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Randy Woodley

George Fox University, rwoodley@georgefox.edu

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**HARD QUESTIONS CONCERNING STRUCTURE & VALUES
in the NEW NORTH AMERICAN ABORIGINAL CHURCH**
Randy Woodley: Keetowah Cherokee; President, Eagle's
Wings Ministry

INTRODUCTION:

Among our current North American Aboriginal churches there has been little thought given to creating a structure, including both our physical church buildings and our church governments, that reflect our deepest tribal values. Invariably, our Native churches reflect the same patterns as seen in the Euro-American church culture. Given this fact, it is not difficult to understand why the Christian church has not been embraced by the First Nations of America.

I see at least three core values among all North American indigenous peoples, namely: our spirituality (our relationship with the Creator), our sense of family and community (our relationship to each other), and our land (our relationship with the earth). To incorporate these core values into our churches will take much thought and deliberation. Because these values are reflected differently among our tribes and because of our particular histories, locations, climates, etc., consideration must be given to include structural diversity. Yet, there are also many commonalties among our peoples.

Since we do not have a model of a North American First Nations church that reflects our distinct values we must draw from somewhere in order to create one. I would like to make some observations using seven ceremonial expressions of Native American religious or spiritual movements that have to some degree reflected our cultures well and have drawn much support over the years. In trying to create a valid expression for a new North American Aboriginal church, decisions will need to be made concerning whether or not particular aspects of these movements are godly, but generally the structures and values reflected in these movements will assist us in developing new church models. The alternative for a truly indigenous church that does not reflect our tribal values and structures has been, and will continue to be, grim in my opinion.

The seven religious/spiritual movements among North American Aboriginal people with which I would like to interact are Sweat Lodge, Sun Dance, Pow Wow, Stomp Dance, Talking Circle, Longhouse, and Ghost Dance. While every observation made will not always reflect 100% accuracy for all seven movements, every observation will reflect the majority of the seven expressions. There are many more ceremonies that could be considered but these seven are those with which I have some familiarity. Also, I realize that even within the same ceremonies there can be a wide variety of practices. Among these seven ceremonies there is no

one that can be used exclusively but all lend suggestions to those of us on our quest to see Christ uniquely express Himself through our cultures. I have observed and/or personally participated in five of the seven religious movements. The two with which I am much less familiar, Longhouse and Ghost Dance, come from the observations and participation of others who were at one time active in these ceremonies or, as in the case of the Ghost Dance, from those who are direct descendants of the movement.

DISCLAIMER:

The intent of this paper is to discover structural models that lead to important questions for a new and emerging Native North American church that reflects our tribal values. I am not lending credence to the doctrines that are held in of any of these seven movements. I am only stating that as religious/spiritual movements they have reflected tribal values that can be identified within their structure. I am also not disregarding the general principles of using the Bible as a guide to begin a church. I make the *a priori* assumption that every Christian church will reflect the values of Jesus Christ, its founder, and those principles such as found in the Book of Acts, will be followed.

TOWARDS A CHURCH THAT REFLECTS NATIVE VALUES:

So how do we go about creating a church that maintains Aboriginal values of our relationship with the Creator, our relationships with each other and our relationship with the earth? As Native Christians we should take seriously Creator's injunction to be "keepers of the earth" (Gen. 2:15). The many facets of our stewardship of God's earth are beyond the scope of this paper but certainly aesthetics need to be considered. Questions should be asked such as: Does the landscape of our site and structure welcome the natural beauty around us or does it intrude upon it? Does our building as a whole close out the earth or invite the earth's beauty in?

What materials will be used to build the structure? Can they be bought or harvested locally and will they be sustainable? Will the cost of the structure be impractical for the income of the people who will be expected to maintain it? What fuels will be used to heat such a structure? Are they readily available? What physical shape should the structure take?

Does the very shape or seating arrangement of a building or a room reflect our values in a meaningful way? In all of the ceremonies I list, except for the Longhouse, participants are in a circle. In the Longhouse, a rectangle, people still sit around the walls facing the center using many of the dynamics of the circle idea. The general value we can draw from among these ceremonies is equality. A structure/shape such as a circle is very different than that of the Euro-American church. In Euro-American churches, a high value is placed on a square room or another shape such as a rectangle that lends itself to a lecture type configuration. Most often in square or rectangle rooms people sit in pews that cause them to look

directly at the back of someone else's head. A platform often lifts the leader(s) above the crowd and a pulpit of some kind is typically used for that person to direct the service/ceremony. This lecture type configuration sends all eyes fixed towards the front of the room.

Generally, our Native services/ceremonies happen at the same elevation and everyone in the meeting has a participatory role. I believe this practice represents the theological concept well of the "priesthood of all believers". The Euro-American model lends itself to a lecture type format in a controlled group setting. It places a high value on those up front. The circular structure places a higher value on every individual. The square model places little value on relationship and intimacy, whereas the circular model places greater value on these relational aspects.

