

Between Traditions: The resurrection witness of the indigenous church.

A Keynote Presentation from the Tri-History Conference of the Episcopal Women's History Project, Historical Society of the Episcopal Church, and National Episcopal Historians and Archivists on June 16, 2016 at the Radisson Hotel and Conference Center, Oneida, Wisconsin. The presenter is the Rt. Rev. Mark L. MacDonald is the National Indigenous Anglican Bishop of the Anglican Church of Canada. Transcribed by Matthew P. Payne.

I'd like to give honor to God first of all and to acknowledge and greet all of you as relatives. That's the way our elders say is the respectful way of addressing people. We are here tonight, I got to see historians and archivists dance. Yeah. Yee haw. That was really something. I mean, did we get that on film? Well we're going to try to get you to sing a little bit as well.

I'm so happy that we had a chance to listen to the hymn singing. Very, very important. A very, very important element of why Christianity had such a big impact on indigenous peoples across Turtle Island. I remember now that I was with this group when my son was about a year old so it must've been around 2000. I brought my Ojibwa hymnal. I still, this isn't the same one but I brought it with me and talked about hymns back then. I thought maybe I should begin by saying, well as I was saying... and start from there.

I thought what I would do is talk a little bit about hymns and what they mean. There are dozens and dozens of stories to be heard about how hymn singing affected indigenous people. Oftentimes the hymns would precede any missionary presence or the presence of any kind of institutional church. There are many stories of that. It is unique, I think, at least in terms of the missiological experience of the church to see such a profound movement of Christian faith and I'll say more about that in just a moment. Entirely through song. Entirely through song. I've thought a lot about that. I've had opportunity to think a lot about that. I believe that indigenous people do their theology in song and think through things in song and that this was a way in which you could create a space for the old world and the new world to begin to talk to one another, to begin to interact with one another.

To sing in the midst of watching one world die and another world be born, these are acts of great courage, vision and wisdom. I'm going to teach you two bits of music and we'll use them throughout my talk. Don't worry. That doesn't mean that the talk's going to be a long one. I want to acquaint you with a couple of things. First off is a lullaby. It comes from northern Minnesota where I grew up. It goes like this.

Way way way way way,
Way way way way way,
Way way way way way.

Try that with me.

Way way way way way,
Way way way way way,
Way way way way way.

That's beautiful. That's wonderful.

Now, I became interested in looking at indigenous music and began to look at ethnomusicologists and some of their writing, some of their work. I noticed that oftentimes what would happen is that the vocables, the 'way way way', the 'hey-a, hey-a, hey-a's, they would be put hey-a hey-a, dot dot dot dot dot dot, then what was intelligible in the song would then be written out in English. I've learned through elders that that was backwards. That the things that were unintelligible, the vocables, that they were the most important part of the music. The idea being that, as one elder put it, when you are born you come out of the womb having been filled with the Holy Spirit of God. You come out of the womb speaking in tongues. You say things like

‘way way way’, ‘hey-a, hey-a’ and you come out of the womb a sacred being having been brought to life by the Holy spirit.

These sounds, these sounds are sacred. As this elder said to me, if you live long enough you'll start learning that language again. Just go to the nursing home and you'll see that people start learning that language again. They start learning that holy language again. Let's try that again.

Way way way way way,
Way way way way way,
Way way way way way.

That sounds really nice. Your mother would be proud.

Well, it is such an honor to be here in this place, which as in the paper I read from Owanah Anderson¹, the “Canterbury Cathedral of Indigenous Ministry in North America” and to be with all of you, so many of you are close, especially Blanche (Powless). I want to recognize her. She's our elder, our mentor and I've known her for so many decades. She's watched me to grow in a number of different ways. It's such a blessing to see her and to be with her at this time. So many others who are friends and loved ones, you truly are my relatives.

What we have seen here of the Oneida people, and I've detected among you is a sense of great promise that there's something growing here. There's something emerging here that is full of hope and full of promise. I think that we delighted to see an aspect of that identity connected to Christian faith, connected to Christian music. I would like to say yes, we see something wonderful happening here, something unique, something special, something that is emerging from the Oneida people.

I would also like to say that we can see that something special also emerging among historians and archivists. That's really what I want to talk about tonight. Something that is emerging, something that we saw emerge in the times that we've had together. Let's sing a little bit again.

Way way way way way,
Way way way way way,
Way way way way way.

Very useful bit of music. You can make it a Lenten piece just singing

Lord have mercy.
Lord have mercy.
Lord have mercy.

You can make it Easter music.

Hallelujah.
Hallelujah.
Hallelujah.

