



NEWS ARCHIVE:

Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon

Editor: Kiply Lukan Yaworski, Communications
Phone: 306-242-1500; Toll Free: 1-877-661-5005
communications@saskatoonrcdiocese.com

Prairie Centre for Ecumenism's annual Summer Ecumenical Institute focuses on reconciliation

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

The Anglican Church of Canada's first National Indigenous Bishop explored the challenge and the promise of reconciliation at a Summer Ecumenical Institute organized by the Prairie Centre for Ecumenism June 10-13, 2013 at the Cathedral of the Holy Family in Saskatoon.

Since 2007, Bishop Mark MacDonald has served as the national pastoral leader to Indigenous Peoples in the Anglican Church of Canada. Before that he served 10 years as bishop of the U.S. Episcopal Diocese of Alaska.



Bishop Mark MacDonald of the Anglican Church of Canada was a keynote speaker at this year's Summer Ecumenical Institute.

In the second of his keynote addresses to the ecumenical gathering, MacDonald stressed the fundamental role of reconciliation in the gospel, before exploring the hope he sees for reconciliation with indigenous peoples of Canada

Reconciliation is critical to understanding what new life in Christ is meant to be, he said, citing a New Testament understanding of reconciliation as central to what Jesus came to do.

"Reconciliation is critical to Christian identity, it is fundamental to the primary response to the Good News of Jesus Christ. I think it is impossible to overstate this. This is why we say 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us' – because reconciliation is key to the acceptance and experience of Jesus and the message of Jesus," he said.

Shifting spiritual and theological currents are supporting the reconciliation that is happening between indigenous people and the Church, MacDonald maintained.

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The idea of an official path of Christianity, through the Western tradition and the Western approach to study, to truth, history and philosophy is giving way to a new understanding that truth can come to us from many traditions.

“Instead of saying there is only way, one culture that allows people to accept and understand the Christian message, we now know that every culture and people has its own path, has its own way – and that all of them at some level have to be valued, understood and I would say studied and embraced,” MacDonald said.

Another shifting current is that the central faith issue is no longer belief, but idolatry. “We’re talking about the idolatry of nationality, about the idolatry of gender, the idolatry of race.” Western culture and civilization can become an idol, he added. This is being confronted by a return to the purity and clarity of the original message of the gospel, MacDonald said. It is absolutely essential to “confront our allegiance to those things that are less than God, because that leads to misery.”

Another shifting theological current revolves around the idea of the absence and presence of God, he said. “Essentially we have acted as if when Columbus landed, God got off the boat with him, and we have acted and in some cases believed that God was not present wherever our particular truths were absent,” MacDonald said. This view meant it was fine to wipe out someone’s culture to replace it with your “true” culture.

“Our understanding of mission was based on the idea that if we don’t bring God there, God isn’t there.” That is not only harmful when bringing the Christian message to other cultures, it is also harmful when talking to teenagers or our brothers and sisters who are not interested in church, he stressed.

Echoing the gospel, which says “God is very near, turn around,” we are shifting to an “understanding that says that God is intimately, actively, militantly, vigorously, entertainingly involved in people’s lives, long before we talk to them,” MacDonald said.



“We see our role as less about bringing God to people as helping them to see God present in their own lives. This is a huge shift in the way that we understand faith.”

Participants engage in discussion during the annual SEI.

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Gandhi and Martin Luther King's confidence was not only about their methods. "Their confidence was in God's presence," said MacDonald. "The idea is that God is present in culture, and to act nonviolently is to reveal that presence, to allow that presence to speak, to allow that presence to overcome."



A banquet at the Western Development Museum was part of the event.

- Photo by Nick Jesson

Over time, prayerfully, thoughtfully and with humility, it is possible to see God's pattern of working in history, he added. It is time for all Canadians to "see the importance of this moment and hour," said MacDonald. "And how critical it is for the Church to be part of this reconciliation."

When a slave trader or tax collector is converted to Christ, their identity changes, but that doesn't mean their past is obliterated, their past becomes part of their redemption. This will also be true for Canada, said MacDonald.

"What reconciliation demands of Canada is a redeemed identity... if we are truly to be the country that God intended us to be, if we are to live in the destiny of the greatness that God intends for this country, it will be because we were the people who did that, and who changed."

He cited the mission of First Nations leader Elijah Harper to reveal the original vision of the elders for this country. "The original vision was that we could all come together here, and that this country was great enough for us to work with each other, to live with each other and provide a way of life for our children and grandchildren that was better than anything that we had before."

Elijah Harper resisted the Meech Lake accord because he felt it was a lie, said MacDonald. "It was a deformation of the original vision, because it said there were two founding cultures, one English and one French, and Elijah Harper said I can never ever agree to that. Nor should we. Because, he said, the vision of the elders – our destiny as Canada – is to live with the greatness of all together, and not just the two."

With the government apology, with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and other currents in Canadian society, indigenous people are claiming their humanity. "That's happening, it's going to happen, and it can't be stopped," said MacDonald.

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“The question is not will the larger society give indigenous people their humanity, the question is will they try to resist the claiming of it: which is futile,” he said.

“The answer is to rediscover the original seeds of grace that God planted in the beginning of our nation. That is dependent on a confidence in God’s presence, and that God has laid the groundwork of a better future in our past.”

What follows is the call to take action to address injustices and inequities, he added. For instance: stopping the slaughter of indigenous women on Canadian streets; acknowledging the critical relationship that indigenous people have with the land, “giving supreme, prior and informed consent to indigenous people whenever development is happening near or on their lands”; and funding Aboriginal education at the same rate as non-Aboriginal education.

“In essence we are in a situation where we are beginning these conversations and consultations with each other about where we will come together,” said MacDonald.

“Indigenous people have claimed the right to develop in a way that has integrity with who they were in the past. ... not only because God gave us that identity, but also because indigenous people are the original inhabitants of the land, and that special Aboriginal right is something that can’t be given away.”

The theme of the Summer Ecumenical Institute – Reconciling Churches, Reconciling Peoples – was also explored in other sessions and panels over the three days of the conference, including sessions about the practice of reconciliation in churches and spiritual ecumenism, as well as sessions on the Canadian Council of Churches, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, various ecumenical and inter-faith dialogues, and the intercultural and interracial experience of Regina Peace Mennonite House Church.

Chaplain for the Summer Ecumenical Institute was University of Saskatchewan campus minister Paul Sartison of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, and the ecumenical Bible Study Leader was Bill Richards, professor of New Testament Language and Literature at the College of Emmanuel and St. Chad.