

The Story of Indigenous Ministry in Alberta: *A study on the relationship between the evangelical church* *and the first peoples of Canada*



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ABSTRACT: *This essay provides a brief summary of a project on the history of the actions and changing philosophies of the evangelical church in their relationship with Indigenous peoples in Alberta. An overview of the original project's research design is provided, followed by three main sections. First is a broad historical overview of the relationship between the evangelical Church and Indigenous people, beginning with the first contact by European settlers in the 18th century. This is followed by a short section on changing philosophies of missions work with Indigenous peoples within the Euro-Canadian church. Finally, a summary of the main philosophical and cultural debates currently and historically taking place within the context of Indigenous ministry is included. The purpose of these discussions is to equip readers, particularly Christians, with a better understanding of the complicated context of the Church's ministry actions towards Indigenous people in Alberta.*²

KEYWORDS: *Indigenous ministry, Indigenous peoples, Indigenous Christians, Indigenous church, First Nations, First Nations ministry, Evangelism, Church history, Evangelical history, Alberta history, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Contextualization*

The relationship between the Church and Indigenous peoples in what we now call Canada has a long and storied history. At one point in the late 20th century, Canadian evangelical Christians were passionate about sharing the Gospel with their Indigenous neighbours. However, in the era of social justice, post-Christianity, contextualization, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, ministry is more complicated than it once seemed. Christians find themselves second guessing age-old philosophies and models of ministry that once seemed sure, and, in the face of passionate voices that critique and challenge the Church from inside and out, find themselves uncertain how to proceed.

In 2020, Vanguard College Library began a project to create a digital heritage collection on the topic of Indigenous ministry. With further funding, this heritage project evolved into a full qualitative research study that aimed to answer the question, "What is the story of Indigenous ministry in Alberta?" The project is available in full online, but a version has been converted into an article here, summarizing some of the findings from the study. To read the whole story and view databases with ministry contacts, practical resources, and research information, visit <https://www.thesimaproject.ca/>

This essay provides a brief summary on the history of the actions and changing philosophies of the evangelical church in their relationship with Indigenous peoples in Alberta. An overview of the original project's research design is provided, followed by three main sections. First is a broad historical overview of the relationship between the evangelical Church and Indigenous people, beginning with the first

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² Note: This article has been adapted from a larger work by the same author previously published on www.thesimaproject.ca/. Minor adjustments have been made to suit the article better for shorter length. The full context of the study is available to read on the project site



contact by European settlers in the 18th century. This is followed by a short section on changing philosophies of missions work with Indigenous peoples within the Euro-Canadian church. Finally, a summary of the main philosophical and cultural debates currently and historically taking place within the context of Indigenous ministry is included. The purpose of these discussions is to equip readers, particularly Christians, with a better understanding of the complicated context of the Church's ministry actions towards Indigenous people in Alberta.

Research Design Overview³

The purpose of the "The Story of Indigenous Ministry in Alberta (SIMA) Project" was to create a thorough and foundational knowledge repository that enables users to understand and connect with SIMA. The research methodology is qualitative research, using narrative analysis, and involves the collection of stories, documents, and other records of personal experience to help construct an understanding of SIMA both past and present. Data collection methods include 1) semi-structured interviews using snowball sampling (18 in total), 2) literature survey of websites, books, articles, and archives, and 3) document collection of digital resources and objects. The scope of the project includes para-church ministries intended for Indigenous individuals in Alberta within the evangelical Protestant tradition, and loosely limited to the last 100 years while prioritizing historical information connected to currently operating ministries.

Project partnerships/funding includes Vanguard College Library, Family and Community Twining Society (FACTS), Young Canada Works in Heritage Organizations, and Canada Summer Jobs. This project is jointly owned by Vanguard College and FACTS. Funding for the project came from the government of Canada, primarily through Young Canada Works in Heritage Organizations.

