

KEYNOTE SPEECH

ALL MY RELATIVES

World Communion of Reformed Churches

Uniting General Council

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Introduction

In a formal gathering like this our Lakota/Sioux people offer the greeting, *Mitakuye Oyasin*. It is a traditional tribal greeting which translates “All My Relatives or Relations.” What is communicated is a sense of one’s connectedness to the bigger world of creation. It says I am part of the people who have gone before me, with the people living today, and with those who will come after me. It says I am related to things above, things below and things all around. It says I am a small part of all that is, and ever has been, sacred. It militates against the sacred/secular dichotomy and dualism of the West and aligns us with a holistic and integrated view of the world. I will add that perhaps, because of what the Creator has made possible for us in the coming of Jesus, in the truest sense of this term, we become the Body of Christ – the family of God. So today I greet you as your Lakota brother in Jesus!

My father is Oglala Lakota/Sioux from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and my mother is Sicangu from the Rosebud Lakota/Sioux Indian Reservation, both in South Dakota. I was born in 1954 and lived among my mother’s people until age 6, when we moved away from the reservation where I grew up until I moved back in 1972.

In the winter of 1972, along with 600 others, I participated in the American Indian Movement’s (AIM) forced takeover and occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Office Building in Washington, DC, protesting the U.S. Federal Government’s breaking of more than 700 congressionally ratified treaties that it made with our tribes. For eight days we occupied the building and were surrounded by riot police. During this period of my life I began to allow hatred toward white people and Christianity to grow in my heart. In 1974, however, after years of many

painful experiences with drug and alcohol abuse, time in jail and a growing despair of my own lostness, I became a follower of Jesus while living in Hawaii.

This Hawaii experience occurred when I was all-alone during a drug overdose at two o'clock in the morning on an isolated beach. There, in deep desperation, I yelled, "Jesus if you're real, then will you forgive me, come into my life and be my savior." And he did!

I am only "Ikce Wicasa" a Common Man. I am not a chief, tribal leader nor do I speak for all Native people. I am only a pitiful human being who follows the path of beauty that we call the Jesus Way. As a common man, I welcome all of you to Turtle Island. For those visiting from other lands, welcome as our honored guests. If this event was in one our native communities or villages we would welcome you in a formal way with food, gifts and songs. So I apologize I can only offer words of welcome.

Many tribes refer to North America as turtle island. (Tell the story of how North America rests on the back of a giant turtle). More that 700 different tribes believe that Creator put them on this land long before Columbus got lost in his search for a new trade route to the East Indies and we discovered him floating around lost in the Caribbean. Paul writes in Acts 17:26 that Creator pre-determined set times and geographic places. We are the First Nations peoples of Turtle Island. It would appear Creator brought the Europeans to Turtle Island too. Perhaps in Jesus, we could have walked together as brothers and sisters and a great new nation "The Body of Christ" made of many nations could have grown here between our peoples. But it did not. The most horrific incidence of genocide and ethnic cleansing in the western hemisphere occurred here instead.

Our people were decimated by war and disease from some 50 million in 1400 to barely 230,000 in 1895. There are numbers of documented cases where small pox infected blankets were sent to villages (biological terrorism) and bounties were paid for the heads and scalps of Native men, women and children. Today we are 2.4 million in the USA and 1.2 in Canada. But, perhaps what makes the story most tragic is that so much of this was the result of the misappropriation of the biblical narrative that was co-opted as a tool of colonial imperialism. However, the story is not finished.

It was a defining moment in my journey as a Lakota follower of Jesus when Dr. Jerry Yellowhawk prayed over me in a Lakota naming ceremony, giving me the name *Taoyate Obnajin* "He Stands With His People," and Rev. Vincent Yellow Old Woman gifted me with his

eagle feather head dress to confirm the name and Creator's gifting in my life.

Over the years as I have reflected on my experience in Hawaii, I am glad I did not find faith in Jesus in a church building or institution. It spared me from having to then become Christian Reformed right away; I didn't have to become Baptist right away; I didn't have to become a Presbyterian right away; I didn't have to become an Anglican right away; I didn't have to become a Pentecostal right away; I didn't have to become a Methodist right away. I just became a follower of Jesus. Soon after my commitment to Jesus, I learned I needed to become a Christian too. And from there I became a Calvinist, Wesleyan, Lutheran, Quaker, Pentecostal, Dispensational, Armenian and Evangelical Christian. And then I learned that I had to decide on a bible to read; The RSV, NRSV, KJV, NIV, CEV, NKJV and that some English speakers believed only English speakers could have a bible that was "Authorized" by God. And then I was taught there was such a thing as Christian pants, shirts, dresses, shoes, and socks, Christian haircuts, Christian instruments, and Christian buildings.

