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# Modeling the Harmony Way - An interview

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# Modeling the Harmony Way

Randy Woodley interview by PRISM Magazine

Eagle's Wings Ministry, Inc. was founded in 1999 by Randy Woodley and his wife, Edith. The ministry is a largely Native American community in Newberg, Ore., where the Woodleys reach out with the good news of Christ while respecting indigenous cultures.

Based on the Native American "harmony way" (shalom) tradition of spiritual and emotional health, social and environmental balance, and economic prosperity, Eagle's Wings seeks to model and promote the wellbeing of Native American and other communities in ways that are culturally contextual, holistic, and community-based. Central to the ministry is a commitment to leadership training appropriate for traditional indigenous cultures. This work is advanced through the Eloheh Village for Indigenous Leadership and Ministry Development, which is a mentoring school, and Eloheh Farm, which is a demonstrational community where new life skills are acquired through direct experience.

We asked Woodley to walk us through his ministry's holistic approach to community transformation.

## **Tell us how Eloheh Farm came into being and what it means to you.**

God helped us see that we not only needed to be culturally contextual but also holistic. That's when we really began to develop a theology of the land and knew we needed to find a place of ministry. We had in mind sort of an indigenous L'Abri, but we also came to understand that what we were teaching our indigenous people was needed and desired by nonindigenous folks as well. In other words, we are going to need to heal together.

Indigenous spirituality, culture, and education must begin with the land. You know the old saying "Give a person a fish and they eat for a day, but teach a person to fish and they eat every day." Traditionally, our indigenous people have always possessed the skills to survive in even the harshest of environments. We have known "how to fish." But what if someone poisons the river? Then no one can fish. What if someone sells the river? Then only the one who owns the river gets to eat.

Life is much more complex today than in the past, and simply learning how to fish isn't enough anymore. In order to develop young leaders we need to be concerned with the whole person and the whole community living in the whole world. This means that we must understand our world as it is but always remain grounded in the indigenous spirituality and values that have allowed our people to survive for millennia.

We've found that education must be done in the context of land. It is from our place on the land that we derive our identity. Can we really learn when we don't know who we are? Where will this learning go? How will we understand unless we have the land to teach us? Living with the land—

and our covenant on the land and with Creator and all creation—is the lived experience and accumulated knowledge, wisdom, and understanding that distinguishes us from other ministries, schools, and communities. In such a model of community we tangibly witness for Christ and bring much needed hope to others.

### **What specific kinds of things can people learn in your community?**

The work of shalom is advanced through both Eloheh Village and Eloheh Farm. Some of the areas we address while mentoring others include culturally appropriate theology, mission, and ministry; traditional indigenous values, ethics, and ceremony; economic development opportunities through small-scale, culturally appropriate business models; sustainable living skills; regenerative farming methods; whole physical and emotional health; marriage and parenting skills; abuse and intervention training; educational and career assistance and development; and community building and organizing. Our goal is to heal and mentor the whole person who can then, in turn, offer healing to and help others create more whole communities.

At the farm we are seeking to be a whole-health regenerative food circle of heirloom and native food varieties. We are nonprofit, chemical-free, and in a relationship of harmony with the land. *Eloheh* (pronounced Ay-luh-hay) is a Cherokee word describing a physical place where the Cherokee harmony way is practiced. We began Eloheh Village as a model, permaculture venture in rural Kentucky in 2004 on 50 acres. Eventually, we were “run out” by a white supremacist paramilitary group, which caused us to lose our life’s savings.

But in 2010 we purchased a small, 3.75-acre, 96-year-old farmstead that needed lots of work. We are still working on it but are well on our way to a good relationship with the land once again. Why? We can eat healthier. We can eat for less. We can live greener. We can share with friends and sell excess food. Our food tastes better. Our bodies respond in better health. We can live more independently from corporate greed and poisons. We can give freely to those in need. And we can show others how to do all of the above.

### **What is the greatest challenge to your work?**

There are many. But I think the greatest problem is that American culture is rooted in a dualistic worldview, which resists a holistic way of life. I hope that eventually it will sink in for people that our relationship with God has everything to do with our relationship with our neighbor, which is related to our relationship with the earth, which is related to how we obtain our food, which is related to the political views we support, etc. Salvation or “healing” is a grand construct, and Jesus is grand enough and good enough to help us understand all the implications of our healing.

### **In what ways do you encounter Christ in the people you serve?**

Well, I find Christ in the most unlikely places. I think Jesus occupies the whole earth and beyond. So I not only encounter him in other people but also in all of creation. It seems to me that God is always interested in my conversion, not just in the conversion of those I encounter. This means being changed into Christ’s likeness by his truth. I find truth of Christ in a tree, a butterfly, and even in the soil itself. I find Christ in the people who are like me but even more in those different from me. I encountered Christ in an amazing way the other day through three homeless young men. As they sat and shared, I thought about the wise men in the birth narrative of Christ. Their wisdom was simple and yet so profound. I especially sense God’s presence in community when all people have a voice. It seems to me that the Spirit especially creates new ways for us to think and find new options when the dignity of everyone’s voice is heard.

**How would you define success in holistic ministry?**

I think success has to do with how we go about doing what we do. I want to ask myself many questions before thinking about success. Are all voices being heard, especially the ones that disagree or are least likely to be heard? Have we considered how this will affect everything else and also future generations? Is it honoring of others and the Creator? Will this effort give whole life to others or just a temporary fix?

And then there's the true litmus test, for me: What does my wife think about it? She's the one who really knows me and can help me figure out how much is personal stuff working itself out in my life and how much is God's leading. Often it is a mixture of both.

Money never really matters (much) to us, because we never seem to have it. We just learn to do what we need to do with very little funds, so things are never looking very successful according to worldly standards.

**What scripture has guided you most through the years, and why?**

Luke 15. I pretty much live there. Jesus is not just telling the Pharisees (and us) in these parables to find the lost; the point of each story is to always be extending the ever-expanding invitation to join the community or party to others, especially those most unlike us. I especially love the image of the father in the story who has been humiliated and dishonored by his son, who seems to be daily watching for the son to return, and when "he is a long way off" the father runs to the son. The son has a standard speech prepared, but the father doesn't even hear him. It's not about our grand schemes and plans for the kingdom. It's just about accepting the love of the Father. Jesus portrays God as the most vulnerable being existing. And that's what real power is about. It is love!

*A recognized legal descendent of the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma, Randy Woodley is co-founder/president of Eagle's Wings Ministry and has been active in Native American ministry for over two decades. He is ordained by the American Baptist Churches and the author of Living in Color: Embracing God's Passion for Ethnic Diversity (IVP, 2004), When Going to Church Is Sin and Other Essays on Native American Christian Missions (Healing the Land, 2007), and Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision (Eerdmans, 2012).*