INDIGENOUS VOICES OF FAITH

Interviews by Andrew P.W. Bennett

March 2023

CARDUS PERSPECTIVES

About Cardus Faith Communities

The Cardus Faith Communities program conducts research and promotes understanding of Canadians' freedom of religion and conscience, the place of religion in the public square, and the ways in which faith congregations are active contributors to our common life.

About Cardus Perspectives

Cardus Perspectives are contributions to the discussion about important issues in Canadian society. Perspectives are the work of the author and do not necessarily represent the position of Cardus as an organization.

How to Cite

Bennett, Andrew P.W., ed. "Indigenous Voices of Faith." Cardus, 2023. https://www.cardus.ca/research/faith-communities/reports/indigenous-voices-of-faith/.

CARDUS

Cardus is a non-partisan think tank dedicated to clarifying and strengthening, through research and dialogue, the ways in which society's institutions can work together for the common good.

cardus.ca

@cardusca

Head Office: 185 Young Street, Hamilton, ON L8N 1V9

info@cardus.ca

About the Editor

REV. DR. FR. DCN. ANDREW BENNETT is program director for Cardus Faith Communities. He holds a PhD in politics from the University of Edinburgh and degrees in history from McGill and Dalhousie universities. From 2013 to 2016 he served as Canada's ambassador for religious freedom and head of the Office of Religious Freedom.

Executive Summary

Indigenous Voices of Faith is a series of interviews conducted by Cardus in the fall of 2022, in which we asked twelve Indigenous people in Canada to tell us about their religious faith and experiences. Since 47 percent of Indigenous people in Canada identify as Christians, Christian voices are the primary but not sole focus of this interview series. The purpose of this project is to affirm and to shed light on the religious freedom of Indigenous peoples to hold the beliefs and engage in the practices that they choose and to contextualize their faith within their own cultures.

Table of Contents

Foreword by Graydon Nicholas

I was privileged to read these testimonies of twelve Indigenous persons of different Christian traditions and other faiths and how their faith and Indigenous spirituality coexist. It reminded me of some early steps of Christian evangelization in Canada.

Evangelization began in the Atlantic when the priest Abbé Jessé Fléché baptized Mi'kmaq Grand Chief Henri Membertou on June 24, 1610. The early missionaries taught the Indigenous peoples who Jesus was. Our Catholic faith teaches us that he is God incarnate. The early catechism asked the question, When did Jesus become Indianized? Or, when did he become one of us? This is crucial because St. John Paul II reminded all of us on his visit to Huronia on September 15, 1984, that "Thus the one faith is expressed in different ways. There can be no question of adulterating the word of God or of emptying the Cross of its power, but rather of Christ animating the very centre of all culture. Thus, not only is Christianity relevant to the Indian people, but Christ, in the members of his Body, is himself Indian." Pope Francis said the same when he spoke at Sacred Heart Church in Edmonton on July 25, 2022.

I want to offer another quotation of St. John Paul II when he canonized St. Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin in 2002 with these words: "'The Guadalupe Event,' as the Mexican Episcopate has pointed out, 'meant the beginning of evangelization with a vitality that surpassed all expectations. Christ's message, through his Mother, took up the central elements of the indigenous culture, purified them and gave them the definitive sense of salvation'. . . . Consequently Guadalupe and Juan Diego have a deep ecclesial and missionary meaning and are a model of perfectly inculturated evangelization."

The twelve persons interviewed for the Indigenous Voices of Faith project have shared of how they were taught about the essential gifts that our Creator (God) gave to their elders about smudging, pipe ceremonies, drumming, fasting, and relationships. These relationships covered families, languages, gifting, songs, the land, and care for others. Each person from the various tribes or nations was taught about how to respect all of life. Many of these brave persons have shared of how their present lives are a coming-together of Indigenous spirituality and their Christian faith. The importance of inculturation is evident in their testimonies.

The representatives of the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations were convinced by the Government of Canada to operate residential schools, where the

languages, spirituality, family relationships, and other Indigenous ways of living were not allowed. This had devasting consequences for the survivors and their families. These twelve courageous people have shared the hurt, pain, and almost destruction of their beings. Yet, these twelve brave men and women are on a true path of reconciliation. Bill Adsit said that he was not a residential school survivor but wanted to be known as a residential school conqueror.

During his visit in July 2022, Pope Francis reminded us at the meeting at Maskwacis, Alberta, that the residential school experience was wrong because "the overall effects of the policies linked to the residential schools were catastrophic. What our Christian faith tells us is that this was a disastrous error, incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ." This is difficult for Catholics and other Christian leaders to hear and accept.

These twelve men and women are to be admired for their testimonies that challenge all of us to continue on the journey of reconciliation as brothers and sisters. For those of us who are Christians, we are to do this with the compassion of Jesus.

Graydon Nicholas
February 13, 2023

Originally from the Tobique First Nation in New Brunswick, the Hon. Graydon Nicholas, CM, ONB, LLD, is a Roman Catholic and a Wolastoqey elder whose name Wihkwatacamit means "the person who loves to tell stories." He is a lawyer and former judge of the New Brunswick Provincial Court. Graydon served as the thirtieth lieutenant governor of New Brunswick from 2009 to 2014.

Bill Adsit

Bill Adsit

The following remarks were delivered by Bill Adsit at the National Prayer Breakfast in Ottawa on May 31, 2022. Although this is not an interview like the others, we are including this edited transcript in the series as a valuable contribution on the same topic.

I have been asked to speak on 2 Corinthian 1:3–4, and it says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."

I have struggled with this passage and have had many conflicting feelings as I prepared this talk about my life. When I think about the horrors of the residential schools and injustices against my brothers and sisters, so many did not survive, and many have lived all their lives with the memories, and it has destroyed their whole life. I sometimes feel guilty when talking about the compassion of God in my life.

I know many residential school survivors are asking, Is God really the Father of compassion and comfort in all our troubles? And can we really comfort those in any trouble? God's compassion only becomes real if we experience it, and not just read it.

God's compassion only becomes real if we experience it, and not just read it.

Today this world needs compassion. We have the war in the Ukraine, in Israel, and trouble in Taiwan and Korea, the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, climate change. Canada, too, has had its troubles. In the last year, as a First Nations person I struggled with and was very upset at the discovery of the unmarked graves in Kamloops last spring and the continued discovery of more. All Canadians were traumatized and shocked by this. We too face COVID, and now economic recovery from COVID and political unrest.

Many of us are dealing with job losses, financial stress, broken relationships, and health issues. And just last week my son-in-law was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and had his operation last Friday. We are not promised a life without troubles. Like the book of Job says, "Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward."

I too had major life struggles and want to tell you my unique story of how our compassionate God led me and my family. I never really planned my life, it just unfolded according to his plan.

I was born in Telegraph Creek in the Northwest Corner of BC, into the Tahltan Nation. Both my parents were Tahltan, and both were alcoholics. My father was extremely violent, and they divorced when I was five years old. My mother took my two sisters and moved to Wrangell, Alaska, and my dad took my one-year-old brother and me and dropped us off at the residential school in Whitehorse, Yukon. I never saw my mother again until I was thirty-two years old.

I can still vividly remember that day at the Whitehorse residential school, because I saw my father talking to the administrator and understood from their conversation that we were being left. As he turned to walk away, I grabbed on to his leg and he just peeled me off and walked away. I only seen him a couple of times over the next ten years. I was one of very few at the school who was there for ten years without going home during holidays. I lived year-round at the school. Without going into the details about the residential school, all I will say is I experienced all the abuses you hear about in the news.

When they closed the school, I was fifteen and completely alone, no family contact, no contact with my nation, no education, no job, and really no prospects. After thinking back about this time, I determined I also had to deal with issues of parental alcoholism, extreme violence, divorce, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, physical and emotional neglect and abandonment—nine out of ten adverse childhood experiences. What chance of success did I have in life at this point? I would say zero percent. Only 3 percent of the population have eight-plus adverse childhood experiences, and only 10 percent are successful. Little did I know at that time that God was the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, and he also said, "I will be a Father to the fatherless and will give the lonely a family."

I was only on my own for one day before the RCMP picked me up, and in a very short time ended up in court and was made a ward of the government and put into a foster home of Earl and Carol Gaetz (an excellent Christian foster home). They even arranged a summer job for me. So, I had food, shelter, and clothing a few days after leaving the residential school!

I was there about a year, and her husband died, and she moved to Rimbey, Alberta. I was moved to a couple of other foster homes, and one summer holidays I ended up working in Cassiar, BC, and to this day I don't know how she found me there and asked if I wanted to move to Rimbey to finish my high school.

My first day in Rimbey High School, the principal called me into his office and said I had three strikes against me coming to this school. First, you are the only Indian in this school. Second, you are older that everyone else in your grade. And third, your name Belfry will not work, from now on you are Bill Adsit. And I have been Bill Adsit ever since. It was there that my troubled past began to haunt me, and I became angry, violent, and starting drinking. I had friends at the beginning but slowly lost them. I knew I was in trouble, so I quit school in grade 12 and joined the air force.

It was during my time at Namao Air Base that I started going to Rimbey on the weekends, and four of us were hanging around, and I eventually started dating Val, now my wife of fifty-six years. The interesting fact about our relationship was that she did not know anything about my residential school experience, and I knew a little about her just getting out of reform school. What a pair, the most likely not to succeed! My anger, heavy drinking, and rebelliousness did not fit well with my marriage or with the military, and I was forced to resign, and it was a quick one. Military man in the morning, and civilian in the afternoon!

I got a job in Edmonton, and my personal problems became worse. It seems I was always in court about drinking and driving, and other offences. I saw an ad in the *Edmonton Journal* and applied to Transport Canada as a flight service specialist, passed the exam and interviews, and was off to Ottawa for the ten-month course. I passed, and transferred to the Yukon and then Uranium City, Saskatchewan. Even though I was still drinking, I did well.

Out of fear and all hope, like the prodigal son, "I came to my senses." I prayed for God's help and forgiveness. Instantly I realized things changed and I had reached a turning point in my life.

We were only in Uranium City a week, and my heavy drinking continued. One day I was followed home by the RCMP and asked if I was Belfry Adsit, and I said yes, and they said there was a warrant out for my arrest because of my violent acts. I was flown to Edmonton and put into the holding jail. First time in my life I had time to think and face the consequences of my rebellious life! I was extremely afraid, as I could face time in jail, lose my wife and marriage, my family, my job. Because I had no time for Christianity, this is also the first time I thought of what was taught about God in the residential school. They said that if you want to change your life you can always pray and ask God for help and compassion. Their message was correct, but their methods were harsh. Out of fear and all hope, like the prodigal son, "I came to my senses." I prayed for God's help and forgiveness. Instantly I realized things changed and I had reached a turning point in my life.

What changed? I felt a sense of relief, knew I was forgiven, and had a complete attitude change, but it has been a long, slow process to heal! The rebelliousness stopped, the heavy drinking slowed to a trickle, and I began to mend my marriage and look after finances, and all the responsibilities that a sensible, Christ-following man should do. After we got our finances in order, we discussed my possibility of going to university and found out the only university that would accept me was Trinity Western, on probation. So, I quit my job and moved my wife and three daughters there and managed to do well and obtained a business administration diploma.