Information gleaned from literature and other historical sources has been cited appropriately. However, a large portion of the information included in this essay was generated directly from research interviews. This information is not cited, in line with APA citation guidelines which state that original research findings within a study should not be cited as it is assumed the knowledge was generated by the research methods. Instead, anonymity of research participants has been protected, except when the participant provided explicit permission to be cited by name. In some cases, examples have been constructed from multiple accounts.

An unfortunately common mistake made in historical research is for members of the dominant social group to tell the history of other minority groups, instead of letting individuals from these groups speak for themselves. This project has made every effort to include Indigenous perspectives, but it has intentionally limited its scope to only the history of the Euro-Canadian evangelical church in order to avoid telling the stories of others. As a result, only the history, philosophy, and culture of the Euro-Canadian evangelical church, insofar as it interacts with the Indigenous church, is included in this article. For more resources on Indigenous Christian culture and history, see the SIMA Project annotated bibliography here: <https://www.thesimaproject.ca/collections/books>

A Historical Overview of Indigenous Ministry in Alberta

Due to Alberta's far distance from the first European settlements in the East and the South, it was one of the last areas to be reached by European explorers, with first contact occurring in 1754 (Berry & Brink, 2004, p. 26). In the early period of contact, the settlers had a commercial relationship with the First Nations, and they saw Indigenous peoples as potential allies or trading partners (Government of Canada, 2017, Part 3). However, once the settler population grew enough to outnumber the Indigenous peoples and began demanding more land, the settlers' regard of the Indigenous peoples began to change (Government of Canada, 2017, Part 3). The settlers viewed the First Nations people as dependants, and as inferior to the more "civilized" and Christian European society (Government of Canada, 2017, Part 4). They eventually

³ A more detailed project methodology can be found at <https://www.thesimaproject.ca/about/research-methodology>

made this attitude into policy and began a program of assimilation that would be the central tenet of Indian legislation for the next 150 years (Government of Canada, 2017, Part 4).

Unfortunately, the church was a driving force in this assimilation program as they desired to see the First Nations people assimilated into their Christian Kingdom (Government of Canada, 2017, Part 4). The first Christian missionaries arrived in Alberta in the 1840s (Palmer, 1990, p. 3), and ministry by the Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Catholic missionaries began. In keeping with the attitudes of the time, the main mission activity was the residential school program, which sought to assimilate Indigenous children into European society. In the late 1800s, Treaties 6, 7, and 8, comprising most of the territory of Alberta, were signed between the First Nations and the Crown. Around the same time, the buffalo died out, and the Plains First Nations were left disenfranchised of their livelihood. According to Ray Aldred, a leader in the Indigenous church, efforts at forced assimilation began to increase in the early 1900s when the residential school system came into full swing. By the end of the century, the abuses of the residential school system, the forced assimilation at the hands of the church, and other adversity the First Nations were experiencing, led to Indigenous Christians who had come to faith in the 1800s stepping away from the church.

In the early 1900s, while the mainline Protestant denominations continued on with their work in the Residential schools, a new player entered the field: evangelicalism. These denominations arrived too late to participate in running the Residential schools, so their ministry took a different form, primarily that of missionary sending organizations. In fact, the height of Indigenous ministry operations in the evangelical church seems to have taken place between 1950 and 1990 through these missionary organizations. During this period, Euro-Canadian evangelical Christians “had a heart for the Indians,” seeing them as a needy people group who needed to be saved. The goal of these organizations was to plant and establish European-style churches, and they often viewed Indigenous culture as demonic, something that Indigenous people needed to be delivered out of.

