

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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# Wholistic Mission to North America's First Nations

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**Abstract:** The author provides a brief review of the misunderstanding and racism that have characterized the majority population's relationships with First Nations peoples and accompanied all too many mission attempts to reach out to these peoples. A missionary himself, he suggests that genuine commitment to the evangelization of First Nations peoples requires a commitment to wholistic mission with an emphasis on words and deeds that proclaim, disciple, and heal.

For over five hundred years, since first contact, First Nations people have been the object of mission efforts, but it is estimated that in that time, only 3 to 5 percent of First Nations people have converted to the Christian faith. The history of contact, beginning in 1492 to the present has been a troubling journey for the First Nations peoples of the Americas. In this paper, we will look at the impact of the dominant culture on the First Nations people and the need for a wholistic approach in our mission efforts.

Columbus landed on the shores of the Americas in 1492. This is what is commonly known as first contact. Between first contact and 1661 it has been estimated that 130 million First Nations people perished in the first nearly two hundred years of contact.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will refer to the first people of the Americas as First Nations as they are the first inhabitants of this land. Richard Twiss states, "I strongly embrace the concept contained in the name 'First Nations.' The terms American Indian and Native American both denote a political and colonial identity, created by others and imposed on us through conquest and treaty."<sup>2</sup>

The conquest of the Americas started on the east coast and moved rapidly westward. First Nations people were pushed from their homes and traditional territories. Diseases, for which there was no immunity, killed millions.



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In the mid-1800s, the doctrine of Manifest Destiny became a prevailing attitude regarding the westward expansion on the continent. The Oxford Dictionary describes Manifest Destiny as a nineteenth-century doctrine or belief that the expansion of the United States throughout the Americas was both justified and inevitable. It was driven by both political and religious belief. Somehow God had divinely ordained this new world to allow people to create heaven on earth, and to spread democracy across the face of the land. I do not intend to write on the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, and its complexity. Rather, this is about the spirit of Manifest Destiny and the consequences that it had for the First Nations people.

The forefathers of the United States government wrote the Declaration of Independence. They wrote, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” So how could the spirit of Manifest Destiny justify and inevitably violate the God-given rights of the First Nations people and enable non-First Nations people to conquer this new land and make it their own?

This doctrine opened a door to a belief system that somehow First Nations people were less than human. This led to eradication policies. In 1864 Col. John Milton Chivington, who also served as a Methodist pastor, stated “Damn any man who sympathizes with Indians. . . . I have come to kill Indians, kill all, big and little; nits make lice”<sup>3</sup> (Sand Creek Massacre). Whole tribes were exterminated through eradication policies. Assimilation policies such as, residential schools, were adopted. Children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in order to assimilate and Christianize them.

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This was an effort developed in a partnership between the state and the church. First Nations children were forbidden to speak their languages or practice any of their cultural practices. Their hair was cut, and they were given European clothing to wear. Their names were taken away, and they were given Christian European names. Richard Pratt in 1879 started the Carlisle Indian school and stated, “[We must] kill the Indian and save the man.”<sup>4</sup> At last count the Canadian government has identified over six thousand graves at residential schools across Canada that hold the children of First Nations people. Many of the children were physically and sexually abused.<sup>5</sup>

The impact of the trauma caused by the oppressive nature of these policies, and the genocide of the First Nations people has left a wave of intergenerational pathologies and chronic social issues. Through removal policies, and the sudden shift of economic engines, men could no longer manage resources to care for their families.