We should ask ourselves, would our people rather come and participate in a ceremony/service or would they rather hear a lecture? I would argue that generally a lecture is less appealing to most Aboriginal folks. Lectures are appropriate for a people who place a high value on book knowledge and theory but that is not where most of our tribal people are. We are a more experiential and practical and participatory people. Quoting from my book:

In the Native worldview a person who knows mostly theory is considered to know very little; and most of what means something to American Indians cannot be learned in books. What is more important to a group of Native Americans? Honesty, wisdom and experience. In Indian country true knowledge is not so much about facts as it is revelation from God.¹

I was taught by elders to observe closely when a task was being done and not to ask questions. After awhile, I was given the opportunity to try it, and I was corrected when I messed up. I was told to pray about these things and meditate on them. Every so often my questions — which were still in my heart and mind — would be answered. This learning style was very different from my training in college and seminary, where I was certified based on my knowledge of certain facts.

In the Indian world we experience; in the Euro-American world we gather facts about it. Someone has said that Native Americans would rather participate in a ceremony while Euro-Americans would generally rather read a book about it. Or perhaps, attend a lecture. At any rate we must ask ourselves questions concerning the physical shape of our surroundings. Even the trees, the rocks, the hills, the flowers, and many other things of our natural surroundings are more circular than they are square.

¹ Randy Woodley, *In Living Color* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books) 2001.

The seating arrangement also reflects our views concerning leadership. In a square model the meeting is set up so a single person in front can control the rest of the people. The leader is obviously in control and those not in the front are considered more or less as spectators. The value of mutual respect and dissention is given little place in the square configuration. Our tribes traditionally leave a place for everyone to share or participate in the service or ceremony.

Questions should certainly be asked in the beginning concerning decor. I can walk into almost any First Nations church today and there is an obvious absence of any decor reflecting our cultures. Yet, when I enter the homes of the church members I will often see baskets, paintings, blankets, etc., which reflect our distinctly Native culture. What this says to me is that we as indigenous people are not "at home" in our Native churches.

Concerning models for leadership we should consider the fact that in many of the seven ceremonies listed it is very difficult to determine exactly who is in charge. Usually leadership is spread out among a number of people. When leadership is distributed in an Euro-American church it is usually in a more compartmentalized way. As noted, the circle does not lend itself well to one person directing the meeting. For example, at a Pow Wow is it the Emcee who is in charge? Is it the Arena Director? Or are the Head Man and Lady Dancers in charge? Each one of these is leading at various times and could easily be understood by a casual observer to be the leaders. In reality, most Pow Wows have a committee that makes all the important decisions. Yet, the committee is often found in the background.

How compartmentalized should an Aboriginal church be? For example, in none of the seven ceremonies I list are children pulled away from their families to be taught separate from them. Should the Aboriginal church then do away with the compartmentalized Sunday School/Church School approach? Certainly our high values concerning family should be expressed in our churches. I would argue that the dominant society has structured itself in the educational and religious systems in a way that places little value on family and shared family spiritual life. In most of our tribal ceremonies children are full participants.

Another consideration, how do those wishing to join themselves with a Native church become a part of it? Among all churches and ceremonies there are varying degrees of membership requirements but there seems to be a higher value in the Euro-American churches on paperwork. Often, membership agreements are given out and need to be signed in order for a person to be officially recognized. Among our own ceremonies there is less value placed on a document and more value placed on whether ceremony actually helps a person or not. To some degree we make our commitment known with our feet and our seat.

What about prayer? Is prayer a section we make time for or is it included in all the aspects of our worship? When do we pray? How do we pray? What of the use of Eagle Feathers and smoke during prayer? In what ways does that reflect our Aboriginal spirituality?

All churches need finances but there are very few Aboriginal churches who are self supporting financially. How does an Aboriginal church collect money to sustain itself? Do we take up offerings? Do we take pledges like some ceremonies do? Do we pass a plate or a basket or lay a blanket on the floor?

Music is part of most Native ceremonies. What instruments reflect the rhythms and the structure of our tribal music? What language do we use? Can we use traditional songs such as prayer songs? If we blend the traditional instruments like drum and rattle with more modern such as guitar or piano what ramifications will it have on the perception of others and the values associated with those traditional instruments?

Preaching and teaching are Biblical concepts but is a modern Euro-American sermon style or teaching style authentically Native to our particular people or would another way of teaching be more appropriate? Jesus told a lot of stories — is that a valid way of delivering a sermon for us? And then there is the ceremony of food. Certainly we know that feasting is part and parcel of many of our Native cultures. Should we eat every time we meet? Do we incorporate our traditional days of feasting in our worship times?

What about regularity of meetings? How often should we meet? Is it Biblical to meet once a month instead of once a week? The Native American Church does and they receive many at every meeting. Do we meet all day or for a few hours only? Can people be late for our services or, according to "Indian time", will there just be varying shades of arrival? This also represents some of our distinct values.

CONTINUING THE PROCESS:

There are literally thousands of questions that we as First Nations leaders should be asking as we begin planting churches and developing meaningful models. Many are hard questions that require consensus building and much counsel. Even then we must ask questions as to how politically such a process should be organized according to our own Aboriginal structures and values. We have finally progressed to the point where we can ask such questions of one another in a public forum. I pray we continue with all diligence as there is no safe, nor I believe Christian, alternative.