

Aboriginal Peoples in Canada

Interview: Ruth Gillingham

In much of the world, people from traditional or tribal religions have readily converted to Christianity (this has been especially true in northern India, northern Burma, and much of sub-Saharan Africa) but for some reason this has not been largely the case for Aboriginal peoples in Canada. For a number of years I worked closely with First Nations peoples through various Salvation Army social services ministries and witnessed firsthand that the original peoples of the land have not readily embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ. With all of our social ministries across Canada where we share the love of Jesus Christ, meet human needs and seek to be a transforming influence in our communities why are there not more First Nations peoples receiving the good news and experiencing the transformation of Jesus Christ?

I believe that the role of the Church in the colonization of Canada and its historical engagement with Aboriginal peoples has served to be an effective deterrent to their conversion. When we recognize that primary cultures, such as the Aboriginal people of Canada, value time through an abundant lens their history of oppression and abuse by the Church is carried with them today. In our culture we view time as limited and what took place in the past is in the past and often forgotten. We do not treasure our historical roots and fail to see how the past is a part of or even relevant to our present context.

A primary example of the Canadian Church's historical evangelistic campaign to the Aboriginal peoples was the residential school system. This was a systematic deconstruction of the Aboriginal family, community and culture and its impact is still felt today. In light of our history it is understandable that it may be difficult for Aboriginal peoples in Canada to embrace the God of the Christian Church. History tells them that it was Christianity that took their children away, abused them physically, emotionally and or sexually, made the overarching judgment that all things Aboriginal were considered to be evil and the list of offenses goes on.

It came to my attention that The Salvation Army has been listed by the Truth and Reconciliation Council of Canada as having participated in this system through a girls home in Prince Rupert, B.C. called the Kanata All Girls Residential School. (see <http://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/FULL%20List%20of%20Schools-%20ENGLISH.pdf>) We also aligned ourselves with a governmental system that sought to annihilate the First Nations culture. Rather than being a prophetic voice crying out against the oppression of this community we were aligned with the social culture of the day and our apathy and indifference contributed to the oppression of Aboriginal peoples.

Soong-Chan Rah, in his book *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* encourages the church to examine her history of hostility between the races, lament this broken history and work towards reconciling these relationships through understanding and affirming others and their cultures. The Salvation Army took a big step in this process last summer as we partnered with Indigenous Pathways to host a Celebration of Culture: A Journey of Reconciliation at Pine Lake Camp in the Alberta and Northern Territories. The gathering was "designed to give Indigenous Salvationists and Christians from other churches the opportunity to

express their faith through cultural traditions. The three day event was a means of educating non-Indigenous delegates in Indigenous culture, values and worldview.”¹ Another Pow Wow is planned for the summer of 2018 at Pine Lake Camp and the journey of reconciliation will continue to be explored together. It is my hope that as we continue down this road of reconciliation, hearing the stories of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, learning from them and experiencing their rich culture, we will learn ways to effectively reach out in our social services ministries sharing a love of Jesus that truly meets Aboriginal Canadian’s needs and serves to journey with them as we are both transformed.

¹ <https://salvationist.ca/articles/salvation-army-sponsors-public-pow-wow-at-pine-lake-camp/>. Accessed March 23, 2018.