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The male role in the communities all but disappeared. The forcible removal of the children shattered culture and family units. Children did not learn how to be mothers and fathers, husbands, and wives. O'Brien, in the introduction to her book, *Coming Full Circle*, writes

Chronic social problems that emerged as a result have indeed carried on into subsequent generations. George Guilmet and David Whited noted in 1989 that some of the highest mortality rates in contemporary American Indian communities were attributable to “accidents, suicides, substance abuse, and violence—all expressions of the emotional stress experienced by individuals who have been stripped of their cultural traditions and forced into schizophrenically bicultural existence.” . . . Statistics gathered in 1993 confirmed that alcohol-related deaths were 579 percent higher for American Indian and Alaska Natives than for the general population, while suicide rates were 70 percent higher, homicide rates 41 percent higher, and the rate of drug related deaths was 18 percent higher. . . . Poverty rates among reservation communities range from 30 to 90 percent; unemployment ranges from 13 to 40 percent; accidental death rates are typically three times the national average, alcoholism rates are 30–80 percent higher, domestic violence, teen pregnancy, child neglect, and suicide are often twice the national rate. . . . The dropout rate of Native students in public schools was as high as 60–80 percent. . . . Healthcare providers note that spiritual and mental distress associated with the impacts of colonialism, poverty, and intergenerational violence are commonly expressed somatically among Native communities.<sup>6</sup>

“How can your God love us and hate us, so much, at the same time?” Hear this statement from a First Nations woman, a residential school survivor.

Mission work to First Nations people, because of its history, requires a complex response using a wholistic approach for Gospel proclamation. At Lutheran Indian Ministries our mission is to proclaim, disciple, and heal. What was the First Nations woman understanding of the message of God’s love? How did she hear this message? For that matter, how does anyone hear?

In Acts 26:14 at Saul’s conversion, we read, “And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language (Paul’s mother tongue), ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” Our Lord was speaking to Paul through the language he understood best, through his Hebrew culture, through his mother tongue. In contrast, the First Nations people have become orphans (trauma),

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they have become strangers (loss of cultural identity), and they have become widows (death and loss of love).<sup>7</sup>

There is a resurgence within First Nations communities to recover their cultural identity, and to recover their languages. I believe the church must be present in this restoration of cultural identity for several reasons. First, the church bears a certain responsibility because of its involvement in the historic trauma of oppression and genocide that has led to these conditions. If reconciliation is to occur, both the church and the First Nations must meet at the same table. Second, only the Gospel and the presence of Christ can bring the healing that is needed. Thirdly, I have seen in the last thirty years a strong desire within First Nations communities, to know and understand who the Creator (First Article revelation) made them to be. I believe the Holy Spirit is preparing a suffering people to hear the Gospel!

As First Nations people begin to heal, they begin to see and hear differently. I am reminded of Mark 8:22, the story of the blind man whom the people begged Jesus to heal. Jesus took the man out of the village, spit on his eyes, laid His hands on the man, and asked him, “Do you see anything?” The man replied, “I see men, but that look like trees, walking.” Jesus lays His hands on him a second time and his sight was made whole. I believe, in this story, that we see healing as a process.

I think a similar process is going on among First Nations peoples. As they experience this cultural revitalization, they are beginning to see that they were created by the Creator. That they have been loved and cared for. Our God has not left Himself without a witness (Acts 14:17).

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An example: the Nuchahnulth people of the Northwest coast have practiced, for thousands of years a ritual called *oosimch*. They would go to the rivers at the break of dawn and bathe. As they entered the water, they chanted a prayer in their native tongue. “We bow ourselves to you Creator, true light of the morning. Have pity on us. We bow ourselves to you Creator, true light of the morning.” They would then offer their gratitude to the Creator and begin to pray for their families. Then they would offer prayers for their communities, for the children, and their elders. Then they would pray for the land and its resources.<sup>8</sup>

I found this ritual fascinating and sensed a wonderful connection to Baptism. I began to teach and preach on the Sacrament of Baptism. In the end, I told them that I thought they had been waiting in the waters for thousands of years for the words, “in the name of the Father and in the name of the Son and in the name of Holy Spirit.” Over the next eighteen months, we witnessed thirty-eight Baptisms in the river where the ritual of *oosimch* was practiced. I remember a middle-aged woman who came to

me with tears of joy and said, “Today is the first day that I know I can be fully Native and fully Christian.”

