

RESETTING the Relationship

Empowering Indigenous Leaders



Shari Russell is a theologian, advocate, counsellor, administrator and Salvation Army Officer. A Saulteaux from Yellow Quill Nation in Saskatchewan, she was scooped up from her home when she was two years old, still clutching a piece of paper that her mother had stuffed in her hand. Her Indigenous name, her mother's name and the name of her band were scribbled on that paper.

Knowing those names, those roots, allowed Shari to grow up more aware than most '60s Scoop survivors of her Indigenous identity.

Adopted by a Christian family at six, she struggled to connect her faith and culture. But that struggle refined Shari's ability to express the beauty and richness of her Indigenous culture . . . as

a follower of Jesus. "God has given me a passion to share this and to empower our Indigenous People to fully embrace who Creator has made us to be," she says.

In fall 2016, Shari spoke to a rapt audience at the Resetting the Relationship conference about how to empower Indigenous leaders in our Baptist churches. Baptist Women was one of the sponsors of that conference. live magazine covered part of this conference and filed the following notes from Shari's presentation.

IN EVANGELICAL CHURCHES, challenges abound in empowering Indigenous leaders. To effectively resolve those challenges requires an understanding of the differences in worldviews and perspectives on

7 WAYS CHURCHES MAY EMPOWER INDIGENOUS LEADERS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

More insights from Shari Russell

- 1 Learn about the history and current experience of Indigenous Peoples.** Go through the Blanket Exercise workshop offered by KAIROS (www.kairosblanketexercise.org). This is an interactive learning experience that covers 500 years of Canadian history in a 90-minute participatory workshop.
- 2 Recognize the impact of colonization and paternalism.** Really think about the context of missions and mission trips!
- 3 Recognize privilege and its impact.** Ask yourself what you take for granted. And consider how you live out your relationships with the land; with animals.
- 4 Be prepared to pay the price for empowering Indigenous leaders in your congregation.** "It will cost you time and relationships, particularly if people don't want to change."
- 5 Consider where you fall on the aid spectrum.** Which one of the following describes the relationship you and your congregation have with Indigenous Peoples?
 - Ally* – involved in the business of activism
 - Advocate* – speaking on behalf of those that don't have a voice
 - Accomplice* – working in the anti-colonial struggle to dismantle the systems you may find comfortable
- 6 Trust Indigenous leaders in your church.**
- 7 Work toward the calls to action offered by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.** Calls # 48, 49, 59, 60 and 61 are key.

faith between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Christians.

PERSPECTIVES

Identity

Identity is critically important for Indigenous Peoples and many have felt compelled to choose between being Indigenous or Christian. "They have heard the distorted message, 'God loves you but He doesn't like your ways . . . your feathers, drums, regalia, pow-wows or sweat lodges,'" says Shari. But God intends to incarnate the Gospel in every culture.

Stereotypes/Philanthropy

Shari believes the Indian Act has reinforced colonial and paternalistic stereotypes and notions of philanthropy. "There is a power differential at play. Usually a white person considers all First Nations persons to be wards of the state and that in turn has led churches to assume that they (churches) know best."

Leadership Abilities

Definitions of leadership are different. In Indigenous culture, it is not appropriate to put yourself forward. You wait to be asked.

Cultural Evaluation and Assimilation

Indigenous Peoples have been taught by the Church that their practices are evil. Today in evangelical churches, that belief expresses itself through an air or attitude of caution when Indigenous Christians are invited to participate in Indigenous cultural events or invite non-Indigenous church members to join them at those events.

There are also cultural assumptions at play. The Church has adopted practices and values from Western, non-Indigenous culture: "What a Christian looks like, what worship should look and sound like, the Protestant work ethic, the prosperity gospel, consumerism. Even mission trips to the poor and our Sunday school curricula. Are these Christian, or expressions of Western culture?" According to Shari, there are assumptions even in the way church buildings and sanctuaries are designed.

Indigenous Peoples in Canada have internalized Canada's colonization of their culture and their very selves. Media reinforces their understanding of themselves as unlovable, incompetent and intellectually inferior to white Canadians.

Given these stark, often unacknowledged differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives, how do evangelical churches empower the Indigenous leaders in their midst?

RJ ■