Now I used to sing that to elders back home. They would always say are you trying to put us to sleep because it is a lullaby after all and after you've all had a big meal it's a pretty dangerous thing to do as you're getting up here to speak, but it's a very useful and helpful bit of music to enter into the feeling of this moment here today.

A few years back I was contacted along with a couple of other people by two Bible societies. They had prepared materials for use in areas that had undergone intense trauma. They had tried these materials out in 14 or 15 places around the world and it was to help victims of intense horrific trauma deal with their issues using a Biblical context. Because in a lot of those places the people were Christian, and very decidedly Christian, and felt a need to deal with

¹ Owanah Anderson is author of “Anglican/Episcopal mission among American Indians” published by Forward Movement Publications, 1997. ISBN: 0880281820.

things in the context and through the lens of their Christian faith. They had used this all over the world and they had found it helpful. It was a marriage of trauma theory and Biblical texts and it had worked well.

So when somebody suggested “Well, you know, we ought to try this in Canada, people have experienced trauma up there too,” now there was a little bit of hesitation because it didn't seem all that appropriate but they tried it. They found out, and that's why they contacted us, that the trauma was much deeper, much more complex, much more challenging than anything they had seen in the world. Anything they had seen in the world. Now this shocked them. They found it astonishing. They needed to try to talk through what that means.

I'm saying this to us because we have lived in North America with victims of an intense trauma, brought about by colonization. We have all benefited from that colonization and we have no capacity to see the intense pain that it has caused. The complex, layered pain that is caused over decades and decades and decades of an acknowledged attempt to destroy the identity of a people. It's so amazing. At no point in time did anybody ever try to deny the goal of the relationship of the larger society and the church to indigenous people was to make their identity humble and disappear. That was acknowledged. The goal of the program of the church, the goal of the program of government was to make sure that at the end the Indian problem would be solved by taking away that identity, by destroying that identity and giving a new one.

Of course, it didn't work very well as we see today. We see a culture, a society, a large group of people who have a very difficult time seeing the pain that their society has inflicted on a group of people nearby. At hand. Now, that's the tough part. Let me switch gears here.

Last year, a woman wrote Dr. Martin Brokenleg² and me and said can you recommend any contemporary books on indigenous theology for me to read? Well, I sent back the usual, find Deloria Junior³ and a couple of others I can't remember. Dr. Brokenleg, and I should say Martin Brokenleg is on my top five list of indigenous theologians. He's a spectacular human being. Martin wrote back and he said I think you should read “[The Heavens are Changing](#)” by Susan Neylan⁴. Now, I was shocked. Because this is a book about Tsimshian people over 100 years ago. He was suggesting that this would be the best contemporary theological reading that this person could do. He explained why. He said “All the other things that you can read about us don't treat us as agents of our own Christian faith. What this book does, The Heavens are Changing, it allows people to see that there was a thing called indigenous Christianity. It developed under the noses and under the watch of the missionaries but it had its own logic, its own way of being.”

Now, I added to Martin's words. We have a difficult time seeing pain but we also have a difficult time seeing good. We have a difficult time recognizing very good things when they happen. That's really what I want to talk about tonight.

These days I don't often get a guitar but they gave me one so I'm going to play it. I don't think we have too many academic papers punctuated with guitar but I'm going to teach you a very simple chorus. Some of you might know it.

The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord⁵

Now you try it with me.

² Dr. Martin Brokenleg holds an EdD from The University of South Dakota, an M.Div. from Episcopal Divinity School and a B.A. from South Dakota State University. He has retired after thirty years as Professor of Native American studies at Augustana University of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

³ Vine Victor Deloria Jr., a Native American author, theologian, historian, and activist.

⁴ The Heavens Are Changing: Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity (McGill-Queen's Native and Northern) Paperback – June 3, 2003, Susan Neylan, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003, ISBN-13: 978-0773525733.

⁵ The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor, by John B. Foley, SJ, 1978

The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.
That sounds nice. Let's do it again.

The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.
Again.

The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.
I will bless the Lord at all times.
His praise ever in my mouth.
Let my soul glory in the Lord.
For he hears the cry of the poor.

Again.

The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.
The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.
Let the lowly hear and be glad.
The Lord listens to their pleas.
And to hearts broken he is near.
For he hears the cry of the poor.

The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.
The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.

Very good. You sound great. We'll do it again.

The experience of colonization was more than just traumatic. It was, as our TRC⁶ in Canada has described it, an experience of cultural genocide. As I said, it was acknowledged. Father Michael Oleksa⁷, who's an eastern Orthodox missiologist, pointed out that when their missionaries arrived in Alaska they reported that Alaska natives knew nothing about suicide. Today Alaska natives have one of the highest rates of suicide of any ethnic group in the world. The experience of colonization has been very, very difficult. The experience of promise in the midst of that is very important.

