

Becoming Neighbours:

Three Conversations on Bridges between Aboriginals and EMC Churches



WHO ARE OUR ABORIGINAL NEIGHBOURS?

This is an important question for our EMC churches. It is a difficult question. It is challenging because we live in a time and context in which a genuine relationship with our neighbour tends to be an optional add-on to vocation or career, family and social life, and, yes, even the life of the Church itself. We are often far too busy to bridge the gap between ourselves and the stranger next door.

Ironically, when we do try to bridge the gaps, our help often takes the form of investing our money to send trained people to somewhere far away to display the love of Christ while we carry on with our business here. Meanwhile, many of us do not know the names of those who live nearby. Overcoming this attitude is difficult because it requires re-imagining our daily life and the ways and places in which we invest our time and energies.

What does this have to do specifically with our Aboriginal neighbours? As churches, many of us find ourselves in rural communities that are in close proximity to reserves. Many of us in urban centres find ourselves in neighbourhoods in which we, literally, do have Aboriginal neighbours down the street. Some people in our churches are aboriginals and fellowship with those of us who are not.

A Modern Day Example

Not only are EMC churches in an awkward proximity to Aboriginal neighbours, but historically, Aboriginal people have been a modern day example of the man who fell into the hands of robbers in the parable Jesus tells in Luke 10:30–37. The story of colonialism in our world has left Aboriginal people in a disadvantaged position relative to many of us who inherited the privilege created by gross injustices against Aboriginal people. The fact this injustice has allowed us to be in the position we are in society is a reason for great concern, especially because the Gospel we proclaim is one in which the flesh of Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between cultural and religious people groups (Eph. 2:14).

A Rebuttal Rebutted

The tricky bit here is that it was often the activity of the Church “proclaiming the Gospel” that left the Aboriginal people stripped, beaten, and alone. Sadly, the Church played the part of the “robber” in the Good Samaritan parable. Today, a rebuttal that one often gives to this sobering appraisal of the Church’s action in the past is: “That was not our doing. We should not be held accountable for what people did long ago. It is clear that what was done is done and now we need to move on.”

The problem with this rebuttal is that it doesn't hold water when examined in light of Jesus' parable. This rebuttal will tend to produce a "priest" or a "Levite" walking by on the other side of the road, and not a "Samaritan" who takes on the task of caring for and genuinely loving our Aboriginal neighbours. The question of "Who is our Aboriginal neighbor?" must become more difficult before it can become clearer.

This parable adds another layer of complexity to this question. We do well to remember that the parable was told for the purpose of converting the "priests" and the "Levites."

Repentance

Jesus' command in verse 37 to "Go and do the same" is, in fact, a call to repentance. Seen in this light, the Church today is in need of the reconciling message of the Gospel just as much as the Aboriginal people are in need of it. In this light, we need to view the Gospel as not simply new information, or even new religious customs that a privileged Church needs to hand off to Aboriginal people. The Gospel announces a concrete event that takes place in the radical act of mutual repentance and mutual love for the other.

To be sure, the Gospel does announce a radically specific claim about Jesus the Christ that all are called to make a decision on, but that claim is not one that should ever underwrite a relationship of unequal power between individuals. The Gospel should call into question such unequal relationships and, when that happens, the Church of today should not be surprised to find itself called into question.

Re-imagining

Earlier we said that overcoming an attitude of apathy and ignorance towards our Aboriginal neighbours, or any neighbour in general, is difficult because it requires re-imagining our daily lives along with the ways and places in which we invest our time and energies. The work of re-imagining is precisely what the Church is called to do today. As the Church seeks to repent of its complicity in fostering past and present injustices, it must do so by imagining, both within our churches and along with our Aboriginal neighbours, a new way to live together that will manifest the reconciliation that the Gospel proclaims. This will be a slow and difficult work.

In this booklet you will find three case studies that will challenge your church to engage in the work of re-imagining just described. We encourage churches in the EMC to use these case studies within a Bible study or within your Sunday School.

To churches that find themselves removed from Aboriginal communities, this booklet is for you too. While you may not be in close proximity to Aboriginal people, you still live in a country in which these issues will not go away soon. And, even more important, you belong to the whole body of the Church that needs care, wisdom, and reproof as it seeks, in its unique time and place, to be faithful.

