

INDIGENOUS-SETTLER RELATIONSHIPS

By Chandra Behrenz

INTRODUCTION

The influences on First Nations and Settlers' relationships since first contact were mostly influenced by the fur trade – the sharing by both groups for each group's mutual benefit. Other influences included diseases, such as the devastating smallpox disease that caused much suffering and death to the First Nations people who had no immunity to such an illness, misunderstandings between the peoples, religious conversions, and marital alliances between First Nations and European peoples that created our Métis Nations.

THE EAST

As the east is always the BEGINNING (infancy) point of the medicine wheel, I started this class with eagerness to learn the history of truth never taught to me in school. Many misconceptions had to be UNLEARNED as a starting point. I now feel comfortable using the land acknowledgement prior to opening prayers in any public setting in my province of Saskatchewan. This has come about by a greater awareness of life in Canada prior to European contact, and the realization that everyone living in Canada today is a treaty people. Canada was NEVER considered “owned” land by First Nations people in the European concept of “ownership”. Land was considered a shared space for communal benefit. Thus, the treaties are viewed as COVENANTS (sacred) by First Nations people. In contrast, the government viewed the treaties as CONTRACTS (agreements of understanding).

THE SOUTH

The south is a time of RELATING (youthfulness). Colonization is not my fault, but I must do my part to work toward truth and reconciliation in my everyday life. Much control, repression

and cultural damage occurred as result of the *Indian Act*, which I was shocked to discover was NEVER a part of any treaty, but was a federal government law designed to repress and assimilate First Nations people into the mainstream society's mass immigration from Europe. This proved problematic because in the European culture, the emphasis was on capitalism, individual rights and wealth attainment; whereas, the Indigenous culture was not monetary-based, but saw the common good of the entirety of their society as a collective for communal benefit. Many times the Indigenous people were traded alcohol that could impair their judgments when making trades and this was NOT to their advantage. In addition, marriage to Europeans or military service for Canada meant enfranchisement resulting in lost Indian status. Much, if not all, of the federal *Indian Act* has the goal of assimilation and loss of original cultural identity.

THE WEST

The west is a time of RESPONSIBILITY (adulthood). I was introduced to First People's Church in Edmonton by my Métis aunt. Here I saw for the first time the four directions integrated into the Mass. I plan to attend a Mass at Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Saskatoon equivalent of First People's Church. The four directions make perfect sense in the life cycle of humanity as a whole. As a Catholic Christian of maternal Métis descent, I need to be conscious of the fact that there are still many unjust laws in Canada that affect Indigenous peoples even today. Many social issues have resulted from the harm of colonization, the federal *Indian Act*, and the legacy of the federal government's residential school system. Indigenous people wanted education for their children – NOT abusive situations with the goal of assimilation away from their families and culture. Attention and caution must be exercised about the federal government and its policies, given its history of over 150 years of broken promises. Much work still needs to be

done. For example, at the present, not all school systems across Canada have mandatory treaty education for students.

THE NORTH

The north is a time of REFLECTION (mentality). This brings me to having a solid awareness and understanding of the past that has led us to where we are today. A positive step forward is the Catholic Church's commitment to the implementation of the 94 recommendations as identified by the Truth and Reconciliation Committee as it addresses the churches. In addition to this online course, I took the initiative to read, in its entirety, *21 Things You May Not Know about the Indian Act* by Bob Joseph. I am currently reading the follow-up book by the same author, *Indigenous Relations: Insights, Tips & Suggestions to Make Reconciliation a Reality*".

CONCLUSION

It is important to be mindful that First Nations people had an established relationship with the Creator God as they understood God to be well before European contact. Being respectful of Native Spirituality and implementing it where appropriate in Catholic practices is a good way to blend to cultures. At one time it was a source of shame to discover a person had Indigenous ancestry. Everyone needs to feel comfortable within their own skin before trying to understand others. Lastly, the Church today is NOT here to be loved, but TO LOVE.