If I spent all my time telling you about all the bad things that are happening in the indigenous world it would be a waste of time because that's what you know. What's most important for me to share is what is hopeful. I hope that what I say will ultimately bring hope and will show promise.

Historically, I guess you can't really say that to historians can you? That's a rough word. I've got to watch my P's and Q's here. It has been the habit, it has been the habit of people to look at indigenous people in this way.

Five percent, roughly five percent of indigenous people, these are really rough estimates but roughly five percent of indigenous people have remained rigidly traditional. We've heard about that, we heard about that today on the bus trip. We've heard about that again and again. Five percent have remained rigidly traditional. This five percent is the part of the indigenous population that academics usually are interested in, particularly anthropologists. That's the part that everybody wants to talk to, wants to have an experience of.

Now on the other end there's another five percent. This five percent are the people who have rigidly assimilated into the larger culture so that they have done all that they can to become as white as they can, to fit in as much as they can. For the most part, these are people who will stay away from indigenous people and, I hate to say it, but the church and the government, that five percent, that's the group that they're interested in.

There's of course 90% in the middle. The church and the government on one side, the academics and other people on the other side, are not interested in that 90% in the middle. The

⁶ Truth and Reconciliation Commission

⁷ The Rev. Dr. Michael James Oleksa is a graduate of Georgetown University and St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary and earned his doctoral degree in Presov, Slovakia.

90% in the middle are a mixture of those two things. They're both indigenous and they've also adopted a number of non-indigenous things. They've become very Christianized.

Now, in Canada, indigenous people, over 80% of them are baptized even today. Over 80%. What's amazing about that figure is that if you in Canada, which is a much more rapidly secularizing country than the United States, if you went to people of British descent and found out how many of them are baptized, it would be a lot less than 80%. A lot less than 80%. I'm sure.

This group in the middle are for the most part considered losers by everybody. The church is upset with them for their lack of diligence. The hymn singing that we heard, although it was accepted by many church leaders, the book by Michael McNally, "[Ojibwe Singers](#)⁸", which singers points out that the hymn singers were persecuted by church authorities because they were afraid of something developing that wasn't a part of their system, wasn't a part of who they were.

This 95%, which hasn't been paid much attention to, this is where creativity happened. This is where the elders were. This is where the people that we heard about today are. I was so impressed with Dr. Larry Hauptman⁹ in part because he was focused on the 90%. He talked about the resilience, the courage, the perseverance and the ingenuity of people trying to live in the midst of a horrific experience of colonization. What we saw is the resilience, what I would call the genius of the 90%. The people who were not sufficiently traditional to be interesting to the academics, and not Christian enough to be interesting to the church, but who nevertheless were able to make a way for their families and friends and loved ones.

This is, I think, our great challenge and our great moment. Sing with me again. Let's do way way way.

Way way way way way,
Way way way way way,
Way way way way way.

Very good.

Just singing is what Martin Brokenleg was pointing towards. Is that we're beginning to see historians, archivists, there was all kinds of evidence of it, beginning to pay attention to the 95%. Not looking at them as losers, as people who didn't really fit in, but people who have made for themselves a distinctive, unique Christian faith. The way that the hymns have spread from here and really from eastern New York all the way up into the Arctic. The hymn singing tradition that we saw here, is something that if you went up to Iqaluit or if you went to Arctic Village, the northernmost American Indian village in the world, if you went to Arctic Village you would see them singing hymns that were passed on from place to place, from person to person. This hymn singing tradition which I think deserves a lot more attention than it has received but is beginning to get more attention, this hymn singing tradition is a uniquely indigenous way of doing things. It needs more understanding. It needs more explanation. It needs a lot more attention. That's what I think is this moment that we're in right now.

What we've seen is the promise of a particular people. What the Oneida people have done is a wonderful thing. A spectacular thing. My fear is that you will go away thinking that they are the only ones who have done this or who are doing this. It's a difference of degree-ing, not of kind. Meaning that they have done very great things, but other people are also doing very great things by surviving, by singing, by showing hope in the midst of the wake of what was one of the world's great traumas.

⁸ Ojibwe Singers: Hymns, Grief, and a Native American Culture in Motion Paperback, Michael D. McNally, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2009, ISBN-13: 978-0873516419

⁹ Dr. Laurence M. Hauptman earned his doctorate in American history from New York University and has taught history at SUNY New Paltz since 1971 where he became Distinguished Professor in 1999.