Somehow when Jesus came into my life and overwhelmed me with his love and kindness I wanted nothing more than to simply follow Him because He truly saved me from a life of addiction, abuse, self-destruction and likely a premature death. While following Jesus seemed one thing, becoming a Christian seemed quite another thing.

As the years passed I began to resist the pressure to accept interpretations of the Bible that said "old things had passed away and all things had become white" regarding my following Jesus in the context of my Native cultural ways, music, dance, drumming, ceremony and culture. In reference to my Native culture I was informed the Bible said "touch not the unclean thing," or "come out from among them and be separate," or "what fellowship does light have with darkness." This meant I needed to leave my Indian ways behind me, because I had a new identity in Christ, and it WAS NOT Indian! The Bible was used to demonize just about everything important to our cultural sense of being one with God and creation. So, while Jesus found me, the church began to lose me! The church became complicit in the colonialism of indigenous people.

One of the points of colonialism is to displace people from their culture and then their land. African scholar, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, (n-Go-gay-wa-ti-ONG-go) in *Decolonizing the Mind*, sees the way that control was introduced and managed was to deconstruct the people's sense of self and replace it with that of the colonizer ... the cultural bomb. The effect of the cultural bomb

was to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland...the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world ... tools of self-definition in relationship to others.

Sadly, the hegemony of the prevailing worldview assumptions of the European immigrants not only lingers today, but have morphed into a distinct christianized cultural bias against Native and indigenous culture and ways. Because of clashing worldview values Native North American / Indigenous people have never been embraced as co-equal participants in the life, work and mission of Jesus. In 1st Corinthians 12 Paul uses the human body as a metaphor to describe how people of diverse social and cultural backgrounds should regard and interact with one another. In verse 20 he says "the eye cannot say to the hand I don't need you and the hand cant say to the feet I don't you."

In North America we have more than four centuries of active on-going missions among our tribes. Yet, despite four hundred years is witness, there has never been a self-identifying Native person in a position of national leadership in any denomination or any para-church ministry, nor are there any today. A close examination of the national Christian speaking platforms across the land reveal the glaring absence of native men and women who are ascribed a place spiritual stature in our own land. And I repeat in our own land. And I repeat again, in our own land!

If you look at a thing and you cannot identify any perceived sense of value in it, then you get along without it. You cannot see how it will in some way benefit or add value to your life.

The Euro-North American expression of Christ and his kingdom has said to the Native North American expression of Christ and his kingdom, we don't need you. You have nothing we need. You can add nothing of benefit to us. But we in turn have everything you need.

It has created and only reinforces a benefactor/beneficiary paradigm in the church. We exist in the minds, policies, and attitudes of the North American church as the perpetual mission field; needy recipients, unreached peoples, marginalized, etc. We are not seen in light of the scripture as co-equal participants in the life and mission of the American church.

The missionary efforts among the people located on my reservation over the past 150 years still suffer under the weight of that hegemony and is typical of the current state of the

“Native church.” The largest town on the Rosebud Reservation is named Mission. This community of 910 people is so named because it was the place where missionary agencies were invited to set up shop. In July of 2008 I led a cross-cultural immersion course for seminary students in Mission. I sent groups of two or three people to visit nine different churches on a Sunday morning in five different communities. Afterward, during a de-brief time, without exception each group commented that they could have been attending any “white” church in “anywhere” USA. There was nothing “Native” about those mission churches except the fact Natives were sitting in the pews. The music, liturgy, language, décor, and style were all Anglo.

This kind of paternalism and “evangelism” goes on all summer long, year after year, decade after decade and little changes on reservations all across the USA and Canada.

A 2008 *New York Times Newspaper* article reported that males between 15 and 25 on the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation have the highest incidence of suicide in America. A 2010 television documentary stated three of four girls have been raped or sexually assaulted on the same reservation. Poverty, alcohol and drug abuse and all the maladies that accompany these things are staggering in magnitude! These kinds of socio-economic realities exist in indigenous communities around the world wherever European colonialism has gone.

An authentic Native American cultural or indigenous expression of following Jesus has never been allowed to develop; the very idea being rejected as syncretistic and incongruous with “biblical” faith. Instead of embracing Jesus as the Creator, the majority of Native Americans blame American Christianity and the church for the loss of their own culture and identity.

