

**The Road to Warm Springs**  
The National Consultation on Indigenous Anglican Self-Determination  
Anglican Church of Canada  
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Transcript: Ministry Moment from the Rev. Chris Harper,  
Indigenous Native Priest for the Diocese of Toronto

*More information including a video of this Ministry Moment at  
[www.anglican.ca/roadtowarmsprings](http://www.anglican.ca/roadtowarmsprings)*

Chris Harper:

As I was getting set up and ready, I noticed the deer over my right shoulder, in the back there by the trees. And I was thinking about all the deer that I used to see on my ministry in Saskatchewan as I traveled from place to church to church and, you know, all I could think was "This is my father's world."

And ... But I thought we'd try something a little bit -- well that seems it works better ... *Sweet By and By*—does everyone know that?

(singing)

There's a land that is fairer than day,  
and by faith we can see it afar;  
for the Father waits over the way  
to prepare us a dwelling place there.

-- If you know it sing it

(singing)

In the sweet by and by,  
we shall meet on that beautiful shore;  
in the sweet by and by,  
we shall meet on that beautiful shore.

We shall sing on that beautiful shore  
the melodious songs of the blest,  
and our spirits shall sorrow no more,  
not a sigh for the blessing of rest.

Here's your part:

(singing)

In the sweet by and by,  
we shall meet on that beautiful shore;  
in the sweet by and by,  
we shall meet on that beautiful shore.

To our bountiful Father above,  
we will offer our tribute of praise  
for the glorious gift of His love,  
and the blessings that hallow our days.

Here's your part again:

(crowd singing)

In the sweet by and by,  
we shall meet on that beautiful shore;  
in the sweet by and by,  
we shall meet on that beautiful shore.

Chris Harper:

Beautiful. I've been asked to share a ministry moment, and I'm starting my stopwatch. And, now.

I want to say ... Because we just had our group moment, that my story is no better or bigger than yours. And my journey is no better, or challenged as yours. But it is and indeed a great honor to say a few words with you today. I am, and have been called to be the Indigenous Native Priest for the diocese of Toronto; a title that I've taken on which seems to have a double repetition there and a lot of people ask me about, "Why? Indigenous, native, isn't it the same thing?" And I said, "Well, I put it that way because number one: it makes you ask. It makes you talk." And so, I play with words a little bit.

But as the Indigenous Native Priest I have to say that I have been given a great blessing by Bishop Colin, to allow me to be who and what I am for the first time in my life. I've walked two paths, you might as well say, indigenous and non-indigenous, and as a priest and as—at the same time with traditional knowledge in the back. And, I think one of the most amazing things in this journey is that I've been blessed to be able to walk with a lot of wonderful people. And, at the same time, learn from a lot of wonderful people. And each and every one of the people

that I've journeyed with have shared a story, and their story became part of me. And that most amazing part of that story that is shared is that we are all blessed in the sharing. And I think that's important for us as ministers, and as people of the church, to understand; that the story is shared. The story that we are given is important, and is a blessing to all.

As the Indigenous Native Priest for the diocese of Toronto, I am incredibly honored to be able to see the diversity of life and humanity. Coming from ... As I have lived on the reserve, and as at the same time I live in the city now, I get to see, and I don't know if you know anything about the transit system in Toronto—the TTC. I love to travel the TTC. Number one: I see the real humanity. I see people. I see people with stories, and I see people's stories in their eyes. Some people, incredibly sad; some people, broken. Some happy, some way too happy if you know what I mean. And in all that journey—some people have been there right?

But in all of this I see the most amazing stories and I loved—I would love just the opportunity but it absolutely freaks people out when you sit beside them and say, "Tell me about your day. Tell me how you're doing." And you know, then I try to explain at the same time, "That's alright, don't freak out. I'm a priest." That works sometimes too.

But the challenge is, is to hear the stories. To hear the stories of the absolutely everybody. And, as a past parish priest, as I've worked in the parishes themselves, I learned that there is a cap—an encapsulating capsule that you're put into—a bubble that you're put into in the parish ministry. And you have to answer to the wardens, to the parish team leadership board, and you have to the various committees, and at the same time, to the archdeacon, and then finally, to the bishop. Bishop Colin can be sort of a great, wide and wondrous latitude and angle that I've been able to go to. And it's one of the most-scariest things for absolutely for me, when he handed me a blank sheet and says, "You're going to have to draw your own duties, and, at the same time, your own job description." And I thought, "Now, whoa, whoa, that's scary." Because I've always been told who and what I'm supposed to be.

As I've discovered, as I walked down on the streets, and be with people and everything else like that, you have to put on a different uniform. And that is one with my hair, for the first time in over ... Well, when I was a little kid, I got my first haircut. I think it was when I was about ten and I had braids down to here. And it was traumatic for me when I had my hair cut and it was right to a brush cut. And everyone loves the brush cuts in those days, right? And it was traumatic for me, and so I've, In all my life I've never been able to grow my hair.

And then so when we moved from Thunder Bay, my last parish ministry, into Toronto—into the diocese of Toronto, my wife conveniently lost her haircutting scissors and shears. And she's the only one that has cut my hair for the last thirty-eight to thirty-nine years of our marriage. And so she said, "We'll just let your hair grow." And so it's been growing for a year and this is how long it's gotten. But it's also become part of my uniform. Because now when I walk down on the streets and everything else like that, I look like everybody. And they're not afraid to approach me, but at the same time, still walking the two paths, I see the difference between both the traditional people's views—the word—and they challenge me with the words of appropriation, co-opting our traditionalism of rights and everything else, to the other side of the Christian, and where they throw the 'isms' at me: parallelism, sacredism, animism, pantheism, all the other intellectual words, and they throw that at me, and so I'm being in battle

from both sides, and from both trails. And the challenge is, that it's, to try to reach out to both sides, and to welcome them to onto the bridge of peace.