After the second world war, the Canadian government began reevaluating their residential school system. In 1946, a special parliamentary committee first examined the impacts of the government’s policies of assimilation and their negative effects on First Nations people (Government of Canada, 2017, Part 5). Although changes were slow coming, the government of Canada began changing their Indian legislation throughout the latter half of the century, including changes to the educational system that saw the residential schools shut down by the end of the century (Government of Canada, 2017, Part 6). In the early 2000s, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was launched, which investigated the impacts of the Residential School system, and proposed a way forward of reconciliation between the Indigenous peoples of Canada and the groups that had oppressed them, including both the government and the church. In addition, in the ’80s and ’90s Indigenous Christians began questioning the prevailing assumption that adopting Christian faith required Indigenous believers to reject their own culture, which was understood to be inherently demonic, and to fit into Euro-Canadian culture, which was understood to be inherently righteous (Leblanc & Leblanc, 2011, p. 88). This led to the development of the modern day “contextualization movement,” which pushes churches to foster culturally Indigenous expressions of Christianity, and to commit to the decolonization of Christianity.

As the Catholic church and the mainline Protestant denominations were the ones specifically addressed by the TRC, they are the denominations that have most actively participated in the TRC’s Calls to Action. As a result, their methods and philosophies of ministry have changed from that of the 1800s and 1900s. Now, most of these denominations have specialized initiatives meant to foster reconciliation and empower Indigenous peoples to fully participate in the church as equals.

Because they were not involved in running the residential schools and were not party to the Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the evangelical denominations largely have not been active participants with the Calls to Action. However, their methods and approaches to ministry are changing as well, influenced by the ripples the TRC has created in society. Although evangelical denominations experienced a height of Indigenous ministry in the late 1900s, this fervour waned as the century came to a close. In the last 50 years, we have seen an encouraging number of evangelical ministry organizations and initiatives led by Indigenous people themselves, in tandem with the growth of the contextualization

movement. Unfortunately, the issue of contextualization and the task of responding to the TRC are highly controversial in evangelical circles, and have led to hesitancy and disunity within the Euro-Canadian evangelical Indigenous ministry community.

Increasingly, “Indigenous ministry” is becoming something not done “to” Indigenous peoples, but “by” Indigenous peoples. Indigenous church leader Ray Aldred explains that in the early 1900s, oppression and efforts at forced assimilation increased and led to Indigenous Christians stepping away from the traditional Euro-Canadian church. However, he continues that in the ’70s, Indigenous Christians themselves then began founding churches and leading their own Christian communities. According to Aldred, “this Indigenous-led ministry had always been in the background, but now it came into the foreground.” With the realization of the contextualism movement in the ’80s and its current flourishing today, it is increasingly being seen that Indigenous peoples are able, willing, and eager to make their Christian faith their own through an expression that is distinct—though not entirely unattached—from that of the Euro-Canadian church.

As this understanding comes more into acceptance, the evangelical Indigenous ministries that still remain find themselves reevaluating their models of ministry, and moving towards an understanding that emphasizes the value of Indigenous perspectives and Indigenous leadership. With this comes a contentious debate that revolves around the issues of contextualization, syncretism, and the decolonization of Christianity. However, more than ever, this debate and other conversations in Indigenous ministry are being led by Indigenous people themselves, as equal brothers and sisters in Christ who have valuable contributions to make to the body of ministry being offered by the church.

A Changing Philosophy

In Alberta, most of the evangelical church’s involvement in Indigenous ministry has been conducted within the context of missionary para-church organizations. These organizations were most active between 1950 and 1990, but a few still operate today. The purpose of these organizations was to equip Christians, mainly from the Euro-Canadian church, to travel to remote Indigenous communities and share the gospel. They usually accomplished this by establishing European-style churches, which were often not adopted or continued by the local communities after the original missionaries left the area. The methods of these organizations are criticized today by Indigenous Christians, who argue that they were based on getting Indigenous communities to adopt Western models of religion and culture, and were not appropriate or effective models of ministry. However, staff involved in these organizations point out that the current presence of Christianity among Indigenous peoples, with whom the gospel had not been available to before contact with Christians, must be attributed in some way to the work of missionaries and missionary organizations.

