territory, abundant life, self determination and identity.

