



# PROGRESS AFTER 400 YEARS

Terry LeBlanc, Mi'kmaq/Acadian

**F**our hundred years ago on June 24, Chief Henri Membertou, along with 20-33 other Mi'kmaq tribal members, was baptized into the French Jesuit faith. The monument marking this historic occasion stands today on the Listuguj reserve in the Gaspé peninsula of the province of Quebec, Canada. Unfortunately, though the marker is real, the events it commemorates are remote to the contemporary experience of the vast majority of Mi'kmaq people.

The reality for many today is that Membertou's baptism is simply a historic memory. It has become so negatively colored by the last 150 years of Christian work that many call its very occurrence into question; some even vigorously dispute it in revisionist fashion. That a Sagamou (Chief) of Membertou's status would embrace Christianity—and his family with him—is alien to the experience of most Mi'kmaq today. In the face of the growing self-awareness of Native people of their historic cultures and religious traditions, the Church could easily become irrelevant.

The North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies (NAIITS) was founded in the belief that without significant change, the North American Christian church would continue to ignore Native North American peoples and their cultures in yet another, albeit this time mostly unintentional, effort at assimilation into mainstream Christianity. To introduce needed change, NAIITS emphasizes the inclusion of indigenous culture and worldview(s) in training future indigenous leaders.

Many paths have converged within NAIITS to create a roadway of scholarly inquiry and instruction—one that is rooted in an extensive personal and collective praxis of ministry and mission.

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During the period since our early formation we have come to affirm the words of fellow Native scholar, Taiaiake Alfred, who asks and answers what has been a pressing question for our community:

What is "Indigenizing the academy?" To me, it means that we are working to change universities so that...our people are respected in, and hopefully even integrated into, the larger system of structures and processes that make up the university itself.

In the ten years NAIITS has been in existence, its growing team of practitioners and academics has undertaken the intentional development of Native North American scholarship in the areas of theology, biblical studies and mission.

During this period, NAIITS has hosted seven symposiums focusing on Na-

tive North American theological and missional issues; it has published six volumes of what has become an annual journal, featuring the presentations and papers of each symposium; and it has facilitated the publication of Native authors in various mainstream missiological and theological publications.

Beginning in its relationship with Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky, NAIITS has developed

or is in the process of developing working relationships and partnerships for graduate and post-graduate study with a number of institutions in Canada, the USA and Europe. As a result of this intentionality, the NAIITS community has recently graduated students with PhDs and one with a DMin. We have students in current doctoral



Historic document signing solemnized with a traditional pipe ceremony

training, and there will be almost a score of students in graduate study this fall. In the history of advanced training of Native people within the traditions of the Church, from which its founders have come, this represents an unparalleled achievement. Simply put, what NAIITS is doing works!

Previous attempts to train pastors and educators from among First Nations people met with very limited success. These attempts focused on things external to, things foreign to, the way of being and thinking of Indigenous people, introducing us to conflicting feelings and attitudes about education in general and theological training in particular. Anti-intellectualism rooted itself into many of our peoples' thinking. As Roberto Dansie describes it, "The more they were exposed to formal education, the further they got from themselves." Taiaiake Alfred says it another way: "The whole of the decolonization process will have been for nothing if Indigenous education has no meaningful Indigenous character."

There are three shifts we are trying to make in hopes of providing an environment that is conducive to developing Native leadership within the wider Church. The first shift is found in a rediscovery of the story. Story addresses the issues with which people are actually dealing. At the same time, it creates confidence in the way narrative works, with which one does not lapse into a revived pharisaic attitude intent on building fences, one truth on another. Good fences, it turns out, do not make good neighbors, only placated or enslaved ones. Thus, there is a need to embrace the source of theology, our Indigenous spirituality and the gospel story. It is a story that is inclusive of Native people—as they are! Sitting Bull observed correctly,

"If the Great Spirit had desired me to be a white man, He would have made me so in the first place. It is not necessary for eagles to be crows."

Theology must happen on the margins, engaging students by resurrecting dialogical learning as they do theology.

The second shift moves us away from theology as the realm of experts to something that the common people understand, taking ownership over its transmissibility. This encourages the community to learn discernment so as to pass on the story to subsequent generations. We are therefore making an intentional shift away from institutionalization, seeking instead to use the institution to give its legislated authority to the moral authority already granted by communities to their respective leaders.

Furthermore, the learning environment is being

A HISTORIC AGREEMENT WAS ENTERED INTO ON JUNE 12, 2010 BETWEEN THE NORTH AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR INDIGENOUS THEOLOGICAL STUDIES (NAIITS) AND GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY AT NEWBERG, OREGON. THE AGREEMENT MARKS THE BEGINNING OF A NEW TYPE OF PARTNERSHIP AND IS THE REALIZATION OF A LONG-STANDING HOPE FOR A NEW WAY TO PROVIDE THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION FOR NATIVE NORTH AMERICANS.

expanded to include a re-appropriation of the ethics and practices of orality. This will not downplay the importance of literacy, but by reviving orality, or dare we say a hybrid of the oral and textual, we seek to build communities of unity instead of extreme individualism and isolation.

The third and final shift we are making is to move from a position of isolation to one of community and communication. The Westernization of our communities has had many negative effects. But instead of trying to co-opt Western methods, which as Paulo Freire makes clear, often lead to harsher impositions of Western standards than the West would make itself, we are attempting to create a learning community that intersects with the cultural community of the learner.

This means that we seek not to isolate the instructor from the learner's community. The instructor travels to the place of the learner and vice versa. This makes the task more likely to impact the learner in a significant way. Rather than attempting to entice them out of their life experience, teach them a new life experience and then inject them back into their community, we encourage the context to become part of the learning process and therefore a more likely part of the transformed life experience.

NAIITS is both reactive and proactive. It is envisaged as a transitional, and hopefully, transformational approach. It is reactive in that we are moving to help our people transition from a colonial experience through a post-colonial experience of the world of knowledge and wisdom. It is proactive in that we are seeking to move past de-colonization to fan the flames of Indigenous thought so that the Church might be enriched through a reinvigorated Indigenous knowledge context.

We are attempting to build upon the existing strengths of both western academic tradition and Aboriginal heritage. For the Aboriginal community, adaptation is life's byword. What's most challenging in all of this is the inherent difficulty for Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people alike to believe that education that occurs in a local context—one lacking facilities and history—can carry the same prestige as that gained in a place which has significant infrastructure and history. But we are making progress.

Welalin (Thank you)! 🌐