A change is taking place in missions-based Indigenous ministry. In the past, Indigenous ministry was largely built upon a philosophy of doing ministry to “save” Indigenous peoples by planting Western-style churches. However, today many of the still-operating missionary organizations interviewed communicated that they were beginning to question these philosophies. This reflectiveness coincides, not coincidentally, with the age of the TRC, which has asked the church to engage in reconciliation. As the Euro-Canadian church has slowly begun the process of reflection on mistakes made and harms inflicted in the past, it is also trading out the institutions that defined its ministry models. Appearing in their place are organizations like NAIITS (formerly the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies), which represent the new model of Indigenous ministry wherein Indigenous people lead their own ministry and articulate their own, unique expression of Christian faith. Indeed, the very people reached by the older model of Indigenous ministry, flawed as it was, are the ones now reforming and breathing life into the field.

This transition has been far from simple or smooth, especially due to the fact that the process of addressing past mistakes and reevaluating forms of ministry is closely tied to controversial contemporary issues. For instance, institutions such as NAIITS have been criticized by certain sectors for going too far in their efforts to establish Christian faith within the Indigenous context, straying into compromise or even

syncretism. Although many research participants articulated an attitude of reevaluation regarding issues like contextualization, many others did not. Instead, other participants articulated a concern that the contextualization movement and similar thinking was leading churches astray. Furthermore, Indigenous, Euro-Canadian, and other non-Indigenous individuals and institutions can be found on both sides of the debate; there are no clear ethnic or denominational lines of division drawn in the sand (although there are trends). Although virtually all involved Christian parties realize the need to address the call for change and applicable contemporary issues, they have yet to agree in any unified sense on a way forward.

Contemporary Issues

In addition to historical narratives, understanding contemporary issues within the world of Indigenous ministry will help yield a clearer picture of the past and the present. Two main issues constantly remain at the forefront of any discussion on Christianity and Indigenous peoples: The contextualization of Indigenous Christianity, and the task of responding to the TRC. Regardless of one's opinions on these issues, understanding them is important to understanding the past, present, and future story of Indigenous ministry, as such themes form the path of the narrative.

The Discussion of Contextualization

In any arena where Indigenous people interact with Christianity, a basic question arises: Can and should Indigenous culture be brought into or provide the basis of Indigenous expressions of the Christian faith? The discussion often ends up being phrased in terms of whether elements of Indigenous culture/spirituality, such as smudging and drums, can be used in Christian worship.

Pro-Contextualization

Those who are pro-contextualization argue that contextualization is a basic part of missions work. They would point out that, in any other country, contextualization of the local/Indigenous culture into Christian worship is a common and accepted practice. For instance, drums are commonly used in worship services in countries outside of the West, as wide ranging as Colombia (Priest, 2007, p. 120), South Africa (Robert & Daneel, 2007, p. 57), and South Korea (Joo, 2007, p. 105). Proponents of the usage of Indigenous drums in worship argue that the drum is simply an instrument, and although it is associated with non-Christian Indigenous spirituality, it can be "redeemed" by Christ and used in Christian worship. Similarly, smudging is a practice used in praying to the Creator (Robinson, 2018, para. 3), and so it can be used by Indigenous Christians to pray to God in the same way. Doing so simply makes worship contextual for Indigenous people, and removes a barrier for them to participate in worship. Proponents of contextualization argue that blocking Indigenous culture from the church is a religious guise for racism, and the still-prevalent colonial attitude that exalts Western Christian culture and demonizes other cultures. In this mindset, the job of those doing Indigenous ministry is to share the gospel in a way that makes sense and is relatable to those in the Indigenous culture.

Here is an example of an argument from someone who is pro-contextualization:

People come into the centre, and they smell something [burning sweetgrass], and they ask what that smell is because it reminds me of their grandma. And we tell them about it and ask if they know what Grandma was doing when she burned the sweetgrass, and they say no, so we explain that she was praying. And this opens the door to conversations about spirituality, and it leads to a faith journey with the Creator. Indigenous people aren't animistic. They don't believe everything has a spirit, they believe there is spirit present in everything. That's the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is always present in and around creation. First Nations people have just always recognized this.