After I completed two years, Canada Revenue Agency gave me a job in Edmonton. About three years after, I was called into the director's office and was told that CRA had been audited and I was the only Aboriginal auditor they had in Canada, but since I did not have a bachelor's degree they could not promote. Don Massey, the HR director, had arranged for me to leave for two years and go to the University of

Alberta and come back with a BComm with an accounting major. I did that, but it was very difficult as I had not completed grade 12.

Due to God's providence, I spent thirty-seven years with the federal government, working with the military, Transport Canada, CRA as business auditor, and Aboriginal Business Canada as the regional quality assurance manager. He gave me the opportunity to be the president/CEO of the Tahltan Nation Development Corporation for nine years, where I set up twenty-six different companies and changed the face of the nation to one where full employment was now available. And because of the degree, I have had many job opportunities. God's hand in this!

In January 2009, I was the first residential student in the Yukon to go through the hearings for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. After I told my story, the adjudicator said that he was so glad that I was a residential school survivor. I said, "John, I hate that word 'survivor'; it sounds like a victim-mentality word. Who wants to be a 'survivor'?" He said, "Then what to do you call yourself?" I said, "I am a residential school conqueror!"

I can look back and see where God showed his compassion and kept his promise of being a Father to the fatherless and gave the lonely a family.

Now, at this stage of my life, I can look back and see where God showed his compassion and kept his promise of being a Father to the fatherless and gave the lonely a family. Why did life turn out to be very rewarding? Why, through the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, am I a conqueror?

First, Jesus. He forgives me, so I can forgive others. Without forgiveness, you cannot heal. He gave me hope, so I give hope to others. He instantly changed my attitude.

Second, others. No one can get through this life without the help of others. God's compassion is only shown in the world by other people. God uses his people to show compassion. The RCMP, social services, and the foster home of Carol Gaetz. Gordon Matthias, high school principal in Rimbey. Sgt. Cor Heimstra from the military, who made sure I completed some of grade 12. John Burchynsky, who gave me a job even though I was a mess. Dennis McGrae from Transport Canada, who was a great mentor. Don Massey from Canada Revenue Agency, who instigated my BComm at the U of A, at their expense. Steve Bellringer, chairman of the board from BCH, who ensured I got my [Institute of Corporate Directors] diploma. And many friends: Jim and Mona Bacon, Tom Rogers, Rob McPhee, Garry Merkel, and many others. Also, renewed connections and relationships with some of the brothers and sisters. My church family. And the most important person in my life is my wife, Val, who has been my supporter through thick and thin. God in his compassion knew the wife I needed, and he gave me her. We have three wonderful daughters, nine grandkids

and eight great-grandkids, plus an extended family. God has been gracious in the lives of our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and has shown his love through the generations. So did God give the lonely a family? Definitely.

Third, yourself. I want to careful here when I talk about "yourself," as I don't want to take all the credit for any success in life. It is only because of the first two reasons, Jesus and others, that I have had opportunities in life. But, without stepping out in faith and doing the hard work that those opportunities required, I would not be here today talking to you. I firmly believe that my compassionate God gave me the gift of resilience. God used others to give me opportunities, but unless I act on those opportunities, nothing happens. So, "yourself" is a major contributor to becoming a conqueror.

Now I am in position to comfort others, because of the comfort that I received. And because of God's compassion, I can show compassion to others. God has softened my heart and enabled me to love others. You can show compassion through kind thoughts, words, and actions. Listen and learn about their concerns, especially our Indigenous brothers and sisters. Express love and affection. Offer emotional and financial support. Always be kind. Use encouraging words. Uphold others in prayer.

I want to read to you a passage by Charles Swindoll that has been my inspiration for years:

> The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness, or skill. It will make or break a company, a church, a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is ten percent what happens to me, and ninety percent how I react to it. And so, it is with you. We are in charge of our attitudes.

My prayer for the rest of my life is that I will mellow out and treat everyone that crosses my path with love and compassion. And my hope is that I demonstrated to all of you that God is a God of compassion. When we turn to him and receive his forgiveness and grace, we in turn are enabled to show compassion.

Thank you all for this opportunity.

Photo provided by the office of Cathay Wagantall, MP.

John Borrows

John Borrows

This interview took place in Victoria, British Columbia, on November 1, 2022 and has been edited for clarity.

FR. DCN. ANDREW BENNETT: John, thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this project. I appreciate it.

JOHN BORROWS: Yeah, happy to do it.

FR. DCN ANDREW: So maybe to start, you can tell me a little bit about your Indigenous background and a little bit about your professional work, your family, wherever you'd like to go.

JOHN BORROWS: So, I'm Anishinaabe, and my nation is the Chippewa of the Nawash First Nation. We're called Neyaashiinigmiing. It's on the shores of Georgian Bay, Lake Huron, about three hours north of Toronto or four hours north of Detroit; our home territory is sometimes called the Bruce Peninsula or the Saugeen Peninsula. And that's where my mom and sister live today, and that's where my family on my mother's side has been for generations.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me a little bit about your professional work as a lawyer.

JOHN BORROWS: So, I've been teaching now for thirty years as a law professor. I'm currently the Loveland Chair in Indigenous Law at the University of Toronto Law School. That's where I did my law degree and a portion of my graduate work. I teach Canadian law dealing with Aboriginal peoples. I also teach Indigenous peoples' own law and their revitalization processes. And I like to write; and of course I love to teach as a part of what I do. It's been rewarding to try to figure out the relationship and how it can be improved, between Indigenous peoples and others in the country.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. And you're married and have a family. Tell me a bit about your family.

JOHN BORROWS: So, I've been married now for thirty-eight years, I think it is. And I have two children, thirty-six and thirty-four. My thirty-six-year-old has autism, and she is my greatest teacher, and she's an amazing person of light. And then my thirty-four-year-old daughter, my youngest daughter, is now a professor at Queen's University Law School, and she works in the same field that I do. I have two grandchildren, Waseya and Akeeka. Waseya is an Anishinaabe word, meaning "shining bright and clear." And then the youngest one is Akeeka, which means "the

fullness of the earth" or "there's lots of earth, an abundance of earth." And so it's wonderful to see their names reflecting the earth and the sky and the way that they're coming into this beautiful life together.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. So much of the focus of this project is really to understand how Indigenous Canadians engage with their faith. So, can you tell me a little bit about your own faith, your faith journey, and how your faith informs your life, your work? Just feel free to speak freely on that topic.

JOHN BORROWS: Sure, sure. So, some of my formative experiences were trying to understand the mystery of life. I can remember being a young boy watching hockey every Saturday with my father and enjoying time socializing with him. One night though, I remember withdrawing myself, and going to my room because I felt unsettled about life's seeming uncertainty. And withdrawing myself, and facing those feelings of unsettledness and uncertainty really took me to a place of deeper contemplation. I was eight or ten years old at the time and I felt a little overwhelmed, wanting to know what was around me.

And in the quiet of that small room I found a presence, a comfort, a connection, a purpose, an understanding that life is more than the mere unfolding of days. In those quiet moments, I understood there is something beyond ourselves. And so, as I grew, I would look for quiet places. I often found peace in the beauty of the natural world around me. We lived on a farm, 150 acres, with a hardwood bush and ravine and pond. And so I'd wander across the land finding connection and feeling that beauty. And for me this was a very spiritual experience.

So, contemplation was found in the beauty of the land. I can remember going to the forest and praying. I can remember noticing the sound of the birds and the streams and the changing of the seasons and understanding the relationship we have with the Creator of the earth and having that feeling as a part of life, even as I treasure evolution's truths too. This is an important dimension in my spirituality.

And I think my mother helped introduce me to that way of being. It was a part of her practice of spirituality. Whenever she needed to feel peace, she would go outside to some quiet place, and contemplate, pray, and look up at the stars; she would take the snowmobile out in the winter, and lie on the seat and look up at the heavens. So that was fantastic.

But, also, when I was probably about four or five, she bought me some illustrated Bible stories, in eight volumes. They were various Old Testament stories, from what I remember. She read them to me. Those stories are also a part of my spiritual formation. And she herself had experienced being nurtured in the United Church. And my great, great, great, grandfather, my third great grandfather, converted to Christianity as a Methodist back in about 1811, somewhere around there. And so we have been Christian for many generations.

The Methodism of my great-great-great-grandfather was passed on to my great-great-grandfather and then it was passed on to my great-grandfather, and he was the person that taught my mother how Anishinaabe and Christian teachings came together. He was the most loving male figure in her young life. And there was a church that my great-grandfather built on the reserve. It's still standing, a beautiful stone church. She could always remember going to church, and he would have the stove prepared so that the place was warm and welcoming when people arrived. She remembers going there, and people only singing in Anishinaabemowin and worshipping God through their language, songs and sociality. She felt like she was welcomed in so many ways.

And she would often go to her grandfather's (my great-grandfather) for dinner on Sunday. And while they were gathered, hosting other people in the community, he would always read the Bible with them. And he carried a deep devotion through prayer, through scripture study. This really impressed my mother. And so spirituality came into my life through my mother's relationship to the land and also through her love of God and Jesus Christ and scriptural traditions.

Christianity was a challenge for her too, because her father had been abused on the reserve in day school by Christians. And so he was somewhat antagonistic to church. Although he felt like there was a place for it, ultimately, I think he rejected it. And so there was a little conflict between my mother and her father in that regard. On the other hand, my mother's mother, who is non-Indigenous, was raised in Salt Lake City. Her father played the organ for a living. And in that city you couldn't get paid for playing the organ if you were in a Latter-day Saints (LDS) congregation, because they are lay congregations and people participate without being paid. I think my grandmother felt and remembered the LDS people there. She eventually moved on to Los Angeles where she met and married my grandfather, who was a Hollywood Indian in the 1930s! They worked in Universal Studios. He was on set, acting, and she was a set costume designer, and these experiences brought them together. When Pearl Harbour was bombed in the Second World War she eventually went to the reserve to live with him there.

And then many years later, when the LDS missionaries came along, she said, "I recognize you," having had that experience growing up in Salt Lake City. And my mother, in fact, had already joined this church. She converted from the United Church to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in about 1969. And so the LDS church started to be a part of my background as well. I can remember when my

mother was baptized and what a change that was for her. And then I started going to church with her, and then I myself was baptized when I was eighteen.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: So that's a very formative time for you. That would've been in your mid-teens, I guess?

JOHN BORROWS: Actually, it was a little earlier in my life. My mother joined the church when I was six. I didn't attend at first, but started when I began high school. And I attended what's called seminary in those years, which is an early-morning scripture study every day. I did this for five years because we had grade 13 in Ontario; so I had a religious education from grade 9 to 13, from about 6:30 to 7:30 every morning. And I loved this experience. It was great to learn. My mother was even my formal seminary teacher for one of those years. And like I said, my baptism occurred when I was eighteen. My father didn't want me to be baptized when my mother first joined the church. He wanted me to wait until I was more fully formed. And so eighteen was the year he said I would be free to make my own choices in such matters. So I went to church with my mother for six or seven years without being formally a member. When it came time to decide for myself, at eighteen, I took that step and was baptized.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And your father is also a Latter-day Saint?

JOHN BORROWS: My father's not a Latter-day Saint. He grew up in Yorkshire, and he came across the ocean, after the Second World War. He was from outside of Sheffield, in a place called Rotherham and Barnsley. It was bombed often. And so he was fleeing those sorts of traumas. And he came to Canada in that way. His favourite subjects in school were scripture and Latin, but he didn't feel he could commit to religion.

