



MAKING JESUS KNOWN IN KNOWABLE WAYS

Richard Twiss, Sicangu Lakota

“I was made to burn and destroy all my tribal carvings, eagle feathers, and my dance outfit because the pastor told me now that I was a Christian, old things passed away and all things became new, which meant all my Native cultural ways needed to be replaced with Euro-American cultural ways. Then I was told I could no longer participate in our Native gatherings, dances or ceremonies because they were of the devil and full of idolatry. They even told me my Native drum was an idol and full of spirits, so I burned it and learned the guitar instead. Now I am no longer a Native in my culture. I am an anglicized Christian in American culture. The Bible has been used to colonize my soul.”

This pattern 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.¹

I have heard versions of the above story dozens of times from Native people across North America, and it breaks my heart every time. This rejectionist and culturally demonizing approach remains the primary missionary paradigm among our Native people today and it is rooted in the very beginning of Christian mission in North America.

Every July since 2006, I have asked seminary students and participants in our annual cross-cultural immersion course on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota (population 13,000) to, in pairs, attend the Sunday service of one of the 26 churches on the reservation. Their assignment is to observe the sights, sounds, art, music, language, symbols, liturgy, roles, ritual and structures, then later report to the group

what they experienced. We have now been to more than half of those churches, and with one exception all of the course participants have said they could have been sitting in any suburban white church in America. Nearly everything about the service, music, language and church culture was completely Anglo, even though most of congregants were Native. Only two of the 15 churches attended had Native pastors.

Some of these churches have been on the Rosebud Reservation for 75 years, and the majority of them still teach against various aspects of Lakota culture and ceremony as demonic. Chuck Kraft has noted that the longer a people utilizes a majority of foreign forms, the longer Christianity is understood to be and experienced as a foreign religion—the white man’s religion—not an indigenous faith.² This kind of Christian mission is not a recent phenomenon, but is a continuation of the colonial missionary endeavor established at the very beginning of American missions history.

Eighteenth-century missionary John Sergeant, while pastoring a Christian Native community, “emphasized to his converts 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, p. 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, p. 92). Rest assured that I am not using Sergeant as an “extreme example” to make a point because this mindset is common today throughout missions among Native North American communities.

African scholar Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, in *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, describes how colonialism is fundamentally an attack on the soil and soul of a people that seeks total control of their culture.

Thiong’o says that the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism is the

Richard Twiss, Sicangu Lakota, is President of Wiconi International. He has an earned doctorate (ABD) in Missiology from Asbury Theological Seminary and is the author of One Church, Many Tribes and numerous articles and book chapters. PO Box 5246, Vancouver, WA 98668, Tel: 360-546-1867, Web: www.wiconi.com

cultural bomb. Furthermore, the effect of a cultural bomb is 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... to deconstruct the people's sense of self (how people perceive themselves and their relationship to the world). It's the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer (2009, 3, p. 16).

The intentions described by John Sergeant and Thiong'o are the same: to eradicate Native cultural ways! In America it led to the forging of an uneasy alliance between church and state. Decisions by Christian missionary organizations about how to evangelize Native people in the name of God and the Bible and federal government, in light of American expansionist policies, served to unleash the "cultural bomb" with the same devastating and destructive results.

While the colonial missions paradigm still exists, it is waning around the world as indigenous theologians, scholars, pastors and missiologists begin interpreting Scripture for their own local contexts, opposing the pressure to reject their cultural ways, and instead embrace their histories and cultures. No longer

who-was-always-there," continues to make Jesus known in new and dynamic ways as we resolve to work toward a post-colonial Christendom for future generations.



Native veteran warriors honor the land.

What began nearly 20 years ago with a handful of Native followers of Jesus looking for better, more contextually appropriate ways of telling the gospel story has become an ever-growing national and international community of like-minded people. Since 2007 I have researched and written about this growing movement, having interviewed and surveyed 230 Native believers across North America. This article consists of excerpts from my doctoral dissertation for the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission at Asbury Theological Seminary, titled, "Native-led Contextualization Efforts in North American, 1989–2009." It is based on my past 20 years of observation and active participation in Christian missions among First Nations people.