Early missionary John Sergeant, while pastoring a Christian native community, “emphasized to his converts that their cultural inadequacy and their personal responsibility for overcoming that inadequacy...Only through a complete sense of their own inadequacy can Natives be properly Christianized (Wyss 1998, 94). He felt they could not fulfill this mandate and began a school to assist them toward Christianity with the goal of, “total eradication of all that marks them as native...to root out their vicious habits, and to change their whole way of living” (Wyss 1998, 92).

Despite the history and implications of colonial missions, I nonetheless believe we are in the midst of a historic paradigmatic shift from the paternalism of the past to a genuine native-led movement of the gospel where indigenous believers are emerging as co-equal participants in the life work and mission of Jesus among the nations.

One way to make some sense of early colonial and current neo-colonial mission endeavors is to look at the church through the juxtaposition between Jesus and Christianity, and Christianity and Christendom, the latter being, as professor Peter d'Errico writes in his forward to *Pagans in the Promised Land*, “an alliance of princes and priestly authorities that culminates in the doctrine of divine right of kings and popes.”¹

Lamin Sanneh nuances these comparisons a bit differently;

World Christianity is not one thing, but a variety of indigenous responses through more or less effective local idioms, but in any case without necessarily the European Enlightenment frame. “Global Christianity,” on the other hand, is the faithful replication of Christian forms and patterns developed in Europe. It echoes Hilaire Belloc’s famous statement, “Europe is the faith.” It is, in fact, religious establishment and the cultural captivity of faith.²

Phillip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom*, while acknowledging we are undergoing the greatest shift in the history of Christianity, sees Christianity being inextricably bound up with that of Europe and European-derived civilizations overseas, above all in North America.

Peter D’Errico writes, “When we make these important distinctions, we can begin to understand the possibility of differences between the teaching of Jesus and the political and legal doctrines of a church-state complex operating in his name.”³ With this as a backdrop I will put a little of my tobacco in our common pipe of dialogue for you to smoke on and hopefully enjoy.

As Native people, we are in-between the worlds of yesterday and where we will be; between traditional worldviews and western rationalism; between community and individuality; between spirituality and religion. We are not what we used to be and we are still becoming what we are not yet. In this in-between time we experience confusion, deep loss, fear, the unknown, searching, lostness, despair, our circle is broken. Our identity is constantly stressed, being reshaped, redefined, or altered by the hegemonic assumptions of western Christian dualism, American (national) patriotism or western individualism as we regain our balance in the modern technological world where we live as indigenous peoples.

Here is something I have been thinking about that helps makes sense of what it means for me to be fully human – Sicangu Lakota – and a devoted follower of Jesus. Our Creator became a

⁹ Peter D’Errico, “Foreword” to Steven T. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery* (Golden Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing, 2008), ix.

¹⁰ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 22.

¹⁴ D’Errico, “Foreword” to Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land*, ix.

two-legged. God came in the form of a human being; “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood” (John 1:14; Message Version).

So then I would ask, whose “hood” did the Creator of heaven and earth move into. Creator moved into a small Native village named Bethlehem among a tribe of people called the Hebrews and a sub-tribe, called the Tribe of Judah. Jesus was a black-haired, black-eyed and dark skinned tribal, indigenous, aboriginal, native, First Nations boy – an ethnic boy depending on who gets to call someone else ethnic. He was given tribal names; Bright and Morning Star, The Rock, Rose of Sharon, Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Lilly of the Valley, Chief Cornerstone, Daystar and many more.

When Jesus, God-the-Son was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, as he came out of the water, God-the-Holy-Spirit, like a dove descended on Jesus; then the voice of God-the-Father was heard from heaven saying, “this is my beloved Native boy in whom my heart is deeply pleased.” Jesus did not feel ashamed, like a second class citizen, or any sense of inferiority about his dark skin, tribal ways or ethnic identity because he received the affirmation of His Father’s and the Holy Spirit’s love – in the midst of his tribal identity. God-the-Father was not embarrassed by His son’s obvious ethnic identity.

As we consider a new lens to view the humanity of Jesus through, I want to then reconsider the place or role of indigenous people in light of the *missio dei* as a Trinitarian mutuality model for biblical story-telling. While *missio dei* is translated “Mission of God,” I like the notion of story-telling as more reflective of God’s work in creation. It is God’s story, a “living story” that is constantly unfolding. *missio dei*, however, as Trinitarian mission can serve as both a corrective and redemptive lens in addressing the displacement, neocolonial oppression and utter disregard for the value of our First Nations/indigenous people in colonial Christianity.