I can see the value of immersion in a tradition, but I also see the value of critical thinking and understanding different perspectives and holding other possibilities in mind.

So I had options in my home: a pathway for embracing Christianity, and a pathway for respecting Christianity but holding it at arm's length. And I feel like I benefited from both of these views. I can see the value of immersion in a tradition, but I also see the value of critical thinking and understanding different perspectives and holding other possibilities in mind. And perhaps part of my life is worked out by trying to negotiate between these two perspectives developed in those formative years. This means I value critique, and I value doubt, but frankly I also value faith and I value action and activity in a tradition.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Well, there's nothing wrong with doubt. As one priest said to me once, "Doubt is not a sin, but it's a process whereby we come into a deeper engagement with God and to understand him more fully. Even though he's not fully understandable, we can enter in full more fully into his presence."

JOHN BORROWS: And that's what I feel like. I still feel like that young boy of eight years old, wondering whether there is more to life than the present moment.

My feeling of emptiness led to life filling with meaning. And I find that doubt, or questioning, or inquiring . . . seeking, I guess is a better word. Being a seeker is not feeling like I'm certain about everything but continuing to try to find what those horizons are. When I do the work, I feel filled by it.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And are you active in a local LDS stake here in Victoria?

JOHN BORROWS: Yes, that's right. We have seven congregational units organized as our 'Stake,' here is the Victoria, British Columbia Stake. And I am in one of those congregational units (called a ward) here. And in the past I was part of our Stake presidency, which is an ecclesiastical responsibility, and now I serve through facilitating communication about our and other's faiths. This largely sees me as being the chair of the Victoria Multifaith Society (VMS) here in the city. And so I feel like that's my calling: to work in that multi-faith space.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Well, it's wonderful because I know a lot of my exposure to the Latter-day Saint world has been through Sandra Pallin, who is very much involved not only public affairs but also in a lot of interfaith work. So, tell me a little bit about your interfaith work for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, what that looks like and how that maybe fits in with that seeking you were speaking of.

JOHN BORROWS: Yeah, that's right. I know Sandra well. We are similar in age and we are both law graduates, and we are both interested in interfaith work. And multifaith work is beautiful. One of our teachings by one of our prophets, Gordon B. Hinckley, is to "keep all the good that you have and add to it," and "if there's anything virtuous, lovely, and of good report we seek after these things." And so I find so much truth, beauty, and inspiration for faith in that multifaith space. This is one of the reasons I'm on the VMS board. I'm actually the chair right now in the Indigenous spirituality space. But there's also members of the board who are Christian and Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Bahá'í, Buddhist, Hindu, and non-affiliated. There are nine of us on the board.

And we support one another by asking this question: "How does our faith tradition help us deal with X issue in the following ways?" And so we gather and we talk about how our faith traditions help us deal with racism, or environmental challenges, or feeling the struggles of the pandemic, those sorts of things. We're always asking about how our faith traditions are relevant in a contemporary setting. It's enlightening to listen to someone who's Jewish, or Muslim, or Hindu, or Sikh talk about how their faith helps them deal with pressing issues. It reminds me of why I love the living nature of faith. I love the fact that I can learn from other faiths and apply their teachings in my life as well. It's an expansive celebration of finding support for one another.

And then of course we do work more generally in the community, with memorials related to the Holocaust, or the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, or whatever the case might be. We also gather and celebrate holidays, whether they be Hindu, or Sikh, or Jewish—whatever the case might be. And it's an environment of friendship.

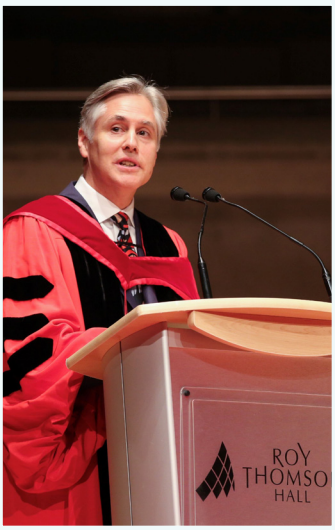
And again, for me, it bolsters my faith because I feel it advances one of the central tenets of being LDS.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Now the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is very mission-oriented. Did you yourself go on mission?

JOHN BORROWS: Yes.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Maybe you could say a little bit about that.

JOHN BORROWS: As I mentioned, I didn't join the LDS church until I was eighteen. And at that time, young men could serve as missionaries at the age of nineteen. And so when I was baptized, even though I had been going to seminary for about five years, I felt a kindled desire to want to serve in that capacity. So I spent grade 13 preparing for a mission as well as preparing to graduate from high school. We were expected to pay for our mission from our own funds, so I was working and saving money, and also reading the Bible and the Book of Mormon and other scriptures to prepare to serve others.



And so, when I turned nineteen, I put my papers in, requesting a call to service, and that call came to serve in the Nevada Las Vegas Mission. So I went to the southwestern deserts of the United States, and that was a great experience for me. The congregation I had grown up in was quite small, about forty people. And when I got to Las Vegas, I realized there were fifty plus congregational wards there, and it was a huge LDS centre of population. This is partially because Nevada is in the inter-mountain west, with the Latter-day Saint population spread out along those rocky mountain corridors. And there were many, many congregations and people who I associated with who helped me to see (in addition to a theological beauty to the church), that there was also an incredibly rich sociality to the church that I had never experienced.

Additionally, there were young men I served with from all over the place, including people from Washington and Minnesota and Tonga and England and Australia, and other parts of the world. It was a fantastic chance to get to live with people who were living their faith. And we would get to know the goodness of the local people too, as we were invited into their homes. I saw many different people from various walks of life, living their faith in different ways.

I have to say, I felt the world was a loving and beautiful place. Even though not everyone wanted to hear what we had to say, people would welcome us in. They'd give us glasses of water. They'd wish us well, even when they said, "We don't want to hear what you have to say." I felt wrapped in love and supported in so many different ways.

So yeah, that was my experience on a mission. I served in some leadership capacities too. We visited other companionships throughout Nevada, northern California, and northern Arizona. And so we had a really nice wider view of the area too.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Now in that part of the United States is a fairly significant Indigenous population. Did you have much interaction at all or any with the Indigenous communities?

JOHN BORROWS: Not so much. The Paiute communities are there and the Shoshone communities are there. And there were people from these communities who I got to meet who were part of the church there. But Nevada is not like Arizona, where there are twenty-two tribes that make up 25 percent of the state's land base. And we meet some of the Indigenous folks in northern Arizona, in the Peach Springs area, for instance, who were very, very much a part of our church congregations. But in the other parts of the state, Indigenous peoples would tend to be intermingled without our units, as opposed to some predominantly Indigenous congregations you would find if you went further into Arizona or in some places in Utah.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And what would you say about your Anishinaabe heritage and that early kind of spiritual experiences you had of encountering God's presence in nature? How do they inform your Latter-day Saint faith?

JOHN BORROWS: I think my Anishinaabe and Christian spirituality complement one another. For example, when I was a young man I went on a Vision Quest, just like some other Anishinaabe people. After preparation, fasting and being alone in the forest I found myself in a closer relationship with the natural world and with my Creator—the power we often call the Great Spirit, Gitche-Manidoo. I have also prayed and fasted throughout my life as part of my Christian faith. This has also brought me closer to God and the earth's beauty.

Another example relates to my everyday life. I'm a daily runner, and every morning I'm outside, I'm praying and I'm trying to receive the beauty that the world has to offer. Of course, you don't have to be Anishinaabe or spiritual to do this. But being Anishinaabe and LDS, I find a particular meaning in greeting the day in this way. It sets the right tone for what I do. Before running, I wake up in the morning and I study scriptures for about an hour, and I'm very wide in my study. For example, I'll study the Old Testament. Right now I'm going through Robert Alter's translation of the Hebrew Bible. He's a Jewish scholar. And I'm loving his translation and insights. Before that, my friend Ben Berger gave me a copy of the Tanakh and the Etz Hayim, and I was able to read (in translation) the Torah with the commentary around that.

And then, recently, for about two years I was reading a translation of the Qur'an every day. There's *The Study Quran* by S.H. Nasr that was produced about maybe seven years ago. I also read Buddhist texts, such as the Dhammapada; in fact I was reading it this morning. Thomas Merton is someone I very much admire, so he's often in the rotation of reading. I also read the Book of Mormon as a part of my

study too, and the New Testament. And right now I am reading a translation of the Bible by Eugene Peterson, called *The Message*.

I'm walking in a world that's both Anishinaabe and Christian, and I feel whole, I feel complete. I feel like they are challenging me to do the same thing, which is to love God and love creation, love our fellow beings and all that's given us.

So anyways, I read these sorts of things, and then I go out running, and as I'm running, I'm carrying the ideas in my mind, and at the same time I am also carrying my love and appreciation for the beauty of the world. And I feel like this practice sets my day and helps me with the rest of what follows. And yeah, I mean, we could have a conversation right now about some of these things, and that's my daily spiritual practice.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Well, if there's one theme, I would say, John, that's come out in many of these interviews that I've undertaken for this project, it's this idea of integration, that as human beings, we are tripartite body, mind, soul. And to try and separate out different aspects of ourselves is really a bit of a fool's errand. And so we were talking before we began the interview of this, I would call it certainly a very false narrative, that somehow Indigenous Canadians can't live out a faith tradition that is somehow foreign or perceived as being foreign to what might be called Indigenous spirituality. How do you respond to that narrative that is present, especially in the media these days and in various elite circles?

JOHN BORROWS: So, I understand this important narrative, because there have been many challenges that Indigenous peoples have encountered with many traditions. I see these challenges in my own profession in the way the common law undermines Indigenous communities. Christianity has also marginalized Indigenous peoples, and I don't want to ignore this problem either. It's huge. But for myself, I find the teachings of Jesus coincide with my love for others, and for the earth. I love his invitation to, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they toil not, neither do they spin, but Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like unto one of them." I feel this verse invites me to find God's love for us in the lilies of the field—in nature. Or when I think about his parable of the mustard seed I find my hope for the future expands. Jesus taught that if you have a faith the size of a grain of a mustard seed, and you cultivate that seeded faith, it can grow to be a great tree that will accommodate others. Faith can provide nourishment and shelter when it is generative and expansive. I also appreciate Jesus's teaching about how seeds that fall in different types of ground prosper according to the ground's broader conditions. Jesus is comparing the grounds of our soul, to the seeds of truth found in his teachings. From this teaching, I look at the earth and I look within myself, and I see the connection regarding the need for receptivity. Or I think of the words of Isaiah, who teaches us about the Creator's power through coastlines and the mountains, or about how faith helps us rise up like eagles.

And there's so much in the tradition that has us find God in the beauty of the world that surrounds us. And so for me, those aren't two things. I read those scriptures and I

practice Anishinaabe spirituality, and I feel like there's an integration. I'm not walking in two worlds at that moment. I'm walking in a world that's both Anishinaabe and Christian, and I feel whole, I feel complete. I feel like they are challenging me to do the same thing, which is to love God and love creation, love our fellow beings and all that's given us. And so I delight in trying to find that connectivity. So, for me, my faith is putting those things together.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. Well, thank you very much. Any last thoughts you'd like to offer on some of these topics that we've covered?