The stories by Cheryl, Terry, Bill, Casey and Fern in this issue of *Mission Frontiers* represent the experiences of many hundreds of other Native believers in the USA and in other countries! While 20 years ago these stories may have been dismissed as a kind of "radical minority," in the next 20 years they will become the norm in Native/indigenous ministry as we move into the era of



Using the Pipe in Prayer and Worship to Jesus"

wondering if God was involved in their histories and asking "if" God can be found in their cultural ways, they are assuming God was always involved and are discovering ways to worship within their cultural ways. The Creator of heaven and earth, "the God-

"post-colonial Christianity." These leaders are part of a new generation of Native/indigenous "progressive evangelicals" who are exploring other possibilities—"innovations" as they seek to contextualize the

gospel in their unique local cultural contexts.

Using Everett Rogers' model of the diffusion of innovations, I identified the innovators and their innovations, opponents/critics, early and late adopters and opinion leaders, and traced the development of the networks and communication channels that spread the new ideas. Here are some important landmarks of this new movement of the gospel.

In 1996, fifty-two North American Native leaders attended the inaugural World Christian Gathering of Indigenous People (WCGIP) hosted by the Maori people in New Zealand. More than 2,000 people from 32 countries attended. For eight days tribal people worshipped Jesus using their indigenous music, dance, clothing, ceremony, ritual, languages and stories as cultural expressions of their biblical faith. Six more Gatherings were convened around the world, with the 2011 Gathering scheduled again for New Zealand (www.wcgipnz.org). In 1998 leaders from North America hosted the Gathering in Rapid City, South Dakota. This served as a major catalytic gathering for Native leaders exploring these new possibilities, with many meeting for the first time in Rapid City.

On the heels of the WCGIP in Rapid City, Wiconi International convened 20 "Many Nations, One Voice" celebrations in 18 cities across North America from 1999 to 2005, which served as significant catalytic events to introduce and promote these new ideas. Each event concluded with Native believers wearing their traditional regalia and dancing and worshipping to the sound of the blending of tribal drums and western-style worship music. For the majority it was the first time they understood this was possible, and it set them free to be Native again and worship in their cultural ways. Thousands of people attended these



Richard Twiss (right) takes his vision to South Africa with R.J. Nomee, (left) Kalispel Tribal member from Usk, WA and a local tribal member (center)

events across the United States and Canada, many of whom then went home and began their own contextualization efforts in their local contexts.

Some Native published authors in the contextual network who are educating people biblically, missiologically and culturally about contextual ministry approaches—Randy Woodley, Adrian Jacobs, Suuqiina, myself, Anita Keith, Robert Francis and Phil Duran—collectively have circulated more than 60,000 copies of their books. Native recording artists in the network—Jonathan Maracle/Broken Walls, Bill Miller, Cheryl Bear, Jan Michael Looking-Wolf, Robert Soto, Mike Jacobs, and Terry and Darlene Wildman/Rainsong—collectively have circulated more than 350,000 copies of recordings that have migrated around the world and musically

promoted contextual theology.

During the past 15 years several inter-tribal powwows have been organized by First Nations Christ-followers, with the expressed aim to bring together biblical faith and Native tradition. Randy and Edith Woodley in Anadarko, OK, Rosalyn Alemany (Dakota), and Ric Ross and Bryan Brightcloud (Chiricauilla Apache) started the annual Pasadena Powwow in Pasadena, California in 1999. Peter and Marcia Mason, "missionaries" from Australia, organized and hosted the Sacred Gathering Powwow in Colorado Springs in 2002 and held three more in the



Wiconi International's "Dancing Our Prayers" Team in Cusco, Peru. Our teams have presented Jesus in 11 countries around the world, including China, Pakistan and Germany, where thousands of people have embraced the gospel of Jesus.

