

A Concept Paper on Indigenous Governance

Introduction

This paper is written to serve the Indigenous Peoples of the Anglican Church of Canada as they enter an important and critical conversation about governance issues. It is our hope that this conversation will help us meet the challenges and opportunities of the new day that has dawned upon us through the development of Area Missions and the passage of Canon XXII. Further, we hope that this first step will help us relate our discussion of governance to the spiritual and theological concepts that have guided our spiritual movement in recent years and, at the same time, provide a way to connect these matters to the hopes of our Peoples for renewal and restoration.

Issues of governance are often said to be technical, straightforward, and unexciting. On the contrary, in this discussion we are hearing the call of God to stand in the freedom that is promised us in Christ (Gal. 5:1). This call presents us with a number of critical challenges and opportunities. At a different level, they offer the same to the rest of the Anglican Church of Canada. It is our prayer that we may walk forward together. After this paper is reviewed by the Governance Task Force and The Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples, it will be passed on to the rest of the Church through the appropriate channels of authority.

(see the solemn declaration with the Pinawa Declaration)

The Nature of our Call

We have chosen a path, or perhaps it has chosen us, to find fulfillment in the spiritual calling that we have received in Christ. Our goal is not political freedom but the freedom of becoming what God has meant us to be. In this, we are welcoming the Living Word that is

creating us ever new. Our desire is that this Word will become flesh among us - dwelling among us; we pray that the Word will become living and real for our peoples, our nations, our communities, our clans, our families, and our hearts. This hope is not a political claim; in faith we believe it is our destiny in Christ.

The General Synods of 2007 and 2010 responded to our spiritual movement by endorsing, first, a National Indigenous Anglican Bishop (NIAB), as called for by the Pinawa Sacred Circle of 2005, and, second, enacting Canon XXII, which recognizes the NIAB, the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples (ACIP), and the Anglican Indigenous Sacred Circle as constituent parts of the Anglican Church of Canada. Most Indigenous Peoples see these acts at a deeper level of meaning than might be apparent to others. These acts are seen by Indigenous Peoples as recognition by church institutions of their God-given authority. In this way, the Church admits the right and duty of Indigenous Peoples, in Christ, to receive, embodied in their own culture, languages, and patterns of life, the fullness of the life and faith of the holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Through these things, the Church finally acknowledges that there were peoples and civilizations present here when the Europeans and their churches landed upon Turtle Island. Further, the Church accepts that there is a claim of Truth in the life and survival of the First Nations, Inuit and Metis people: though other peoples and civilizations have become a part of this Land, the First Peoples have a reserved right to be themselves, to follow their own way of life and to develop as Indigenous Nations with the same honour, respect and dignity as all others in the Canadian family of Nations.

The embodiment of the Living Word of God in our cultures and institutions is a right, privilege, and responsibility that the Gospel grants Indigenous Peoples to share with every

family, language, people, and nation. We claim no separate or special rights in the application of this matter to our own circumstances. We have shown respect for the cultures, customs, and structures of governance that colonial occupation has imposed upon us. We do not seek to alter them in their application to the other cultural communities that exist in the Anglican Church of Canada. What we do seek is the full capacity to be the church in our own homelands and among our own peoples, wherever they may be. We wish to be a church that is structured by our own understanding of what it means to be nations and peoples; that is, to be governed in Christ by the apostolic Tradition of the catholic Church, embodied and adapted to our Peoples and their cultures. We do not have any desire to rule the Traditions or to modify in anyway the Word of God as we have received it. What we seek is the embodiment and rule of that Tradition and the Word in our own context, our own languages, and our own ways of life (see Article XXXIV of the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion). The often desperate circumstance of our people demands nothing less.

We have endeavored to listen to, interpret, and learn the canonical traditions of the Church. We have also accommodated our practices, as much as is possible, to the pattern we have received from the church. In the development of the position of a National Indigenous Anglican Bishop and, later, in the development of the Area Missions we have achieved something that was once seen as impossible: the expression of Indigenous identity, culture, and spiritual geography within a framework that affirmed the Anglican Church of Canada's understanding of jurisdiction. This means that we did not take away from the authority of the bishops or the common ways of ordering the Anglican Church of Canada; we were able to affirm the old even as we reached for the new.

The Way Forward

At this point, we must reach for more. Continuing on our journey of spiritual renewal with the rest of the Anglican Church of Canada, we seek an accommodation to our distinctive ways of being a people and our living relationship with the Land. Though we have respected the colonial borders the Church and government has imposed upon us, they have often wounded our sense of relationship to each other and to the Land.

We are told that in earlier times there were other expressions of the Church that followed patterns that are similar to ours. The Celtic churches, for example, were thoroughly Christian, but did not necessarily follow the more formal and strict mapping that was common in other expressions of Christian faith. Their pattern of relating to Bishop, People, and Land appears similar to our cultural ways. Like the reports we have heard about them, we stay related to each other in ways that defy attempts to map them in any formal and settled way.

In noting our different understanding of borders, we do not propose to overrule the borders that colonization has created. We are, on the contrary, asking for a godly accommodation and recognition to our different forms of culture and peoplehood. This type of mutual recognition is similar to what we find in the relationship of Paul to Peter, of Gentile to Jew, in the Letter to the Galatians. The validity and authority of these very different cultures and very different ways of being church was able to find a shared home in the oneness of Christ's Church. They knew that each in their own cultural path could be faithful to God and remain one in the Body of Christ.

In recent years, our desire to follow our own patterns of relationship and geography was interpreted as a desire to become a “non-geographical” entity within the church. The borders of colonization, appearing to Indigenous Peoples to be fairly arbitrary and only indirectly geographical, are not what define the dimensions of Indigenous cultural and political life. What we look for is a way to honour both ways - our understanding of aboriginal territories and the Anglican Church’s sense of borders shaped by Western law and culture.

In practical terms, these accommodations will need to be worked out at local and regional levels with and under the authority of our Church. There are many ways that this can be accomplished. We imagine that this will require a lot of innovation and quite a few experiments along the way to making this a reality among us. A dialogue between Indigenous Peoples and local bishops and other church leaders will be necessary. Together we will find the accommodations that will allow us to acknowledge that lawful and wholesome growth of a Church within the culture and way of life of the People of the Land.

Our Next Steps

We hope that it will be seen that what is needed is more than a simple translation of the former structure of the Anglican Church to an Indigenous context. Indigenous Peoples must stand in what God has called us to be in our own way of life and in our own future, as it unfolds in God. We cannot settle for anything less. We now must enter into conversations with our own people and with the rest of the church. These conversations must be held in light of understanding of the church we are called to become, shaped by the mission that God has

called us to live – to be a Church of living hope in the midst of much pain, oppression, and despair.

Our future discussion will include consideration of urban areas, the relationship of the NIAB and Indigenous Area Bishops to Indigenous Peoples in other areas and under other jurisdictions. These are not going to be easy matters and involve, as we have discussed above, very different ways of seeing things and doing things. We believe that now is the time to begin these discussions in earnest. We also believe that we should proceed with deliberate speed to enact our mutual understandings in Covenant at diocesan, provincial, and national levels of governance.

We will gather at the end of April to give more shape to these matters, including a fuller description of the elements of Canon XXII. Though we expect definite guidance in the consultation on governance, we don't expect it to be the end of the matter. Beginning with the distribution of this draft concept paper, we will have an on-going conversation about what it means to be the Church in our various contexts.

Prepared by Mark MacDonald, National Indigenous Anglican Bishop at the request of the ACIP Governance Working Group, and revised by the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples at their February 2011 Meeting in Toronto.