JOHN BORROWS: There's such a beauty to the world, I think this is what I want to say. I really do believe in grace. I think we receive blessings that are unbidden. We are living beneath our privileges, there are so many opportunities for us to receive what is immanent . And that's part of what I'm trying to live into. I want to say, yes, there's a place for work and striving, and as we were talking about earlier, being active in a faith tradition, but there's also a place to be open, to receive what's already present. And for me, that's what I'm trying to do, is clear away some of the world's distracting clutter, so that I can be in a space of receptivity and peace. Peace is what I feel often in this world because of this approach. And there's a lot of turmoil. And I work in a field that's about adversarial systems, but that's not all that I deal with in the world. And my faith brings me peace.

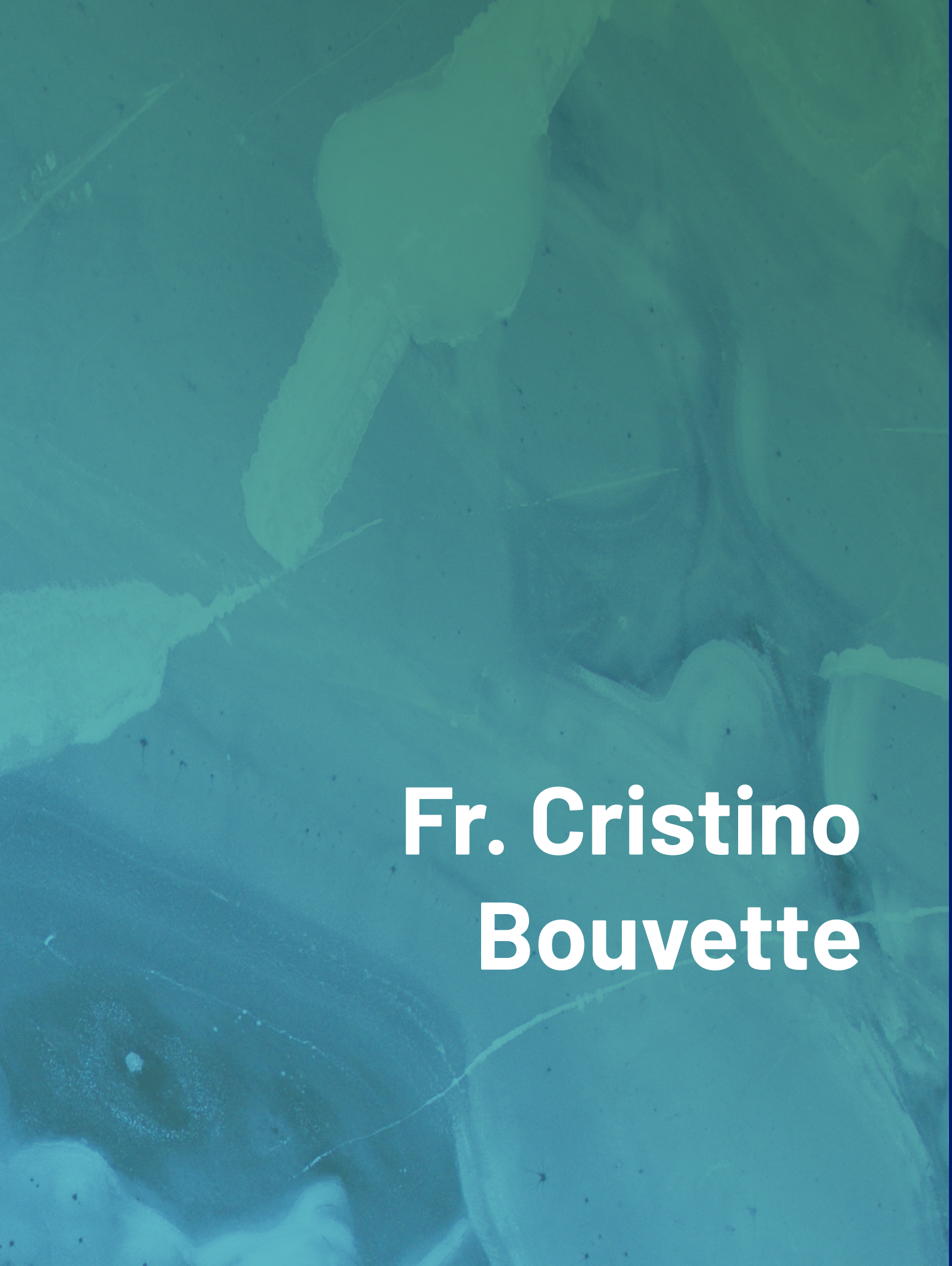
FR. DCN. ANDREW: That same peace that eight-year-old John Borrows encountered on the land.

JOHN BORROWS: Absolutely.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. Well, thank you, John. God bless you. God bless your work.

JOHN BORROWS: Thank you so much.

Photos provided by John Borrows.



Fr. Cristino Bouvette

Fr. Cristino Bouvette

This interview took place in Kemptville, Ontario, on September 9, 2022.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Father Cristino, please introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your Indigenous background.

FR. CRISTINO BOUVETTE: My name is Father Cristino Bouvette. I was born and raised in Medicine Hat, southeastern Alberta, very close to the Saskatchewan border. Both of my parents eventually found their way there. My mother was born in Calgary to her Italian immigrant parents who arrived in Canada in the late 1950s and settled in Calgary and eventually moved to Medicine Hat for work. My father was born to his Métis and Cree-Ojibwe parents in the 1960s, but then as a teenager moved to Medicine Hat also looking for work. There he found my mother, and as they say, the rest is history. So, my Indigenous background comes through my father's side.

My father's mother was born to a long-time member of the Saddle Lake First Nation, which is a Cree First Nation by origin except that over time others of different Indigenous backgrounds had entered their community. And so my great-great-great-grandfather was actually from the area around Lake Simcoe in southern Ontario, and an Ojibwe man. Having moved out west, he met his eventual wife at Saddle Lake, a Cree woman. And so in my lineage through my grandmother's side, I have Ojibwe, I have Cree, and then I have also the fact that her mother was a British woman. And so there's British and Welsh through that side. My grandfather is Métis, and in a certain sense you could say properly Métis in the traditional meaning of the word. His father was from Quebec and his mother was a Cree and Sioux-Dakota woman from down in North Dakota. They met and moved up into central Alberta, where they homesteaded. And so that's where my grandfather was born and raised.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me about your Christian faith, what it means to you, and how it shapes your life.

FR. CRISTINO BOUVETTE: Well, I think I could begin by saying that my faith means everything to me. My faith truly defines who I understand myself to be. This is because faith uniquely transcends all of the various parts of what make us who we are, both informing and being informed by them. I find faith in my life and experience to be a unifying factor of all the other varying and contributing parts that make up who I am. But it is my faith that holds them all together and really gives them the fullness of their meaning. And so, being a Roman Catholic is the most important part of who I am and how I understand myself to be. Of course, as a Catholic priest I must take

that one step further, in that I don't see my priestly ministry and identity as simply my job or career choice. It is the essence of my identity as the outcome of my faith.

My faith has inspired what has led me to choose this path. Indeed, those two things together, my faith and my vocation, truly fulfill the essence of my being. I believe the many other features of who I am are interwoven with those realities. After ordination I was first assigned to the Tsuut'ina Nation, where I served in a parish community on the southwestern boundary of Calgary. There I had the opportunity to serve not only in what I guess you could say was a standard city parish in southwest Calgary but also having the opportunity to go routinely out to the reserve that we also had the pastoral care of. It gave me an opportunity from day one of my ordained ministry to be ministering among people who I felt a special and unique closeness to because of my own Indigenous heritage. This was to my advantage from the very beginning. I think any time, for those people in particular, when someone new comes, they're especially cautious being on the outskirts of the city. They don't have at Tsuut'ina a properly defined national identity, if you will, as some of the other First Nations experience, given the remoteness of their community, and so they're cautious about who this person is walking into their community. So there was an instant removal of that barrier, not due to my priestly identity but the fact that I was one of them, culturally speaking. That built a bridge which then facilitated the exercise of my priestly ministry. It was a beautiful experience for me to see just how complementary these realities could be. I saw myself first and foremost as the Catholic priest who was coming to minister to these people, but it was in fact through my Indigenous identity that my priestly ministry was allowed to flourish and I could serve them fruitfully.

In receiving the gospel, the only way we can be guaranteed its ability to be understood and to be related to is if it's delivered in a manner that we could say is inculturated.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: In speaking of that cultural reality, you prompted a little thought in my mind and that is about the inculturation of the gospel. Could you speak a little bit on your understanding of that, because there are certain narratives out there today that would see that as being somehow inauthentic.

FR. CRISTINO BOUVETTE: The entire purpose of the gospel is for the sake of being appropriated by the people who receive it. If the people who hear the gospel believe it's their responsibility to turn the gospel into something culturally familiar to them, then they have not received this living word of God, this proclamation of good news. They're rather imposing something upon it. It has to be understood in the reverse: that the gospel is brought to and announced to a group of people who pre-exist that gospel and then who receive it or reject it. In receiving the gospel, the only way we can be guaranteed its ability to be understood and to be related to is if it's delivered in a manner that we could say is inculturated.

I worry about what I see happening in our more modern times, not exclusively now but for maybe several generations. It is the idea of there needing to be some kind of a reversal, where our cultures are imposed upon the gospel in such a way that we now think it will be relatable. In actual fact, it was using cultural expressions to the advantage of those who first came to proclaim the gospel that made it understandable to them in the first place. That's what gives them freedom. That's what allows them now having been able to clearly understand what is being presented to them, in language familiar to them, in a way that looks familiar and acceptable to them, to accept or reject it. It honours their freedom for the gospel to have been inculturated for their sake. But, it is a contradiction to imagine that we have to make the gospel our own. We should not impose upon it how we think, or how we live, or what we believe, in order to make it relatable.

If it's not relatable as it's presented to you, the failure is on the part of the one trying to do the presenting, not in the content of what's being presented. This is a distinction that has not been clearly understood more lately. In the early proclamation of the gospel, at least here in Canada, very sincere efforts were taken to make it clear that this is the gospel that is being proclaimed, and we will do everything in our power to proclaim it in a way that you will be able to receive it, and then you will accept it or reject it.

The overwhelming majority of Indigenous people in Canada accepted it. Most Indigenous people in this country would in their present state or in their family's history be recognized as Christians, and I owe a debt of gratitude to my Indigenous grandmother, who I always called kokum because she insisted on reminding us that we did not have the gospel imposed upon us. We did not have Christian faith imposed upon us because of her time in the residential school or her father's time in the trade school that he was sent to. No, it was because our family freely chose to receive the saving message of Jesus Christ and lived it and had continued to pass it down.

That is an authentic inculturation of the gospel. And so I think it's important that we keep clear in our mind which direction the inculturation is going, so that it's actually at the service of people's freedom and not people transforming what has been the immutable message of salvation promised in Jesus Christ for two thousand years.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: So, what you're saying is that the gospel is not just for the apostles sitting in the upper room on the day of Pentecost?