Phillip Potter sees *missio dei* presenting a radical departure from a western ecclesiocentric focus to a Trinitarian focus.⁴ *missio dei* can be thought of in terms of the extension of God’s “village” life in the story of the coming of Jesus and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in Creation; it is Creator’s invitation to be restored in relationship within the village of God.

Trinitarian theology points to the radical communal nature of God. This communion overflows into an involvement with history that “aims at drawing humanity and creation

¹⁷ Philip Potter, *Life in All its Fullness* Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981).

in general into this communion with God's very life. God's very nature, therefore, is missionary. It is not primarily about the propagation or transmission of intellectual convictions, doctrines, moral commands, etc., but rather about the inclusion of all creation in God's overflowing, superabundant life of communion. The church's missionary nature derives from its participation in this overflowing Trinitarian life.⁵

Indigenous people find in the *missio dei* a place of identity, belonging, value, peace, justice and affirmation – Shalom. That place, however, does not, and has not existed in missionary efforts among our tribal people. The Bible expresses the same reality of the new humanity in the word *shalom*. Potter would say the goal towards which God is working, the ultimate end of his mission, is the establishment of *shalom*, which intrinsically involves the realization of the full potentialities of ALL creation – human and non-human – and its ultimate reconciliation and unity in Christ.⁶

The “outcomes” of a Trinitarian centered focus of the *missio dei* described by Bevans and Schroeder are “building vibrant community life, where real sharing, mutuality, service and solidarity take place.”⁷ In this place people experience genuine local autonomy and cultural existence that thrives, as well as a real sense of communion with other local churches and Christians of other cultural groups. This picture of a Trinitarian based *missio dei* has the feel of village life. As the dominance of western, modernist worldview assumptions decline in light of the shift of Christianity from the north to the south and west to east, *missio dei* has huge implications for the future of mission/story-telling as an expression of community.

God expressing God's self through the diversity of the oneness between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the overarching theme of creation – existing in remarkable community expressed through radical diversity. Some have said God is one **because** God is three. Or that unity is not possible in the absence of diversity or again, that unity is only possible in the midst of diversity. Where there is no diversity you have only conformity, uniformity or sameness. Diversity should not be regarded as only a socio-cultural conversation, but a deeply theological one as well.

¹⁸ Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 288-89.

¹⁹ Potter, *Life in All its Fullness*.

²⁰ Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 298.

The *missio dei* as Trinitarian faith calls us to “recognize the interconnectedness of everything in the universe. Everything is related to everything else, and this means that an anthropology in the light of the Trinity can never be one that is anthropocentric.” Since everything is connected, humanity is part of the whole of creation⁸ and the whole of creation is part of our human identity. And everything that “never was,” has ever been, or ever shall be, came first, “existed,” within the community of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit before it proceeded out from them.

In Genesis, the human/creation story emerges from within the radical community of the Trinity and the oneness within the diversity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In Revelation, it “ends” with the radical community of the Trinity and the oneness within the diversity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with human beings fully participating, have been restored to *imago dei*. “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9).

On the basis of both the Genesis and Revelation accounts no people or race should regard itself as superior or inferior in origin or essence. What John saw in Revelation was birthed out of God’s self. The diversity in heaven is the reality of what God intended to be from the very beginning because only in the diversity of humanity could the indescribability of God be “mirrored.” With these as bookends, the *missio dei* is a home for indigenous people in the story of Creation.

In the *missio dei*, as “observable” in Revelation, heavenly worship reflects in its perfected state that which from the beginning of time always existed in the Trinity; here we see diversity perfected, cultures flourish, creation restored and the radical self-giving oneness of the community of the redeemed – the divine *tiyospaye* – “extended family”⁹ worshipping the Creator. Cultural diversity is not a deviation from God’s “original plan,” the result of sin or judgment at Babel, but has always been God’s intention and design for human beings. This is good news for Indigenous people and affirms our “place” as Native/indigenous people within the context of God’s eternal triune community and purposes for creation.

Earlier this year I taught at a conference for Christian school educators hosted by

²² Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 301.