Anti-Contextualization

In contrast, those who are anti-contextualization argue that elements such as drums and smudges are not simply neutral cultural practices that can be brought into Christianity, but spiritual practices that connect the worshipper to something other than God and are even opposed to Christianity. These people would believe that those who convert to Christianity are being delivered from the demonic influence of

traditional Indigenous spirituality, and that converts must leave its associated elements behind. Thus, the combining of these elements into Christianity is not contextualization, but syncretism, which must be rejected in order to protect correct theology and practice in the church. In this mindset, the job of those who work with Indigenous people is to offer the gospel as deliverance from traditional Indigenous spirituality.

Here is an example of an argument from someone who is anti-contextualization:

People say that we contextualize in other countries, but even in Africa they don't use drums in their services, because the drums are part of the old demon worship. In my experience, services that incorporate the drum only bring oppression and terror, and I want nothing to do with smudging. People who didn't grow up 'traditional' are the ones who want to 'reclaim their culture.' Especially people from the Sixties Scoop—later in life they decide they want to 'reconnect with their Indigenous identity,' but when they say they want to reclaim their 'culture' they are really reclaiming that false 'religion.'

Position of the Evangelical Church

At its core, the argument here is whether Indigenous culture can be a legitimate expression of Christian faith and worship, or if Indigenous culture must be transformed by Christ. There is also the question of what extent racism, unconscious or otherwise, plays a role in the issue. Unfortunately, because of the charged and highly political nature of the debate, it has largely divided the world of Indigenous ministry, and it also seems to serve as a barrier to many in the Euro-Canadian church getting involved. Indeed, while an equal number of ministries researched in this project held a strong pro- or anti-contextualization stance, a larger number claimed “no position” on the issue, even while sometimes demonstrating an obvious inclination to one side or the other.

Within the evangelical church, tendencies lean towards the anti-contextualization position. The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) notes that “the practice of contextualization of Indigenous ceremonies in Christian worship remains a matter of controversy in some evangelical circles” (Jacobs et al., 2019, p. 9). Few evangelical organizations would claim outright hostility to contextualization, likely due to societal pressure, but they are also unlikely to embrace it. Contradictions to this rule of public declaration in the evangelical tradition include the ministries of the EFC, the Mennonite Church of Canada, and NAIITS in embracing contextualization, and the Northern Canada Evangelical Mission in strongly opposing it.

Regardless of what position one holds, the fact remains that both the pro- and anti-contextualization positions are an important part of our collective story. Taken together, this debate speaks to the topic's centrality in the story of Indigenous Ministry in Alberta, and it has far-reaching implications in both the past and the present.

The State of the Indigenous Church

An underlying issue related to the contextualization debate is the state of the Indigenous church in Canada. While interviewing Euro-Canadian participants, there was a unanimous conclusion that the state of ministry to or with Indigenous people in the Euro-Canadian church is quite poor. At the same time, a theme also emerged among some participants in debating whether or not an Indigenous church exists. It was generally felt that the Euro-Canadian church had failed to fulfill its duty to establish an Indigenous church. Participants provided one of two explanations as to why, based on their position on the issue of contextualization. Those who were pro-contextualization said that there is no Indigenous church because the Euro-Canadian church failed to properly contextualize the gospel for them. Meanwhile, those who were anti-contextualization said there is no Indigenous church because the Euro-Canadian church contextualized the gospel too much, and never allowed Christ to actually transform Indigenous culture.

Interestingly, instead of picking one side or the other when asked about this debate, Indigenous individuals tended more so to take issue with the question being asked in the first place. Rather than debating whether the Euro-Canadian church has succeeded in establishing an Indigenous church, expert in Indigenous ministry Cheryl Bear-Barnetson (2013) simply argues that the church needs to actually give and leave the gospel with Indigenous people, so they can establish their own church and their own

contextualized expression of faith (p. 66). Similarly, in response to the question of whether or not an Indigenous church exists, Ray Aldred, a leader in the Indigenous church, gave this perspective:

Maybe not one that white people can recognize. What is there doesn't take the same shape as the non-Indigenous church, but there's been a 200-year pattern: Indigenous believers gather together every Sunday afternoon, they pray together, they eat together. Then, every once in a while, some denomination tries to send someone in to form them into a Western-style church, and it all blows up, and then they take off and leave the Indigenous people alone to do their thing again. ...Indigenous faith will just never look "Catholic enough" or "Protestant enough" to the church.