FR. CRISTINO BOUVETTE: That's exactly right. They had to find a way to proclaim it, and it was manifested in Pentecost itself. They were made capable of communicating the gospel in a way that people who first heard it could understand it. That is always how the gospel needs to be proclaimed. If it was just meant to stay with the apostles and then everyone else got to turn it into whatever they wanted, there'd be no church.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: What would you say is your view on how your faith as an Indigenous Christian is understood by others?

FR. CRISTINO BOUVETTE: Well, I was alluding to it I think already in my previous response, because there is the latent assumption that if Indigenous people are Christians, it's because they were coerced or forced into being Christians. I find that incredibly insulting to Indigenous people's intelligence and freedom. My grandmother was not tricked into becoming something that she didn't want to be, and then tricked into staying that way for ninety-nine years and eleven months of her life. She was a Christian from the day of her birth, and she remained a Christian until the day of her death. And so that was not by the consequence of some imposition. I really think that we are moving in the direction of having this assumption that if someone is a Christian and an Indigenous person, it's surely not because they want it to be, and if there are some, they're a rare exception. Perhaps we are now in a time when it's a rare exception that there are Indigenous people who want to remain Christians, and they're free to reject it and they will bear whatever consequence that comes from that decision. But it was their decision to make, and it was always their decision to make, because faith is not faith if it's not free. If you are not choosing this, then whatever it feels like or whatever you think it is, it's not what we understand faith is supposed to be from a Christian perspective, from the Christian tradition.

I do believe that probably the majority of Canadians at this time, out of some mistaken notion of guilt for whatever their cultural or ethnic background is, think they are somehow responsible for Indigenous people having had something thrust upon them that they didn't want. But I would say, give us a little more credit than that and assume that if there is an Indigenous person who continues to persevere in the Christian faith it is because they want to, because they understand why they have chosen to in the first place, and they remain committed to it. We should be respectful of that.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: What do you think is the particular role of Indigenous Christians in the process of reconciliation today in Canada? We hear a lot about the

role of the churches, the government, and Indigenous leaders, but what about the people who are in the pews? What is their role in this process of reconciliation and, by extension, forgiveness?

FR. CRISTINO BOUVETTE: I feel badly to put it in such blunt terms, but I believe that Indigenous Christians in this country right now are living in the time of new martyrdom. I highly doubt it would ever be the martyrdom that costs them their physical mortal life, but they are ostracized and humiliated sometimes within their own communities if they openly express their Christian or Catholic faith. I have dealt with a number of Indigenous Christians who are very faithful in the practice of their respective Christian denomination who are insulted by their fellow band members and on the reserves on which they live. Sometimes even threatened that they have betrayed their people.

That is so sad and so shocking. Yet their steadfastness and their ability to persevere in the face of being slandered or threatened I think serves as a witness to all of us, not even just other Indigenous people but for the entire country to see. For the rest of you running around apologizing for everything nowadays, the apologies that you're making on behalf of Indigenous people who shouldn't be Christians fly in the face of these people who are willingly remaining Christians despite the personal affronts that they suffer. We should be coming to their aid with our support and our thanks and our recognition of their good example and therefore our encouragement. And I think that those who refuse to see it in those terms, or perpetuate this anticolonial perspective that anyone who's a Christian is just a victim of colonization, are overlooking, as I said earlier, the intelligence and the competence of their fellow brothers and sisters who were capable of making this decision.

If there's going to be reconciliation, it's going to have to come from individuals who remain hurt, choosing to move forward in a path of forgiveness if they feel that they can. And they will be immensely helped along that path of personal liberation and healing by looking to the example of brothers and sisters of theirs who have already found their way much further down that path. For so many of them, they would say it's to their faith that they attribute the most assistance in having made that decision in the first place. Thus reconciliation is very much bound up in individual decisions to forgive. Otherwise, we are just repeating from a nicer perspective the imposition of the church upon people, but now saying, "We will be reconciled." Well, that's not anyone else's decision to make except the individual's. If we're going to honour the individual, they have to be free to choose. And I think a great contribution toward their decision to choose that forgiveness and healing and reconciliation will be the example of their Indigenous brothers and sisters who have already chosen that.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Thank you. Is there any other thing you'd like to say or comment on before we finish the interview?

FR. CRISTINO BOUVETTE: Well, only just that conversations like this, I think, help inch us ever closer, and I hope that they continue.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Thank you, Father Cristino.

FR. CRISTINO BOUVETTE: Thank you.

Photos provided by Rev. Fr. Cristino Bouvette.


Marilyn
Crowchild

Marilyn Crowchild

This interview took place in Calgary, Alberta, on November 4, 2022.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Marilyn, thank you so very much for participating in this project. It's wonderful to meet you. And just to kick off our interview, tell me a little bit about yourself, your Indigenous background, what you do, your family, that sort of thing.

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Well, I work full time out in the Tsuut'ina Nation, and then I have prayer meetings out there once a week. My family and my background is Blackfoot First Nation. God just called me at a very young age and to my faith walk.

I also thought this would be very fitting to give you a little bit of my background.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. So here in a photo is King Charles when he was Prince of Wales, holding a pipe along with an Indigenous elder. What was the occasion, Marilyn?

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Yes, this was my grandpa, and it was a ceremony in 1977 marking the one-hundredth anniversary of the signing of the peace treaty with Treaty 7 peoples.[1] Canada is a peaceful country, and we signed the peace treaties back then to enable peace, to bring peace.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. So you have deep roots in that First Nation then with your grandfather. Was he chief at that time?

MARILYN CROWCHILD: No, no, he wasn't a chief. He just sat in there.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me a little bit, Marilyn, about your Christian faith, what church you're part of. Tell me a little bit about its role in your life.

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Well, when you contacted me, I immediately prayed about it. I mean, anything that is brought up or anything where there is an agenda, I always bring God into it and I pray about it and I ask God what does he want me to share? What does he want me to speak on? Because ultimately, first, he's my King, he's my Lord, he's my leader. So whatever he calls me to do, I just faithfully go forward and do that. So what he has put on my heart was to share Psalm 86. And I believe that's just like a prayer starter for the First Nations. And what God puts on my heart is to encourage others. We come to God and we trust in him. We believe in him. He's our

1 Treaty 7 was the last of the various Numbered Treaties reached between the Dominion government and the Plains First Nations. It was signed by the Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, Stoney-Nakoda, and Tsuut'ina.

Yeshua. He's Jehovah. He's the God who provides. He's the God who anchors, who makes a way.

He's God. He's the Creator. Like it says in the book of Genesis, he created the heavens and the earth. He's our Creator, and so we must first believe and come to him, he that ultimately exists, and be diligent. That's the one thing he puts on our heart. And what he wants me to talk about is to be diligent, to be diligent in seeking the Lord. He's the rewarder of those who earnestly seek him, as it says in Hebrews 11:6. But let's go back to Psalms 86:8–17. I'll just state that, but I won't read through it, but that's the beginning of the prayer he wants to say to all First Nations. That's a prayer covering for them to come to God, to come and believe in him.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful.

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Yeah. Hebrews 11:6, we must first believe that he is God and that he exists. So we have to be diligent in seeking the Lord and need to be consistent in prayer also. We can't just say one prayer and then just expect it to be done. We need to be faithful and pray daily. Daily. He says pray all the time when we're at work, when we're cooking, when we're cleaning the house, whatever it is, we need to be faithful in prayer. And it could be just in practical ways. We just come to God and we say, "God, I need you." Or we say just those simple words, "God, help." It's just simple like that. He says that when we seek him, we shall find him, and he's going to hear our prayers. As he was with Moses, he's going to be with us also. As when he was with Abraham, the father of nations, he's going to be with us also, because he has been there since the beginning of time.

He has plans for our life, and he's going to be there through all of our lives, through all our days, until he calls us home. So right now it's just simple, simple. See, God, he's not looking for somebody who's perfect. He's not looking for everybody who's got all their ducks in a row. He's not waiting to get your accounting on the line to see if you have all your numbers in order. God knows all that. And he's just looking for somebody to say yes, just a simple yes. Trust in him and say yes, and he's going to work everything out. Right? In Matthew 6:33 he says, "All these things shall be added unto you." When we seek him, he's going to add all these things on to us. He's going to prepare the path, he's going to permit our footsteps to establish our paths, to make every crooked path straight, to order our footsteps.

We must put our trust in him daily, building that relationship, and say, "God, what do you have for me to do today? What do you want for me to do today?" Because we're all part of a servanthood. We serve. We serve each other. We serve one another, love one another, our brethren, and seek God. The only way it's going to work is if we build a relationship with God and then we go forward from there.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And this is true for all people, including First Nations people?

MARILYN CROWCHILD: To seek the Lord? Well, if they want to come to know the Lord, it would be up to them. But what God has put on my heart when I started my ministry and started walking with God was that I needed to surrender everything to

him. And I have. I surrendered and I trusted him, and there was a spiritual battle between my spirit and the flesh. But once God had brought me through that and I came to God, and he worked things out for me. What he put on my heart at that time was, "I'm calling you into the First Nations. Come and love the First Nations, come and love your people." And so when I pray for my people and I go out there to Tsuut'ina and I minister to other people whom he put on my heart, he said, "Love them just as Christ has loved the church. Forgive one another just as Christ has forgiven us, and he'll forgive us of our sins." And he said he's going to break every chain. He's the God who delivers; he's the God who anchors. He sustains, and he's just there for us.

What he put on my heart at that time was, "I'm calling you into the First Nations. Come and love the First Nations, come and love your people."

FR. DCN. ANDREW: So tell me about how that walk began. Were you raised in the church, or did you come to that later in life? Tell me a little bit about your own personal history as a Christian.

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Well, my family, they were Catholic. They're still Catholic. So we were brought up in a Catholic way. And at the same time, in the traditional way. We had sweat lodges, we prayed with the sweet grass, and we grew up with the cultures and the different things, and we learned our language in the school. But just coming into my teens, it just wasn't enough. I just felt like there was a piece missing in my life, and I didn't quite know what it was. And I met a guy and he told me, he said, "Tell me about your God." And so I told him, and he said, "Well, let me tell you about my God. I'll tell you about my Creator." And when he told me about his Creator, it just inspired me, because he said, "My Creator answers my prayers."

And I said, "Oh, okay." So, I listened to him as he spoke, and then he said, "My Creator is Jesus, and I'm Christian." And so that kind of just sat with me for a while, but I pondered about it as the days went on. One day somebody in my family got sick, and I came and I went to go smudge with the sweet grass. And my prayers weren't answered. I didn't see any results. They were still sick. And so I came back to them and smudged the second time, and still nothing. I didn't see any results. And so I remembered what that guy told me. He said, "My Creator, my God, answers my prayers." So I thought, well, I'll try this. So I came, and I was standing at my window and I looked and I said, "God, if you're real, please answer my prayers." It wasn't a prayer for myself, it was a prayer for the sick.

And I prayed, and I offered my prayer and my faith, and I said, "God, please heal them." And they were healed. And that's when I saw the results, and that's when I came to God and I said, "He's the God who answers my prayers, and I'm going to stick with him."

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And how old were you at that time?

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Probably fifteen or sixteen.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wow.

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Yeah.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: So tell me a bit about the Christian community you're part of now. Tell me a little bit about your church.