What I am asking of us is that we would attend to the promise. Attend to the promise that we see. The trajectory of the living word of God in people. Now, here's where it gets a little touchy folks because if Christian faith is incarnational, if Christian faith is about the incarnation, that means that it's historical. It means that Christian faith can be archived. It means that when we handle these materials that you handle daily in your particular form of ministry, that you are handling sacred things. That you are handling the substance of the Gospel. That you are dealing with things that point towards our destiny in God.

Now, I am not asking for history to become propaganda. Not that at all. In fact, I think that an incarnational faith would say, if you dispassionately apply the discipline of history, the discipline that you have developed, if you do that with a clear lens, that you will begin to see patterns, that you will begin to see things that then the theologians can begin to talk about and begin to work with. History is critical to Christian faith. It is the lens through which we do our theology. I'm not asking at all for you to mess with the lens so it looks a little more Christian. I'm not asking that at all.

What I'm trying to point out is that the lens often gets distorted by things that we are not aware of. It gets distorted by a culture's incapacity to see the pain that it has caused to other people. It gets distorted by a culture's lack of capacity to see the promise when it comes. It is a truly remarkable story. We have found a gem here in this place, among these people. Their Christian faith inspires me and has for many, many decades. Now I hope that you will join me in being inspired by that faith.

What I am trying to say is that what history does is it tells us, it focuses us, to see that the story of the Oneida people reeks of resurrection. It smells like the Gospel. It portrays for us some of the most precious and wonderful aspects of our faith. Here it is just sitting under our noses.

A few years back, I got to meet the granddaughter, the granddaughter of Geronimo¹⁰. Wow. I went, and it was a minister who knew her and brought me to meet her. I went with an elder from Red Lake, where I was living at the time. We went to meet her and it was astonishing. This was a woman who had lived in so many different worlds who had wisdom and insight and faith and kindness and love and grace in amounts that I can't even begin to understand. When we left we were both very, very blessed. The elder turned to me and she said that minister doesn't know what he's sitting next to.

So often, I'm not trying to say that he was particularly bad. I'm trying to say so often that's the way we are. We can be sitting next to something that is so spectacular, so wonderful and not know that God has planted a miracle next to us. Not know that God has done something great.

What we have seen is in my estimation a monumental testament to the power of a saving God. In the midst of horrific pain, in the midst of horrific experience of colonization, we have seen a people triumph. Triumph. I think it is not for us as historians and archivists to tell a story in terms of propaganda, but it is ours to help people to see those stories. To have the clarity to see those stories. To begin to allow history to speak.

I think that's, I think that that's our task. I'm ready to finish now. That usually means I'm halfway done (laughter) but I am really ready to finish. That is the promise that we see here among ourselves. That is the emerging reality that is coming up among us. We have experienced, we have been living next to great trauma, great pain, and we have been living next to great promise and great goodness. It is our task to see it, not necessarily to praise it or to promote it but to see it. As I have seen and witnessed that happening here I can only say that as much as it gives me joy to see what's happening among the Oneida, things that I see happening at other places as

¹⁰ Geronimo was a prominent leader from the Bedonkohe band of the Chiricahua Apache tribe.

well, it gives me great joy that such a group as this is beginning to look at these things and beginning to deal with them.

Let's sing. This is such a good song. This is a song that makes a lot of sense when you think about what we have seen and heard.

The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.
Very good.

The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.
I will bless the Lord at all times.
His praise ever in my mouth.
Let my soul glory in the Lord.
For he hears the cry of the poor.

The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.
The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.

I want to thank you all for the privilege of letting me be with you. Matthewⁱ, your introduction was worth the price of admission for me. I believe the work that you're doing is extremely important and I hope that you will continue to do it. I hope that you will continue to be dedicated to it and thank you for the great privilege of seeing great things emerge among you. Things that have been waiting. The cry of the poor. Let's close.

Gitche Manitou. Great mystery. Gi-nanaakomin. We give thanks to you for your goodness and loving kindness. We thank you for this people and we thank you for the great work that you have done among them. We thank you for those of us who have gathered here, historians, archivists, people dedicated to telling the story in a good way. We pray that you would bless their work. We pray that you would bless what they do. We ask God that you will help us to be faithful to the callings that you have given us and that you will help us to see. You will help us to understand. That you will help us to know the great things that you are doing. The great things that live among us. We ask this Od izhinikazowining Jesus Debenzhiged in the name of Jesus our ruler.

Way way way way way,
Way way way way way,
Way way way way way.

Thank you very much. You're great.

ⁱ Matthew P. Payne, Director of Operations of the Historical Society of the Episcopal Church and Chair of the Joint Planning Committee.