So that's the new mandate, if you will; the model that I've embraced. And which basically says that I stand on the bridge of peace, welcoming both sides from both—you know, both traditional and at the same time, Christian—you know what, it's interchangeable on this side but—you know both in trying to be of who we are, and especially in the city of Toronto, I meet with people, who have never been on a reserve. These are indigenous people who have never lived on a reserve, and who are trying to find their identities. They're trying to find, also, their spirituality. And that means sometimes being able to find a new way to speak to them and identify and relate with them.

To do this, has brought me into this wondrous world of walking in two worlds and at the same time, trying to bridge both sides, to bring peace. I find as I do my talks and discussions in the churches, I find very many questions about exactly who the indigenous people are. And Bishop Colin has sent out a request that all churches start to embrace this new thought of the 94 Calls to Action, and see what it can mean for their parish.

And so some people have taken it on; they've taken it on very seriously. Others have just—you know, they've put it off for now and they say, "Well, we don't do it because we don't have indigenous people in our area." And I go, "Really? My goodness, we're everywhere." And so I ask them, I said, "Have you really looked? Have you asked? Have you sought out?" I said, "Because we are indigenous people we're very good at hiding." I try to ease things too with humor.

But the tensions are always there, and especially within the parishes themselves to try to find what exactly the whole ministry of indigenous ministry means, and how it can relate to the wider church. Some are threatened, because they see it as the death knell of the church for their church. Because things are going to have to change now. And others have been very forth and outright with me and they said, "Well, you know, us indigenous peoples, why don't you just get on with it? We've been talking about it; we've been in regret and apologies and sorrowful for now, for too many years, too many years. Let's just get on with it and get it over and done with." And my simple response is simply, "Well, it's taken how many years to get us into this situation? It's not going to be tomorrow that you get us out again."

So, we have to walk the journey together. It's a journey of two sides, both traditional, and at the same time, Christian. They're side by side, thank goodness. Every once in a while, they get a little bit of wide gulf between the two, and I have to really stretch to try and balance myself in both worlds. But at the same time, the challenge is that we can do it together. There's somewhere in there that it can actually combine. There's somewhere in there, there's moments in time when it can actually combine, and it makes sense. It makes balance, and it speaks to both worlds. To the people that are in the urban situation, especially in urban settings and trying to find their 'Indian-ness' in all of this. Because they've lost who they are. They have no language, they have no—other than they have, you know, brown skin and dark hair. And they know that somewhere down the line there is, as everyone always tells me, they have an Indian princess as a grandmother. We all have, don't we?

But the serious part of it is, is that we are a treaty people. I love that saying. And that means us coming together. We have to find commonalities in language. We have to find commonalities in our theology, our spirituality. But to do that, means that somebody has to stand on that bridge, reaching out to both sides, and say it's time for healing. The church is broken, in pain. And it has the suffering within it. And same with the indigenous people. You cannot live in anger. You cannot live healthy in regret, and fear. It's time for healing. And that means that there needs to be more ministry in the urban setting.

I follow in the great footsteps—the grand, huge, scary footsteps—of Reverend Andrew Wesley. That's why I have great respect for Esther, because I know what she's gone through, with my brother Andrew. And how he has blazed the trail for me. And now the challenge that I take is I take that very same ministry, and I take it out to both sides. I have been yelled at. I have been sworn at. I have been challenged and threatened from both sides. I can honestly say about seven months ago—and this is my funny story—that I was 'street-blessed'. I was 'street-baptized' on the streets of Toronto. Which means I was spat on. And as I'm going, "Yeah, okay, there we go. Now we got that out of the way ..."

But as you get the same reaction within the church too. Where there is such a threat to the body of the church. That they're afraid of me, and at the same time, the message that I bring. The hope and promise is, for us, to take the invitation. And as I try to stand in the middle of that bridge of peace, welcoming both sides, "Come. There's room for healing for all. And indeed, the Lord and Savior, there is enough room for us all."

Finally, I close with this. I close with this. I was invited to do an inter-cultural inter-faith gathering. And to do the opening smudge, the opening prayer. Which I, you know, wonderfully relished in, because I got to see absolutely everything. I don't know if you've ever seen Sufi dance—the whirl-ish dervish dancers? That amazing! I thought, "How do you not fall over?" But anyway, I got to see that, I got to see all the different types of worship, you know, everything from the Buddhists to. On and on and on. It was marvelous. And in there, I did, and I said these words. And I said, "As an indigenous man, I welcome you. As of the First Nations, I welcome all of you. I welcome you to Canada. Kanata, our land. Our village. Our home. I welcome you. I welcome you because you are children of the Creator. You are my relations. And as my relations, you come from all places, granted, but you are all under one sky. You breathe the same air as I do. And you stand now upon the same land. And I welcome you."

"There's room, because Canada is wide and expansive. Not expensive, unless you live in Toronto, but expansive. There's room for us all, and I welcome you." And I said a prayer. And at the very end, at the very end, a man came up. He said, "I want to thank you." He says, "I come from Bosnia, me and my family." And he said, "I have never been welcomed before."

"I've never been welcomed before." And he said, "I want to thank you, because now you made Canada my home now too." And I felt way up there. And I saw, and he says, "And I have to shake your hand." And I shook his hand, and I said, "Welcome."

And then, at the very end he says, "And now I can tell everybody back in Bosnia I shook the hand of a true Indian." There's great highs and lows; there truly is.

But I do—I welcome all of you, for your journey, and your story. I honor you, and hopefully you will honor me, and at the same time, share your story with me. Because it's in the sharing that we grow, and that we are blessed.

[inaudible 00:19:06], Amen.