In order to journey toward wholeness, the First Nations people must wrestle with what it means to suffer. How can we make sense of suffering? How many times have we heard the question, “If God loves me, why does He allow this to happen to me?” How can there be a redemptive purpose for suffering?

Usually, out of a last-ditch effort to find relief from the pain of suffering, we ask this last question in hope. For First Nations people it becomes a series of very painful connections, to the past, the present, and the future. How can it not be a part of historic memory? O’Brien states regarding wellness in her work amongst the Coast Salish people of Puget Sound in Washington,

What begins to emerge here is a sense of wellness strongly shaped by relationships—between individuals and their ancestors, between people and place, and within and between communities. When one considers the profound connection between health and identity, healing emerges as a genuinely religious experience.<sup>9</sup>

While this interconnectedness intensifies the suffering, it can also provide a sense of resilience in the context of the healing process taking place in the community.

A Theology of the Cross is our answer to the redemptive purpose of suffering. Luther said that to truly know God, He must be seen through the cross.<sup>10</sup> Through Jesus’ life and death and resurrection by suffering came the greatest glory to God and salvation to the world. The Theology of the Cross provides a framework for a theology of suffering. Through the cross we see the clearest picture of the redemptive purposes of suffering. Paul states that, “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8:16–17). The greatest purpose of our lives is to allow the glory of God to be revealed in us. Eyer writes, “The theology of the cross says that God comes to us through weakness and suffering, on the cross and in our own sufferings. The theology of the cross says, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.’”<sup>11</sup>

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We see a lament theme in the Scriptures. The book of Psalms often moves from a position of orientation to dis-orientation, to re-orientation. Allender lectures on a Faith, Hope, and Love Matrix. He speaks in terms of shalom, shalom shattered, shalom sought, and shalom restored.<sup>12</sup> If we look at the biblical narrative, this is what we see. In the garden of God, we see shalom. As sin enters the garden, shalom is shattered.

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We have become orphans who have lost our name. Thrown out of the garden we become strangers groping in the darkness trying to create our own sense of shalom. We have become widows separated from God and His love. But God, in His great love and mercy, sends His Son, to give us shalom restored.

The extreme trauma and the extreme suffering of the First Nations people defies explanation. Only in the light of Christ and His Gospel can we begin to make sense of the purposes for which these things have occurred. The Theology of the Cross and a theology of suffering provide a foundation building toward the hope of shalom restored.

I am reminded of the story of Joseph. The trauma and suffering that Joseph experienced was seen by him through a theology of suffering. He says to his brothers, while weeping, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gn 50:19–21).

The Theology of the Cross and a theology of suffering provide a foundation building toward the hope of shalom restored. . . . Sacred Ground is a community-based trauma therapy program.

In addition to proclaiming and discipling, Lutheran Indian Ministries needs a third leg in its mission to serve First Nations people. It has begun to implement a program that deals with the effects of trauma, and intergenerational trauma. Sacred Ground is a community-based trauma therapy program that deals with the effects of trauma and historic trauma within indigenous communities. It centers on a peer group setting that provides common ground for everyone involved. We learn to hold space for one another, a safe space, where we can learn to share our stories. The effects of shame, betrayal, and harm cause us to see ourselves, the world and God, in unhealthy ways. It is like the blind man that Jesus laid hands on, “Can you see anything?” He responds, “I see men, but they look like trees, walking.” Jesus wasn’t finished. His promise is that He will not leave us as orphans. Trauma occurs in the context of community, and I believe healing must happen in community as well. Sacred Ground is about communities coming together and learning how to live from the heart, learning how to share from the heart, learning how to hear from the heart, and learning how to respond from the heart. We begin to see that there can be a redemptive purpose for our suffering.