MARILYN CROWCHILD: My church? Well, see, the church is not just a building. I mean, on the contrary, it's the body of Christ. It's the church. We need to build one another up. I mean, churches are good and fellowship is good, and I agree with that. But at the same time, it's out there. It's the sick, it's the lame, it's the mute, it's the needy who need the people of the body of Christ to go out there and minister to others and to do outreach work. And that's the kind of thing that God had put on my heart: to reach those who are suffering, reach those who need prayers, because not all of them have vehicles. Not all of them have money or bus passes to make it to their church. So he sends the people out there to go and minister to them, to bring the church to them.

So, that's the thing God has put on my heart. And I think that goes back to the time when Jesus said, "Which of you if you having a son or an ox who fell in the well on a Sunday, on the Sabbath day, wouldn't you go down and rescue him and bring him up?" Yeah. So, that's the kind of thing that sticks with me. And so that's why I go out there. I minister to the people, and I'm so thankful, because God has just put a grace on it that when I go out there to minister to people, they listen. He's put this on my heart. He says, "I'll put the word in your mouth. I'll fill you up. And you go out there and minister to them, and you don't worry about if they're going to accept it or not. I'm going to work that out for them."

So I believe, and I trust in God what I share as an evangelist, in speaking to others. God pours into them, and God is going to work that out, that because after you share it it's between God and them now. Now it's between them. Yeah. We just provide.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And so is there in Tsuut'ina First Nation a congregation that you're a part of, or do you lead worship there on Sundays? What does that look like?

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Well, right now I just go anywhere God calls me. See, he's my high chief, he's my high priest. I answer to him. If he calls me to go to Siksika, or he tells me to go to Morley, or he tells me to go to Brocket and Eden Valley, or anywhere he tells me to go, I go. That's my high rank, so I answer to him, and go where he calls me to go. There is the St. Barnabas Church out in the Tsuut'ina Nation, and we get together there for prayers. When they have prayers in the community or funerals and things like that where they need us to get together, when they invite me, I go out there and I help them out. So anywhere they want me to go and help out, I'm there.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. Tell me how you integrate First Nations culture with your Christian faith. Do you follow a particular Christian tradition like Pentecostal or evangelical? What does that look like to you?

MARILYN CROWCHILD: I mean, I just go and do what God calls me to do. I can't really label it. I mean, I didn't even know I was an evangelist until somebody came and told me. They said that we see you as an evangelist. All I knew is I just wanted to go out there and share the word. I was just hungry to reach the people and hungry for prayer and spending time with God and seeing this plan that he's going to unveil and go forth for the days to come. It says in Jeremiah 29:11, "For he knows the plans he has for us, declares the Lord, plans to prosper us and not to harm us, plans to give us a hope and a future." So, I just answer him and how he calls me while going forward with First Nation tradition. I mean, I don't get too involved in those kind of things, but I respect and I continue to preach the gospel to my aunties, to my uncles, and my family.

I thank Jesus because he has given me a grace to open up those homes and those doors to allow me to go into people's homes. And they've accepted and listen and heard the gospel. What Yeshua speaks is a direct connection from God through us, through the vessel. When he pours in us and he fills our cup, it's for us to go out there and fill up others. We're not to be selfish. God didn't call us to be selfish. If he puts a calling on our life, it's to go out there and do what God has called us to do.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And you said a little bit about this earlier on, Marilyn, but what would you say is the calling of First Nations people when they hear the gospel preached? What are they being called to do in terms of having that relationship with Christ?

I pray for truth and reconciliation. I pray that there is a coexistence. We have been coexistent since the beginning of time. Jesus loves us all.

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Well, it depends what reserve you go to. I mean, each reserve and each culture is different, but if you go in there with respect and you go in there showing a respect to one another, respect to the elders, because everybody has a different opinion. But I believe when God has ordained somebody, like when he ordained Moses and he ordained Abraham and others, he just makes a way for that. He makes a way for them and for his children to be those bridge makers, and God's looking for somebody to stand in the gap, to work with him to reach the people. And that's what we should do. He does the work on the inside of us first and then on the outside for our family, our friends, and then the world. John 3:17, he didn't send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world, to save them because he loved them.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: There's so much conversation now in the country broadly about reconciliation, forgiveness between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. Given your ministry, what role do you see your ministry having in that process of reconciliation?

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Just again, trusting in God. Continue to preach the gospel, bring out the Word of God. I have a friend who comes to bring me Bibles. I honestly don't know where she gets them, but one day I'll come home from work and I'll have a big box of Bibles sitting on my porch. And I'm thankful for that, because when I travel, I bring out the Word. And even though some of the Bibles may be gently used, I accept them because the Word is the Word, just like currency is currency. Doesn't matter how old a dime is, you can still go spend it anywhere. Right?

The Word is the Word. So that's what I do and continue to go forward. I pray for truth and reconciliation. I pray that there is a coexistence. We have been coexistent since the beginning of time. Jesus loves us all. It doesn't matter what country they come from, where they live. Jesus has called us to work together, and he's going to knit us together to work with one another, to build up the body of Christ. That's the main goal, is building up the body of Christ for the nation so that she is without blemish.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. Thank you very much. I appreciate your time and for your witness and all of your service. God bless you.

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Thank you.

Photos taken by Rev. Dr. Andrew P. W. Bennett.

Jeff Decontie

Jeff Decontie

This interview took place in Ottawa, Ontario, on September 29, 2022.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Jeff, tell me a little bit about yourself and your Indigenous background.

JEFF DECONTIE: I'm Jeff Decontie. I was born and raised here in Ottawa. I'm thirty-five years old and happily married. I've got three crazy, crazy boys. So, we're in the middle of this sort of crazy life right now. We're in that stage.

My dad's community, and therefore mine, is Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg. It's about two hours north of Ottawa. My mom's from Kahnawake, and she would be a Mohawk Catholic. She would call herself that. I don't think my dad is practicing. He did go to a residential school when he was five for, I think, eight years. It was just outside of Kenora, St. Mary's Indian Residential School, and then for the rest of his schooling in Pointe Bleue, just north of Quebec City, although I actually don't know where it is because I haven't googled it. So, I was raised entirely in the city, just one of those urban Indigenous people from an Algonquin background. I work for the federal government right now in Indigenous Services. I articled for the Justice Department, and I'm probably going to be a lifelong public servant.

So that's just a little bit about me. My wife is not Indigenous. She's from just north of Toronto in the Uxbridge area. We've been married for about ten years—twelve years. Twelve. I definitely said twelve. Ha ha.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me a little bit about your Christian faith, what it means for you, and how it shapes your life.

JEFF DECONTIE: As for my faith, it's a big question, right? Yeah, it's a struggle. The first thing that comes to my head when I'm saying that it's a struggle is the Old Testament story of Israel wrestling with the angel or wrestling with God. He's just constantly wrestling and getting hurt by wrestling with God, not physically for me, I guess, but intellectually. It's a struggle because you have all that baggage, and people let you know about the baggage every day, about the baggage of what Christianity has done. But it's what I think of as a calling. I'm like C.S. Lewis. He's just the last Englishman kicking and screaming to the faith who finally just says, "Okay, God, you got me." It's the same thing with me. It's just God plucking me out and then taking me for a ride. It's been a bit crazy. It's not really good for the career, it's not really good for mental health, if you want to call it that, at times. But it is what it is. He called me, and there's a kind of election mindset that I've had ever since I've entered the faith.

I've had problems with choosing, because I know that choosing doesn't work, and I know that you can be the smartest person in the world, and try to present it to people, and they're just not going to go with you. And so I had to just let it be with the Holy Spirit. He's in charge, and He works with people in His own time. So that's coloured my faith and how I go out and live my faith. I'm probably not as evangelical as I should be, if by that term we mean missionaries.

For me, conversations pop up at work, probably once every three months, and it's just for ten minutes and that's it. That's all the time that person gives. If I walk away from that, I feel bad. So I don't do that. I try to talk, but I don't actively go out and try to convert people because I don't know whether you can do that as a public servant. Outside of lunch hour, maybe. I don't know.

But it's also time-consuming, and I've found that when people ask questions, they're more open to hearing. This is what I've been starting to write about and wrestle with in journals. When I'm engaging with people who are secular, if you want to call them that, in the cities, it's hard to actually present Jesus rising from the dead or talking about the supernatural, until they actually believe in something as crazy as people manipulating the weather, people praying for things like changing the weather. If they're not even there, if the secular mindset has actually influenced them so much that they don't even believe the supernatural, there is very little ground that I can make with presenting the gospel. It's going to be inevitably intellectual. It's going to be cold and post-Descartes.

And I can't even talk to them about stuff that the church fathers were seeing every day or what we're seeing in Asia or in Africa right now that we don't see in the West anymore. Because we've killed the supernatural, in cities anyways. So, if I'm talking to the average person under the age of forty, they are supernaturally dead almost.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And do you think there's a distinction between urban areas and rural areas in this regard?

JEFF DECONTIE: Absolutely, absolutely. When I went to a northern reserve with my wife ten years ago we taught there for part of the summer. We saw some weird stuff on the land, weather changing, and then right around the corner in Kenora, it's not the same weather at all. We saw people under an influence, not just drugs, but just something was going on in terms of demons sticking to people, playing with, just attacking people. And that would have been normal, a normal understanding of people. You can't prove this stuff; it's just by experience. You see what nature can do, the possibilities. Compare that with being educated in the city, with five years or six years studying critical theory, engaged with the text in this small room, thinking, and then you start asking yourself some questions. If it's all Western thought, then it's all about the individual in you, and you're outside of your community. And so this has been my intellectual walk the past year: How is secularism affecting Indigenous identity? Most people wouldn't admit that it does. Most don't care. They're not even naming it, because it's this big thing that's non-judgmental in the background; secularism is neutral. And of course anybody who studies it knows that's false, but

it's influencing Indigenous identity I think particularly for the younger folks. With more of us growing up in the cities, in multicultural environments outside of our community, listening to individualism pumped through our media and our books, to say that that's not going to influence the minds of Indigenous people I think is really naive.

We're not saying we're less Indigenous, because I know that that's false too. It's a changing Indigenous identity that's becoming a little more married to Western thought. I think that affects identities. I think that affects sexualities. I think that affects how Indigenous individuals express themselves. I think that's going to influence family life. It's going to be huge, and if religion's gone, something else is going to replace that. And if it's idol worship, it's going to be media culture that we really start to worship.

So, the big bad beast that I'm zeroing in on is no longer Christianity. I think that Christianity is the big bad wolf now among some circles, but that sounds like the golden oldies. I think most youths wouldn't even declare themselves traditional or Christian. They would say, "I'm nothing, I'm different, I don't care." Well, they are something. They would be secular, and they would be something of a utilitarian "Whatever makes you happy." That's the dominant expression for Indigenous youth, just like other non-Indigenous youth.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: So it seems like there's not much to distinguish between youth that are Indigenous or non-Indigenous in that respect.

JEFF DECONTIE: I don't think so. That would be controversial to say. I think it's going to change depending on what city you're in. I know in Winnipeg there's way more of a collective identity among Indigenous people. It's not the same kind of urban life as in Toronto, say.