In making statements about the state of the Indigenous church, wisdom advises that those from outside the Indigenous community should be cautious. It is valuable to listen to the perspective of Indigenous people themselves as to what the state of their church is. As far as the role of the Euro-Canadian church goes, it is widely understood that Indigenous ministry is not being committed to as much as the situation actually calls for—participants strongly felt that the church has a responsibility to do more. At the same time, the church should not see itself as having a duty to "save" or "establish" Indigenous peoples. Rather, the responsibility of the church appears to fall somewhere between these two realities.

Residential Schools and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Another current issue impacting the story of Indigenous ministry in Alberta is the legacy of the TRC. To provide an entire background on this commission, the factors that led to it, and its effect on the church is outside of the scope of this paper. To learn more about the commission, and to access its resources, visit <http://www.trc.ca/>. For a brief explanation of the commission as it relates to our project, see the definitions for "Truth and Reconciliation Commission," "Reconciliation," and "Calls to Action" above, in the Terminology and Definitions section.

In the eyes of many involved in both Indigenous ministry and the Indigenous community, the actions and understandings presented in the TRC Report and Calls to Actions serves as the best framework for reconciliation available. These understandings are based around the need to acknowledge and repent of current and past wrongs inflicted against Indigenous peoples, and a commitment to intentionally move forward together in the spirit of reconciliation.

The evangelical church has had a mixed response to the TRC. Because of their late arrival in colonial Canada, they were largely uninvolved in the Residential School system. As a result, the evangelical denominations are not directly addressed by the TRC Report and Calls to Action, which were based on the legal case involving the denominations that ran residential schools. However, this does not mean that the evangelical church was blameless in their actions and attitudes towards Indigenous peoples during the same period.

In addition, the TRC Calls to Action include calls that are directed to the church outside of the denominations that were party to the Settlement Agreement, including:

48. We call upon the church parties to the Settlement Agreement, and all other faith groups and interfaith social justice groups in Canada who have not already done so, to formally adopt and comply with the principles, norms, and standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [UNDRIP] as a framework for reconciliation. This would include, but not be limited to, the following commitments:

- i. Ensuring that their institutions, policies, programs, and practices comply with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- ii. Respecting Indigenous peoples' right to self determination in spiritual matters, including the right to practise, develop, and teach their own spiritual and religious traditions, customs, and ceremonies, consistent with Article 12:1 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- iii. Engaging in ongoing public dialogue and actions to support the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

iv. Issuing a statement no later than March 31, 2016, from all religious denominations and faith groups, as to how they will implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

49. We call upon all religious denominations and faith groups who have not already done so to repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples, such as the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius. (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015, p. 5)

Notably, evangelical denominations have largely not responded in full accordance with these calls to action. According to the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada,

Some evangelical communities have supported Indigenous rights to self-government in public support for the TRC's Call to Action #48 to uphold the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a framework for reconciliation. The reality is, however, that broadly speaking, evangelicals are similar to the general population of Canada in their ignorance of and indifference to solemn their treaty responsibilities. (Jacobs et al., 2019, pp. 8-9)

Individual denominations vary in whether or not they have formally and publicly adopted UNDRIP, engaged in reconciliation initiatives and dialogue, issued formal apologies or statements regarding past mistakes, or repudiated the concepts behind European sovereignty. However, they may engage in missions to Indigenous peoples outside of the framework of the TRC, according to guiding theological principles such as evangelism and discipleship.