Scriptures to study in preparation:

Luke 10:25–37

Matthew 18:1–6, 10

Ephesians 2:11–22

Leviticus 25:1–24

Repentance

If your church would like a more extensive discussion of Aboriginal pathways to the gospel of Christ, consider the *Reaching Up to God our Creator* curriculum in the EM Conference lending library (published by Mennonite Church Canada).

Some helpful books are:

Living in Color by Randy Woodley. Chosen Books, 2001.

One Church Many Tribes by Richard Twiss. Regal, 2000.

Whiteman's Gospel by Craig Stephen Smith. Intertribal Christian Communication, 1998.

Neither Wolf Nor Dog by Kent Nerburn. New World Library, 2002.

Organizations to learn from include:

MCC Indigenous Peoples (mcccanada.ca/indigenouspeoples)

Wiconi International (www.wiconi.com)

My People International (www.mypeopleinternational.com).

Discussion One

Two Communities and a Tragedy

Bridgeville Mennonite Church is in a Low German Mennonite farming community. Down the highway is Beaver Rapids Reserve. These two communities have co-existed for sixty years. They have always been conscious of each other, but their relation has been one of bafflement and occasional tension.

On the one hand there is the oft-spoken German Mennonite feeling that people on the reserve cause trouble for farmers. Tractors have been vandalized and some livestock stolen; many members have assisted drunken motorists who strayed into the ditches around Bridgeville. The Aboriginals in Beaver Rapids do not understand German Mennonites, who seem far too concerned with possessions, land ownership, and their work ethic. Many describe what they feel as the condescension of German Mennonites. The main meeting of the two communities occurs when their hockey teams compete. Sometimes the meeting goes well, and sometimes not so well.

But Bridgeville is a Christian community that understands Beaver Rapids to be a community Christ is concerned about. Years ago Mennonites would present choir programs. Attempts have been made to do VBS on the reserve or to provide religious programming in the reserve school. Little fruit has come of this.

Bridgeville now has a new pastor, a graduate of Steinbach Bible College. He has learned about social justice issues in college. He has fond memories of his college mission trip to a northern reserve. He loved the kids. Now, he is the pastor of this congregation and wonders how his experience will play out in this community.

This soon comes to a head for him when a car accident on the highway takes the life of a young woman from Bridgeville and an elder from Beaver Rapids. In the midst of the grief there are questions, accusations and finger pointing between the communities. The pastor knows this is the worst of times, but that it might also be the best of times.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do Low German and Aboriginal communities sometimes not have genuine neighbourly relations? What are the significant cultural differences between a typical Low German community and a traditional Aboriginal community? How do these differences make it hard to relate?
2. Why do you think the choir programs, VBS, and religious programming in the reserve school seemed to bear little fruit?
3. Have you had experiences where hockey or other sports contributed to good relations between communities like this? What problems, if any, have you seen?

4. Is this time of grief a good occasion to discover a new way, or would it be best to wait? What creative ideas do you have for this pastor of Bridgville in the days after the deaths and before the funerals?
5. If you were the pastor, what scripture texts would you preach from on the Sunday after the funerals?
6. What does it take for two communities entrenched in their paths to find a new love for their neighbours? Where have you seen it happen?

Discussion Two

The Family Next Door

Scripture Reference: Matthew 18:1–6, 10

The family next door has just taken in three Aboriginal foster children, siblings—a 15-year-old girl, a 12-year-old boy and an eight-year-old boy. On and off these children have lived with their much-loved Grandma, but due to her declining health, she is no longer able to care for them. Grandma was the one stable person in their lives.

For most of their lives they have lived with their mother and her revolving door of boyfriends. Substance abuse was prevalent and, as a result, the children suffered neglect and physical, emotional and sexual abuse.

The Girl

The 15-year-old girl is angry and has already begun abusing substances as well as cutting herself to deal with her anger and pain. Although she is intelligent, academically she is well below her expected grade level because of the amount of moving around and changing schools, as well as the fact that no one made the effort to get her up in the morning and make her go to school. She has trust issues and so finds it hard to make friends and she is suspicious of anyone who tries to be kind to her. She does, however, enjoy the attention of men and has little understanding of what is appropriate behaviour.

The Middle Child

The 12-year-old boy is impulsive and volatile, over-reacting in most situations, whether it is laughing too loud and long when he finds something funny, sobbing in great distress when he is sad or hurt, or getting extremely angry and losing control over even little things. He wants to please the

people around him, but can't seem to control his outbursts. This makes him difficult to have around. He finds it hard to concentrate at school and is a disruption in the classroom, so he spends most of his time with a special resource worker. The children at school are a little afraid of him and his outbursts, but they also tend to pick on him to see his extreme reactions.