Now, I'm one to talk, because I'm born and raised in the city and I speak English. Most of my problems, I think, for mental health and wellness come from the fact that as a teenager I was alienated and isolated and not really attached to not only community life but family in general. There's this lie of freedom that if you're just yourself you can express yourself and know your culture. It becomes all about you and you choosing. You can just plug yourself in and you'll be fine. Well, I tried that, and it didn't really go well. I had to actually keep searching for something truer and something more ancient. It involves not just a text, it involves people. And so, if we get a little too individualistic in academia or Indigenous thought or how we

express things, and we turn it into only about ourselves, I don't think we're going to be talking about either religion or traditionalism. I don't think we're going to be talking about that. I think we're going to have a lot more problems in Indigenous communities if we go the isolated individualistic route.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Can you maybe tell me a little bit about that coming into faith that you experienced, and in particular your own Christian community and how that has nurtured you?

JEFF DECONTIE: Okay, so basically there's very little Indigenous Christian community coming into the faith. I came to faith at Trent University. So I came in smoking and drinking and not knowing who I was, and I came out a Christian and giving those things up except for the occasional alcoholic beverage. As far as I know, I'm still allowed to partake. Ha ha. But yeah, it was a lonely walk. It would've been easier sometimes if I was not Indigenous. That's the way it felt, because most of the people around are white, or if they're not white, they're from outside of North America. And so, entering the faith had a very European flavour, but it was always theological. I came in through C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*: just an introduction and give it a chance. I think I was reading *Mere Christianity* at the same time as writing a paper on euthanasia in moral philosophy. I found him to be more pleasant reading. So I found myself reading him on Friday night as opposed to doing what I should have been doing, in focusing on the philosophy paper. I was arguing in favour of euthanasia at the time as I was reading C.S. Lewis.

So I came into the faith very intellectually, and it has remained so, and I don't really say that with any pride, because I wish it was less so at times. You see people praying, charismatic people, Pentecostals, and there's something to that kind of expression and you want that. But I'm not that person. That's not my character. Of course this doesn't imply that Pentecostals cannot be intellectuals concerning the faith.

In terms of my Baptist faith, that was the way I entered the faith. People around me had that background, or were non-denominational in background. Denominations were less important. It was who you were following. And [John] Calvin was a big person who I encountered, not just among older people but among the people I was going to school with as well. We were reading him or reading about people who were interpreting him. So, that colours the faith I walk in.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: You were baptized at twenty-two?

JEFF DECONTIE: Baptized at twenty-two in a water tub thing, whatever that is, whatever we Protestants do. It's embarrassing that I actually don't know what it's called. Yeah, it was just a tub in Peterborough. I was baptized Catholic when I was a baby, but sort of just stumbled away. It's not a dramatic story such as where people say, "Oh that happened, and I left." I think the average person, including myself, just stopped listening to the radio frequencies, and then all of a sudden two years later you're like, "Oh yeah, I used to be that, and now I'm not." So it was returning to the faith, but from the Protestant mindset. Now, the way I think about my identities and my Christianity is complicated. I'm an urban Indigenous person who's not really

attached to the community as much as I should be; it's sort of like you're too Indian to be white and you're too white to be an Indian.

And then there are my political beliefs too: you're too conservative to be a liberal, and you're a little too liberal to be a conservative. And in my religion, a little too Catholic to be strictly a Protestant, and a little too Protestant to be a good Catholic. So you're sort of stuck in between, and it's very lonely. And it reminded me of my teens, when I was very lonely. And so the religion didn't provide as much comfort as I thought it would. But that's not the point of a religion. It's not.

That's what has kept me going. If this is to make me feel happy, our culture can provide happiness in the very physical and material realm. This isn't about happiness. So I got that education early on in the faith, but it was still tough. It's been a very lonely battle. And it's wrestling with the faith constantly.

C.S. Lewis has that analogy about the hallway in the big Christian house. I got into the hallway at twenty-two, but I didn't pick a room for a while. I don't know the denominational room, but he said you're going to have to pick a room sooner or later. You can't stay in the hall forever. So I think that's sort of the mindset. It's been slow. I've been generally more interested in Christendom, the big hall, as opposed to the specific identity or denomination. It's the same thing for Indigenous Christians. We know who's really into their faith if they've lost so much. The stories I am more interested in from an Indigenous mindset are, once they're in, what's keeping them in the hall?

FR. DCN. ANDREW: In the church?

JEFF DECONTIE: In the church, yeah. And this affects whether we're missionaries or not, whether we call it that. I don't have to go around the world, I don't even have to go up to James Bay Cree territory or up north to Nunavut, to be a missionary to Indigenous people in our own backyard. Our cities are really in need. When people from those northern communities come here, they're generally not in the collective anymore. If they were Christian, they're at risk of no longer being Christian. They get stuck, they get alienated in the cities. They get lonely in the cities, and then they do certain things to fill that loneliness. And so I think our cities are in great missionary need, and if we wanted to target Indigenous people, fine, but I think Indigenous people have the same need as everybody else who's struggling with twenty-first-century urban life.

So, what are youth and twenty-year-olds and thirty-year-olds doing if they don't have the supernatural mindset, if they're not praying? It's pretty gloomy, pretty alienating. And, like I said earlier, if I'm going to have conversations with these people and the supernatural is killed, I can't just launch in and just say, "You need Jesus Christ," or whatever. Your mindset needs to open up to the supernatural first, before you're even able to accept Jesus rising from the dead. So most conversations that are missionary are going to be not even about Christ sometimes. Any kind of planting of the supernatural is good, but it's scary for some evangelical Christians who say, "Oh, we don't want to believe in the sacred traditional stuff. That's pagan stuff." In this world

right now in the cities, any supernatural thing is an opportunity to talk about Christ eventually. Because they're still hanging on to the supernatural. Just think of what you can talk about to somebody who thinks they can manipulate the weather, as opposed to somebody who thinks that's just childish nonsense. You're going to have a completely different conversation with those two people about Christ.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: I'd like to just build on some of this and ask one last question that touches on a couple of points you've made, and that is, whether you have a sense that the secular world or secularist world and that kind of secular elite understanding of Indigeneity and Indigenous Canadians comprehends Indigenous Christians? Or, put another way, do you believe that your Indigenous Christian faith is understood?

I think that's the danger of secular thought creeping into Canada: it goes unnoticed, it's perceived as neutral, but at the same time it's welcoming a whole wide range of beliefs. And it doesn't just influence Indigenous thought. It's influencing Christianity.

JEFF DECONTIE: Good question. I think that the beast of secular thought can consume this kind of mindset. At first you would think it would reject it or try to kill it. I think of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, and I hope that more people apply his thought to Indigenous people in Canada and the United States. Secular worldviews can sort of eat up everything around them and accept a whole wide range of beliefs at the same time. For example, you have the prevailing scientific thinking alongside New Age believers, and people in society just accept this, saying, "Oh, whatever it is you believe in, all religions lead to the same thing." No one questions it. How can these contradictions coexist? It allows for so many different beliefs, including those who say that the supernatural is just childish nonsense. Then we ask an elder to lead prayer? Any other religion would be a no-no, but you can ask for an elder who's going to pray a generic prayer to some generic Creator, and it's not going to ruffle any feathers. I think that's the danger of secular thought creeping into Canada: it goes unnoticed, it's perceived as neutral, but at the same time it's welcoming a whole wide range of beliefs. And it doesn't just influence Indigenous thought. It's influencing Christianity.

The default option is now unbelief. How does it go upside down in five hundred years? Well, it started with philosophical and political beliefs emerging in the Renaissance, and then it goes to the next level in the 1700s, and then fast-forward here, and it's affecting a whole wide range of areas in life, including Indigenous thought. I don't think it'll kill Indigenous beliefs or identities. I think it'll just radically change us.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Both Indigenous Christians and traditional Indigenous believers?

JEFF DECONTIE: Yeah. I'm talking Indigenous people in general. It doesn't matter what we believe; it's going to colour it. If we're Indigenous Christians, this kind of secular mindset, if we're not aware of it, is going to influence how we live our faith. For example, "I can shop for my beliefs, and I can pick and choose." You didn't do

that two hundred years ago, but now we have a consumer mindset that influences how we think about religion. And if you're interested in traditional beliefs, people still want an individualist life, they want to drink, they want to party, but then the traditional lifestyle is way more strict in some ways, too strict for a lot of Indigenous youth. So how do you do that secretly? You have people picking and choosing how they become a traditionalist, and it looks good on the résumé if you're interested in that life and you're doing it, but you've still got these whispers in your mind, in your education, your philosophy, your life. You were raised in the Western world; it colours how you engage with your own traditional thought. You're just not the same as your great-grandfather one hundred years ago. You're influenced by new education, new language, new technology. This is radically going to change Indigenous life. It's a big unseen ideology. We should watch out for it. Some people were terrified of Christianity in terms of Indigenous lifestyles, and they still are, and any kind of post-colonial ideas and things popping up. But I think people should equally be afraid of the hyper-individualism that's influencing us, slowly. We should know what it is and know how to engage it, or take the best of it, but also stop some of the things that are destroying us.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Thanks, Jeff.

Photo of Jeff Decontie provided by interviewee.

Tal James

Tal James

This interview took place in Saanich, British Columbia, on November 1, 2022.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tal, thanks very much for agreeing to take part in this project. Tell me a little bit about your Indigenous background.

TAL JAMES: All righty. My name is Tal. My Indigenous name is Yum'Yom ala'thut. That part of the name comes from Penelakut Island, and that's where my father is from. My mother is from the Nisga'a territories in the Nass Valley, and I currently reside in Nanaimo with my wife, Christina, who was an import from Germany. We have two boys, Corbin and Connor, and they're in their early twenties.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: That's wonderful. Tell me, Tal, a little bit about your Christian faith. Tell me what it means to you and your life and how you live it out.

TAL JAMES: Well, I mean that's a pretty open-ended question. There's all sorts of stuff, but in general I'd just like to say that I think it's a miracle that I actually have any faith at all.

My parents were good parents to us, but I made a lot of choices in my life then and I did a lot of stupid things. But to make a long story short, I moved from an urban setting to living on one of the Gulf Islands and really living a lifestyle of drinking and a lot of partying, that type of thing.

Then about a year into that life, around seventeen or eighteen years old, I don't even remember the exact age, but we encountered some students over on Thetis Island who were at the Capernwray Bible School, which is part of the Torchbearers centers network around the world. Through our friendships and through our connection, I became a Christian.

One thing that I learned in that whole thing is that Christianity became very important in my life, in the sense that I wasn't judged for my past life. God was there for me. The people that introduced me, they didn't judge me for being an idiot. They just loved me. They loved all my friends and my family. In essence, that's what I believe Christianity is. It is us loving each other, specifically with the goal to introduce Jesus Christ into the lives of other people, and not to make those decisions for them.

I was fortunate to be able to go to Capernwray Hall in England in 1985, following up that first year of being introduced to Christ. In that scenario, I'd never really been away from my family or my friends, I always had them around me. It gave me the

opportunity to explore my faith and understand Christianity, while studying his Word with the purpose of growing in my faith.

I think what happened in that whole scenario was that I really became myself. I discovered my identity as a Christian guy. I think that was a huge thing. I discovered that it was my faith. It wasn't the faith of my parents or the beliefs of my parents. It wasn't the belief of the people who introduced me to Christ. It was me, and it was my growth, and that it is very personal and meant a lot to me.

I had six months to reestablish who I was. I wasn't the drinking idiot. I was a young man who was venturing down a road, and I didn't know where that road was going. I just knew it was a lot better for me than where I was.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: You made the point about how coming to Christ revealed to you who you are, and that you saw that maybe for the first time. Tell me about how that conversion experience connected with your First Nations identity.