Rehoboth Christian School in Gallup New Mexico on the Navajo Reservation. Rehoboth Christian School was established in 1903 by the Christian Reformed Church as part of its missionary work among the Navajo and Zuni people. In its earlier years like all Christian run boarding schools in the United States and Canada, the missionaries and teachers were, by and large, very condemning of native cultural beliefs and practices. The majority of theological streams in the Reformed tradition in North America have never treated, respected nor honored Native peoples and their traditions. Because the understandings of John Calvin could not be distinguished from their western/enlightenment cultural framework, generations of Native/Indigenous Reformed pastors and Christians to this day, distrust, reject and even demonize their own traditional ways as a result of the categorical teachings of Reformed Theology they encountered at Rehoboth.

I want to say Rehoboth as a school is changing, albeit slowly but steadily, as it awakens to the pain and wound it caused among our people and the embracing of a new future. Can we reimagine a new or changed future where people are living out their faith in Jesus in light of the *missio dei*, together as fellow learners and co-equal participants in the life, work and mission of Jesus. This week in Grand Rapids of cultural activity, mutual learning and the formation of this historic new communion is a step in the right direction for the members of the new World Communion of Reformed Churches around the world. Is institutional or structural change enough though to bring about this hoped for future?

Edinburgh 2010

“If denominational unity was the express purpose of Edinburgh 2010 some measure of success was realized. The platform however, was largely unchanged from 1910 except for one woman’s voice and one global south participant. Furthermore, the songs of worship may have come from many places but, the leadership was entirely non-representative of the majority of the church. If denominational unity was the intended goal of Edinburgh 2010 , it may have been achieved in some small measure; if the presentation of the body of Christ in mission was the goal however, we will have to wait for another time.”

Attending Edinburgh 2010 Mission Conference as the National Indigenous Anglican Bishop, I saw that, yes, there has been a great deal of change since 1910 - but not in every way. Indigenous People were again, for the most part, either invisible or marginal to the concerns and directions of the conference. With Christianity at a critical global crossroads, nothing could be

more important than setting the relationship of the churches to the Indigenous Peoples on a firm foundation. Edinburgh 2010 revealed how far we have to go. It is for the churches to pick up this bit of urgent business left undone.

Indigenous Manifesto

I appeal to the new World Communion of Reformed Churches to become active participants in calling the churches of the United States and Canada to strive for justice and equality in its work among our tribes by

1. Repenting of its cultural, economic and philosophical arrogance;
2. Its ecclesiological hegemony;
 - a. We have our own liturgies, ceremonies and rituals that are just as capable of expressing a biblical faith as anything that has ever come out of Geneva, Germany, Rome or Alexandria.
3. Its presupposed theological superiority that has brought great shame and oppression to our native hearts;
 - a. That status of recognition belongs to the conglomeration of Euro-American scholars, ministers and lay folk who have, over the centuries, used their economic, academic, religious and political dominance to create the illusion that the Bible, read through their experience, is the Bible read correctly.¹⁰
 - b. Indigenous reflection and critique of the emerging neo-Calvinism
 - c. Inclusion of theological textbooks from indigenous scholars and the global south in North American seminaries and universities.
4. Its inequitable control of wealth derived from lands unjustly, illegally and immorally taken from our Native people;
 - a. Great wealth has been extracted from our lands by “Christian” land owners and business owners that continue to propagate an economic and ecclesiological system that oppressed our people today.

¹⁵ Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville: Abingdon Press,, 2007), 44.

And then by establishing a kind of truth and reconciliation committee for the purpose of seeking ways to make restitution to tribal people who still carry self-hatred toward themselves because of the misappropriation of scripture, mis-representation of Jesus and the Gospel of Good News and co-opting of the Bible as a tool of colonialism and imperialism.

This would include creating a process of reporting to maintain accountability by monitoring progress by a commission comprised of people from North America and beyond representing indigenous leaders and the global south.

This would include establishing a budget specifically to support local native initiatives dealing with issues of reconciliation, justice and community development.

NAIITS is a group of Native scholars who for the sake of their children's children, have stopped waiting for an ecclesial body to make room for them at the table of theological discourse and launched an innovative new approach to theological education for indigenous people.

The World Christian Gathering of Indigenous People is another global movement of followers of Jesus who have met around the world since 1996 to celebrate their freedom in Christ through the beauty of their songs, languages, dances, ceremony, instruments, chants, and rituals of their cultural ways.

Can you and I live with a heart for justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God – a faith in Jesus lived under the shadow of the community of heaven expressed through radical diversity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

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Some of this material is adapted from my book, *One Church Many Tribes* (Regal Press, 2000), a chapter I wrote in *Remembering Jamestown, Hard Questions about Christian Mission*, (Pickwick Publications, 2010) and a chapter I wrote in *Holy Bible: Mosaic*. (Tyndale, 2009).