The Youngest

The eight-year-old boy is quiet and withdrawn. He learned at a young age that the safest way to avoid conflict is not to be noticed. He spends much of his time daydreaming or watching TV or playing video games, anything rather than engaging with the people around him. He is doing very poorly in school because his mind wanders to places that feel safe, rather than listening and trying to do the work that he is convinced he can't do anyway. The other students leave him alone because he is so withdrawn that they get little reaction from him. His teachers see sadness and confusion in his eyes, but are baffled in how to reach him.

These children have moved in next door, and you have children of your own who are similar in age.

Questions for Discussion

1. As a parent, would you encourage your children to befriend these kids? (Be honest!) What is more important, your own children's protection from these children's dysfunction or reaching out?
2. Would you invite the children to church, knowing they could disrupt your child's Sunday School class? Why do children like this often not succeed in church?
3. You are not a social worker or a psychologist. What do you think you as a neighbour could do to help these children and their foster parents?
4. Matthew 18:5, 10 talks about welcoming little ones as Jesus welcomed them. In what way does that apply to these children? Matthew 25:31ff suggests that our eternal destiny will reflect our response to children like this. Do you think Jesus underestimated the complexities of hurting people? How do our values interfere or assist with being of practical help?

Discussion Three

Paralyzed by What We Know

I am Daniel, a first-year Master's student at the University of Alberta. I am white and grew up in a German Mennonite home. I am here to talk about how I see my Aboriginal neighbours.

I try not to be like my grandpa or my dad: they had some simple notions about work and responsibility they could not overcome when it came to people of another culture like the Aboriginals. They kept saying, "Why can't they go work like anyone else?" "Why do I have to pay taxes so Indians can have a free ride?" "If they would stop getting drunk, they wouldn't be so poor." I have studied cultural anthropology and sociology. I have attended seminars and conferences on Aboriginal economic issues. I even participated in a native spirituality symposium.

I get the complexity. I know there are no easy answers. I understand, for example, that trying to help can often be more harm than help. We Caucasians do not have the answers to Aboriginal questions. I have read the long and sordid history of how the arrival of Europeans in the Americas has been a nightmare for the people who already lived here. I know the way the residential school system tried to destroy Aboriginal identity and dignity. I know their struggles with the present industrial/consumer economy of our society. I have heard Aboriginal peoples' anger at the way they have been victimized by generations of "help." They are a different culture trying to co-exist.

I am keenly aware of the subtle residue of racism in our language and thinking. We have made up labels for these people that have emphasized their status. Whether we are trying to "address the Aboriginal issue" in order to help, or disdain them in stereotypical "redneck" phrases, our assumption that they are somehow less able, or more suspicious, or more dysfunctional, or less trustworthy is communicated clearly to them. I have heard an Aboriginal man say that he always feels inferior to a white person in every encounter. I wish I could resist every hint of racism in my speech.

My Problem

But here is my problem: for all my knowledge and sophistication in these matters, I feel paralyzed in being able to make a difference. Matters are even worse when it comes to faith. I have learned all the myriad

ways in which the Church has been the accomplice, or even the perpetrator, of the subjection of our Aboriginal neighbours.

Jesus, for many of them, is a synonym for white religion. Do they really need me “witnessing” to them and giving them more of what has destroyed them? Is it not time for a “cooling off” era in which we allow our Aboriginal neighbours to discover their own faith so that we can encounter one another as equals at the table of faith? These questions too stoke my paralysis.

Maybe the most dignifying and helpful thing I can do is to simply leave them alone. I will only be more hurt than help.

Questions for Discussion

1. How have you felt the paralysis Daniel describes in your life? What causes us to become paralyzed when responding to our Aboriginal neighbours?
2. How do the social sciences like sociology and anthropology help the Church become a good neighbour? How might it also hinder?
3. An Aboriginal activist might say, “We don’t want your help, your solutions, your ideas, your money. Leave us alone.” What is a Christ-like response?
4. Should white churches seek to plant churches in Aboriginal communities? If so, can you suggest ways that a church like your own could do it without coming across as superior? If not, why not?
5. What does the Church offer the situation between Aboriginals and whites in Canada that the social scientists, social workers and politicians cannot?
6. Can you think of stories in the Scriptures that shed any light on how to move beyond paralysis?



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