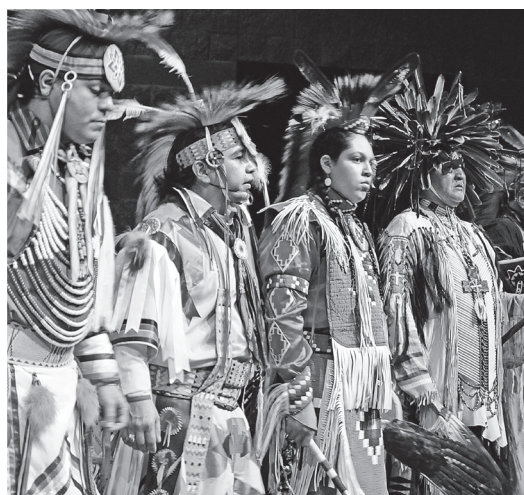
ensuing years. Marshall “Tall Eagle” Serna and his Native church gathering hosted a “Christ-centered powwow” in 2007 in Salem, Oregon. Pastor Robert Soto (Lipan Apache) has hosted the Annual South Texas Intertribal Powwow in McAllen, TX since 1980. Bill Govey hosts The Peoples Powwow in Flagstaff, AZ annually, and Doug (Haida/Tsimtsian) and Gloria (Yupik) Yates hosted a mid-winter traditional potlatch gathering in the Tsimtsian village of Metlakatla in 2008.

Wiconi International hosted its 6th Annual Mni Wiconi Wacipi “Living Waters Powwow” and Family Camp in July of 2010; 270 people attended the camp and 1200 people the powwow. It is another profound example of taking contextualization to a deeper “heart language” level. These unique inter-tribal powwows help to keep the people engaged in their tribal identity, bring much needed wholeness to their internal conflict between their faith and culture, and make room in their heads and hearts to genuinely, biblically dance their prayers to Jesus.

Many Native pastors and leaders are praying in a traditional tribal way, burning sage, cedar or sweet-grass as part of their prayers. Others are meeting in a traditional sweat-lodge ceremony as a place of worship, intercession and accountability. Others are praying with a “pipe” ceremony and holding rites of passage ceremonies for their sons and daughters as a place of discipleship. Others are using traditional designs, cultural religious motifs, musical styles, ceremonies, rituals, symbols and



Cheryl Bear performs her Native music at the Wiconi International powwow.



Wiconi International's “Dancing Our Prayers” Team leading worship time at the annual Missions ConneXion Conference in Vancouver, WA 2010

indigenous names and languages as vital components of their contextualization efforts.

With limited space I cannot go into detail in describing all of these events nor recognize all the people responsible. What has emerged is a recognizable movement of people who are introducing and practicing spiritually transforming cultural expressions of a truly biblical faith in Jesus. My dissertation is a careful analysis of these contextualization efforts, which are reshaping missionary attitudes and introducing effective new paradigms of gospel-telling that will redirect the focus of future missions and build Christian community among the tribes of North America. This is of profound significance.

It is my hope that other indigenous followers of Jesus around the world will be inspired, challenged, encouraged and strengthened to remain steadfast and emboldened in their local contextualization efforts wherever they live!

I invite you to visit our website to learn more about this and connect through our links page to various contextualization leaders and organizations around the world.

Hoheceturwe yelo— “and that’s the way it is.” 🌐

Indian Life is the largest Native Christian periodical in North America and has become a positive voice in support of contextual ministry in the USA and Canada. Please visit their website (www.indianlife.org) and consider becoming a subscriber.



End Notes

- 1 P. 44 McKnight, Scot. *A Community Called Atonement*. Abington Press, Nashville, Tennessee, 2007
- 2 P. 377 Kraft, Charles H. *Anthropology for Christian Witness*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1996