Contemporary Issues as Barriers to Engagement

Unfortunately, issues such as the contextualization debate and TRC responsibilities can serve as significant barriers to churches taking on the responsibility to reach out to their Indigenous neighbours. One research participant explained that churches have a difficult time navigating their response to the TRC because "it's a political issue, and a very charged one. But it's also essentially a relational issue. And the two can't be separated." Such a dimension makes the normal ministry of the church, which is intensely relational, into a political minefield that individuals may not feel equipped to navigate. Another research participant observed that:

For a lot of people, Indigenous ministry is just unknown—this is very common. There's also a fear of it. Fear of not doing it the right way. Fear of not knowing what to get involved in and what not to get involved in. Fear that it might cost too much. But there's also a growing awareness that something has gone wrong, and that something has to change.

The evangelical church as a whole is far from having a confident and unified response to these controversial issues that can guide them into meaningful ministry that takes responsibility for the past and strives to move forwards in healing and reconciliation. However, as the aforementioned research participant observed, there is an awareness that something needs to be done, and that what is currently being done needs to be done better.

Conclusion

The relationship between the evangelical church and Indigenous people in the land that we now call Alberta has historically been fraught with difficulties, and even today is marked by hesitancy, confusion, and controversy. However, as to the future, this relationship is uniquely poised to enter a new era marked by learning, reconciliation, and partnership.

This relationship differs from that of the Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations, which are distinct from the evangelical church both theologically and in terms of corporate responsibility regarding their relationship with Indigenous peoples. Although the Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations have been held to account by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and their role in the residential school system, evangelical denominations have been able to get by without doing as much in the way of reflection and reconciliation. Rather than being involved in the residential schools, the

evangelical church put its efforts into missions to “save” Indigenous peoples through traditional evangelism and the planting of Western-style churches, particularly in the latter half of the 20th century.

As we crossed into the new decade, this energy waned as the contextualization and reconciliation movements began to bring prevailing ministry philosophies into question. Over time, willingness to engage with Indigenous peoples was lost to burnout, staff turnover, and political challenge. Today, some Indigenous ministries exist but they are often underfunded, under supported, and disconnected from each other. However, as these ministries begin to see Indigenous Christians themselves rising up to take leadership in the Indigenous church under new models of ministry based on Indigenous sovereignty, evangelical missionary organizations have found themselves reevaluating their models of ministry.

In order to move forward, the evangelical church finds itself needing to formulate answers to two contemporary issues within the world of Indigenous ministry. These two topics, the debate surrounding contextualization and one’s response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, present two of the most controversial issues currently affecting the landscape of Indigenous ministry. They are highly involved both with the Indigenous church’s ability to develop and flourish, and in shaping the relationship dynamic between the Indigenous church and the wider evangelical church. As for the evangelical church, the result has been a stagnation in and avoidance of relationship with Indigenous Christians. As this relationship becomes increasingly political, Euro-Canadian evangelicals find themselves avoiding meaningful interactions altogether, either due to feeling unequipped to navigate this relational minefield, or due to a hesitance to abandon tradition or compromise on beliefs. In order to progress, the evangelical church must come to terms with past and current issues, and, in doing so, take up the task of relationship once again. This task may be uncomfortable and daunting, but Christ-like, self-sacrificial love always is.

The current state of Indigenous ministry in the evangelical church in Alberta is marked by controversy, hesitancy, and a lack of understanding. However, both history and contemporary voices speak to a clear need for the church to do more than it currently is. Generally speaking, the church itself hears this call and realizes that the need for it; however, it does not yet know how to accomplish what is needed. The relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Christian church has gone through intense growing pains in the last few decades, and as a result, we are undergoing a period of transition regarding the role of the church. If the church desires to take charge of their future story, it is important that they learn from their past story and use it to put time, effort, and resources into determining what their relationship with Indigenous peoples will look like in the coming years. By seeking reconciliation in humility, committing to reflection on our past and future, and intentionally engaging in relationship, we can carve out a story side-by-side with our Indigenous neighbours that is marked by mutual growth and equal partnership, together in Christ.

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