

The United Church Changed Approach to Indian Missions

Mission work among North American Indians has been carried on for decades. Indians were looked upon as "an aboriginal, savage people." A 19th-century author spoke of them "as full of revenge which nothing can satiate, of a ferocity which nothing can soften, and as strangers to the most amiable sensibilities of nature." Their religion was considered pagan and demonic. This was still the case prior to World War II.

I Eat, I Eat

In 1937 a very unusual celebration took place at the Indian settlement of Kitamaat. People of the community, and a number of invited guests from the outside, had gathered in the church hall. The main feature was Chief Johnny Paul. He came in on all fours. He was dressed as a medicine man, hideously dressed. As he made his way to the frightened audience, he yelled, "I eat, I eat." During the evening old time pagan dances were performed, and all sorts of savage old customs were recalled.

At the conclusion of the program, the chief, after he had removed his ugly costume, said, "We have been showing you this to show you the kind of life out of which Christianity has brought us. You can judge for yourself which is better."

J. I. MacKay, a UC missionary, commented in his book, *The World in Canada*, published in 1938, "It is said on the best authority that sixty years ago in that area there was not one woman in twenty without a scar where a bite had been taken out of her arm. In the midst of the wild dances on any festive occasion, the medicine man would rush in crying, 'I eat, I eat,' and grabbing one of the young women would take a bite out of the flesh of the arm. And they had been proud of their scars.

There was a concert of a different kind on the Saturday night, and on Sunday three beautiful religious services were held. This was the climax of a celebration which marked the 60th anniversary of the Church's ministry among these people. The days of the medicine man and all the horrors that were associated with him are gone. Now in many Indian communities the Church is firmly established and certainly making for a more wholesome life."

Bridging the Gap

Missionaries tried to build a Christian civilization. They realized that the journey would be long. The space between the stone age and modern society couldn't be cleared in one jump. Schools were established. Since Indians were nomadic people small boarding schools were started here and there.

The Women's Missionary Society or the Board of Home Missions of the UC provided workers for these schools. MacKay noted that "very much has been done and is being done today to overcome the instincts of paganism and to help the Indians to a place of

fine Christian citizenship." MacKay suggested that a step in the right direction would be if, "instead of the large dormitory building at the Residential Schools, the students could be housed in cottages, cottages perhaps built largely by themselves."

Students from the residential schools were expected to return to the reserves until progress was made in other directions.

MacKay also called for the restructuring of the curriculum to include a specialty of training in the kind of things by which the Indians are bound to make their livelihood. This suggestion was made in 1938. And MacKay's concerns are still valid today.

Learn from Native Spirituality?

But the attitude towards native religions has now dramatically altered. No longer are these religions considered demonic. "Native spirituality" is the new description of ancient pagan Indian religious beliefs and practices. Interest in native spirituality has been growing in the last ten years. *The Observer*, Dec. 1982, comments, "There is a growing feeling among white Christians that there is something to be learned, that our ancestors were racist and hasty in their dismissal of the inherent value of the native way of looking at the world."

The Rev. Stanley MacKay, a Cree Indian, who is the national consultant for native ministries for the UC, says that non-native Christians can learn to approach Indians and to minister to them more effectively "when people are willing to take on orientations that release them from thought patterns and theological dogmas they hold sacred."

What a vast change in attitude and approach to Indian missions!

Johan D. Tangelder
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