Allender writes, “You are a story. You are not merely the possessor and teller of a number of stories; you are a well-written, intentional story that is authored by the greatest Writer of all time. . . . The weight of those words, if you believe them even for brief snippets of time, can change the trajectory of your life.”<sup>13</sup>

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In First Nations communities, our most valuable resources are the elders and the children. Traditions and rituals are the mechanisms used to transmit information from one generation to the next about the issues of life. Songs, dances, name-giving ceremonies, and story are just a few. In the Nuchahnulth language the word for *story* is *Ha Ho Pa*. It is story that teaches us about the Creator, about ourselves, and about community. I believe that Jesus employed this technique in some of His teachings, especially in the use of parable.

I would like to share an example of *Ha Ho Pa* from a well-known parable, the good Samaritan. We are all familiar with the story. A man is robbed, stripped naked, beaten, and left for dead. The religious elite pass by without helping him. But a good Samaritan has compassion and binds up his wounds with oil and wine. He puts him on his beast of burden and takes him to an inn. He instructs the innkeeper to care for him until he returns.

When I share this *Ha Ho Pa*, I begin to engage the hearers by asking questions. What if I were the man beaten, robbed, stripped naked, and left for dead? What if you were the man beaten, robbed, stripped naked, and left for dead? What if the man in the road is the entire sea of humanity, which has, because of sin, been robbed, beaten, stripped naked, and left for dead? What if that Samaritan took our place in the road and he was robbed, beaten, stripped naked, hung on cross, and left for dead? Wouldn't that make his beast of burden the cross that takes our wounded selves to the inn? Is the inn the church and the innkeeper the Holy Spirit? As we say in First Nations community, "It's a good story."

You wonder what is happening in the inn? We receive the care and the gifts that sustain us. The Word, the water, the body and blood, all creating faith, sustaining faith, and nurturing our faith. In our response we understand that we were all orphans, strangers, and widows. In our journey toward shalom we have been restored, given a family, given a prophetic truth to guide us, and a kingdom that will never end. We learn to love. We learn to live from the heart. Paul would say, "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thes 2:8). We learn what it means to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep (Rom 12:15).

God loves the whole person; therefore, any *Missio Dei* must be wholistic in nature. "He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him" (Ps 126:6).



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Erin McKenna and Scott L Pratt, *American Philosophy: From Wounded Knee to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 375.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Twiss, *One Church Many Tribes: Following Jesus the Way God Made You* (Minneapolis: Chosen Books, 2000), 22.
- <sup>3</sup> Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (New York: Bantam, 1972), 86–87.
- <sup>4</sup> “Kill the Indian and Save the Man,” Digital History, accessed March 2, 2021, [https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp\\_textbook.cfm?smtID=2&psid=3505](https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=2&psid=3505).
- <sup>5</sup> Cindy Blackstock and Pamela Palmater, “The discovery of unmarked children’s graves in Canada has Indigenous people asking: how many more?” *The Guardian*, June 9, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/09/discovery-mass-graves-canada-indigenous-people-first-nations-residential-schools>.
- <sup>6</sup> Suzanne Crawford O’Brien, *Coming Full Circle: Spirituality and Wellness among Native Communities in the Pacific Northwest* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 2013), xxx–xxxi.
- <sup>7</sup> Dan Allender, *Orphan/Priest, Stranger/Prophet, Widow/King* (oral presentation), The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology, on November 23, 2020.
- <sup>8</sup> See Denise Titian, “Quu’asa presents traditional healing information to NETP clients,” *Ha-Shilth-Sa*, Canada’s Oldest First Nation’s Newspaper, September 24, 2014, <https://hashilthsa.com/news/2014-09-24/quuasa-presents-traditional-healing-information-netp-clients>.
- <sup>9</sup> O’Brien, *Coming Full Circle*, xxii–xxiii.
- <sup>10</sup> Steven Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2011), 143.
- <sup>11</sup> Richard C. Eyer, *Pastoral Care Under the Cross in the Midst of Suffering* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1994), 27.
- <sup>12</sup> Allender, *Orphan/Priest, Stranger/Prophet, Widow/King* (oral presentation).
- <sup>13</sup> Dan Allender, *To Be Told* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2005), 11.