TAL JAMES: That's a bit of a longer road. Like I said, I grew up off res. I was an urban Aboriginal, I guess you would say. I was connected to a lot of First Nations communities through soccer and sport and that type of thing. I certainly wouldn't say I was connected in a traditional way. I just did my thing.

It wasn't until later on that I started to recognize my Indigenous background for what it was. That it was a special thing to be able to say, "I'm First Nations." I can't give you a specific date on that; it was a process. I think it wasn't until I married my wife, Christina, when I realized through her that I should become more in touch and in tune with my Aboriginal identity.

She moved to Canada, and she basically lost her German identity. She was trapped in no man's land, and she didn't have her German culture. She encountered First Nations and North American culture, and through that I started to learn about our national heritage.

And recognized that being from the Coast Salish speaking territories on Vancouver Island is special. Having roots in the Nisga'a territories is special, and they're God-given cultures that I recognize as being important in my life. I'm not a fluent speaker. I'm barely a speaker of either language, and that's quite unfortunate. But there are certain things and aspects in my life that I am learning in a lot more detail, like being outdoors on the land and on the water. That's a process too. I'd never be down that road if I wasn't a Christian. If it wasn't for my faith, I wouldn't have had the sound mind to be able to move forward in healthy ways, in the traditional ways of our people.

I'd probably still be a drunk if it wasn't for Christ. I wouldn't have the opportunity to learn from my elders, who have some knowledge about life on the land. Some have

knowledge about life on the water, hunting and fishing skills. Those things are really important, and those things were taken away from us.

As a Christian man going down this road of—some would throw out the catch phrase of the "red road"—learning about that is so important. So many of our young people today don't have those skills. For me to help some people learn some of that, or even relearn, is great. For some of the people I encounter, it just starts coming back, that knowledge comes back. If it wasn't for my faith, I wouldn't be able to say, "I'm an Aboriginal guy." It's a completion of who I am.

We had talked earlier about identity, and my identity is First Nations. Some people might say, "Oh yeah, well, you can't be Christian." And we talked about this. "You can't be Christian and First Nations, because of your Native spirituality." Or this or that. I would argue and say, I can be Christian, *because* of my Native spirituality, because First Nations spirituality encompasses everything we do.

I see a struggle in the church, where spirituality is on Sunday, or maybe Saturday night, depending on your denominational brand. But it's a completion in my thinking. My culture and spirituality was complete, and through Christ in my life, my spirituality is more complete. My culture is more complete. I can live it more in a pure way, by being connected to the Creator in a number of different ways.

I can be Christian, because of my Native spirituality, because First Nations spirituality encompasses everything we do.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: This is such a crucial point that you raise. And a number of other people I've spoken to as part of this project have talked about this whole question of inculturation. When the gospel is encountered by an individual or by a group of people or a people, a nation, the choice is to either accept it or you reject it, and you have free will to do that.

What does it mean to you as someone who lives within this community, within this First Nation? What does it mean to have received the gospel, and how does that relate to your mission as a Christian within that community?

TAL JAMES: Well, as far as my purpose in the community, I believe we as Christians have a responsibility to fix what we broke in Jesus's name. We spoke a little bit earlier about being a sell-out. I'm not a sell-out to the white man's gospel. I'm not a sell-out to a church organization or parachurch organization. I'm a sell-out for Jesus.

When I'm called, and I am called to do a certain work, I'm going to do that wholeheartedly. My life is a spiritual act of worship or service. I run an outdoors program called ROOTS (Reclaiming Original Outdoor Technology and Skills). We do kayaking, archery, camping, and canoeing, and basic survival skills.

I'm starting a program called the Fish Club with another guy. We do a little bit of fishing, some hunting, you know, hunter-gatherer stuff. To me, it's vital that we

relearn these things, because in Jesus's name we were forbidden to do these things. We were forbidden to speak our languages. The government was the war club that the church used against us. I believe it's our responsibility to bring these things back to the First Nations communities. To me, this is one of the most vital spiritual acts that we can be involved in.

I think one of the things that people in the church might say, looking at this, is, "Oh, that's a wonderful act of reconciliation." Ten years ago I probably would've agreed with that, but I don't believe it's an act of reconciliation. I think it's an act of restoration from what was taken and stolen and robbed from our First Nations communities across North America.

Reconciliation, I think, is the wrong term that we're using, in the sense that reconciliation would assume that there was a good relationship, when there never, ever really was.

Reconciliation, I think, is the wrong term that we're using, in the sense that reconciliation would assume that there was a good relationship, when there never, ever really was. In some areas there were some good relationships, such as up and down the Fraser, where the Jesuits had a positive influence and the First Nations people were having positive experiences, but there were struggles and strikes that came after that. When a good work got started, some of the crooked bunch got in the way and took away, overran, and overwrote the good that was already happening in Christ's name.

There's a struggle now with the perpetuation of these things in ignorance, where the people of the church don't necessarily understand all the intricacies of what has happened. I work with North American Indigenous Ministries, and I've been given a lot of room and freedom to do some work that falls along the line of Christian ministry, and I think this is probably one of the most important. Because it's not just me coming in and saying, "I have a solution for the community." It's saying, "I'm sorry, I need to give back what was taken." I put myself in that category, because I am a Christian. First and foremost my identity is that I am a First Nations believer.

I would encourage people of other cultural backgrounds who are believers to see how they can bring back what was stolen rather than come in with a prepackaged solution. We want to plant a church, and in four years we'll be done and move on. That mentality is just planting a church, that comes from the perspective of an outsider rather than meeting the need of the community.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: I think this idea of restoration, as you called it, is really, really crucial. The restoration is that we are restored in Christ. This way you've explained restoration as being part of your ministry as a Christian I think is very beautiful. I mean, it recognizes that incarnational aspect that we recognize in one another, that image and likeness of Christ. To be able to represent that to fellow members of your First Nation as a Christian is a really beautiful thing to do, with lots of challenges, certainly, but a very beautiful thing to do.

Tell me a little bit more about your broader ministry.

TAL JAMES: Well, I look at the kayaking, the archery, the outdoor stuff, that's a lot of the fun work. But on the other side of that is a lot of the hurt and the pain that's happened as a result of the church organization. I can't really say the body of Christ's church, but the church organization. A lot of those hurts happened in Jesus's name. Part of what I believe is important for me is to help people deal with those hurts and pains as well.

Not only that, but to help celebrate the good things. I do funerals. I do weddings. Each has its place in our society, and each thing is necessary. Especially as a servant of the Creator, I want to help people deal with those eternal things or those lifelong things, acting as a facilitator to God. In essence, I'm a mediator. I'm the secondary mediator between the Creator and our people.

I have struggled in the past with some of the stuff, with hurtful things, and it's been very painful. I've come to the place through the guidance of a number of people, counselling, counsellors, that these burdens are not mine to bear. I hear the burdens. I hear the struggles. In the past, I held on to those to my detriment, but I need to release those at the foot of the cross, because that's where the first mediator comes in. He's the one that needs to deal with those things, not me.

I hold them, and I deliver them. But more importantly, I try to let my friends, my family, and people that I encounter know that they have that possibility too. That is, it's not solely my responsibility, and I can tell them about that original mediator between the Creator and themselves. Hopefully somewhere along the line somebody will say, "Oh, I get it." As a Christian, it's taken me probably twenty-eight years to figure that out.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Amen. I mean, I think one thing that all of us that are in pastoral ministry realize sometimes is that we have suddenly taken on the role of being the saviour, when we are not the Saviour. He's already done all the work. Our role is to be, as you say, that mediator. To be that minister to him, to others, to bring him to others.

TAL JAMES: Yeah. I think actually my friend Mark, who put us together in conversation, he was one of those voices that helped me pass that dark spot in my life. He basically said, "You're bearing the burdens of your society on your shoulders. Stop it. Quit playing God."

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Good advice.

TAL JAMES: Yeah. Obviously, he said it in a nicer way, but that's the brunt of it. Stop playing God, because it's a burden that none of us can bear, not one of us. Because I may never, ever be able to deal with your struggles, or anybody else's for

that matter. I have a hard-enough time dealing with my own struggles. It's the same thing: bring those to the foot of the cross and say, "You know what, Jesus, take this. Because I just can't handle it." A lot of people overlook that.

I think there's a lot of people in the church out there, regardless of your denomination, that have this God complex. Dealing with that as a person is difficult and also dangerous. I think in the church of the past a lot of those people had a God complex. The church in the past gave us First Nations people an ultimatum: "You're either with us, or you're going to hell, but you got to be like us before you can be with us."

And so there was the expectation that we were Christians, and then we'll beat the devil out of you after. There's a lot of stuff behind that whole thing. We should never, ever have the expectation for somebody to have our faith before we share our faith , and that's wrong. I think a lot of that goes on still in today's church still. Our deeds need to match up with Christian deeds before we can truly have salvation. I think that's a very subtle, dangerous thing that our churches struggle with today.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: One last question. What do you think is the particular role or roles that can be played by Indigenous Christians in Canada?

TAL JAMES: I think being true to your culture and continuing down the path of understanding where you come from as an Indigenous person is important. Strengthen and fortify who you are as an Aboriginal and never, ever forsaking the Creator, through his teachings in the Scriptures. There's so much that lines up scripturally to all our First Nations cultures, and we need to recognize that.

I'll say it again, and I think I said it earlier, that our cultures were complete, and in Jesus they're more complete. I think that's a big thing and a big step for a lot of us. You're going to have a lot of non-Indigenous people look at you and question your actions based on your Aboriginal heritage. Don't take that to heart. They're the ignorant ones who don't want you to flourish.

Those of you who are Christians, First Nations Christians, you come to the table with the same gifting that non-Aboriginal people have. For them to say, "We want to make room for you at the table," correct them. You are already at the table, and encourage them to step back and allow your gifts to flourish. Because it's one in the same spirit.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. Any last thoughts?

TAL JAMES: Oh, man. Yeah. To me, it's a blessing to be able to be part of both cultures, the church culture and First Nations culture. Personally, I'm far more full and far happier having both of those two things. These two places of being come together, and we are able to learn things to see how we can bridge the gap in society.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. Thanks, Tal. God bless you.

Photos provided by Tal James.

Rosella Kinoshameg

Rosella Kinoshameg

This interview took place in Wikwemikong, Ontario, on October 11, 2022.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Rosella, to begin, why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself and the community you're part of here, and a bit about Wikwemikong?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Well, I've lived here most of my life. I lived in the south end of the reserve in South Bay. I did go to residential school, because we didn't have a school bus. So my sister and I went. We came back after they got the school bus, and then the Pontiac School here in Wikwemikong was opened. Then we moved here and went to school here. They had high school till grade 10 at the time. Then I went to North Bay, where the nuns used to run the St. Joseph's College, for grades 11 and 12, and did some of my 13. I missed out on a couple of subjects, so I did those at night school later.

Then I applied to a nursing school. I applied both in North Bay and Sudbury and got accepted at both. I chose Sudbury, because it was closer and I could go home on weekends. So I went there for three years, graduated, worked in Sudbury for a year, got married, and my husband wanted to go to University of Windsor. So we moved to Windsor in September, but I was pregnant, and so I had my first baby in January in Sudbury. Then in May of that year, I applied at a couple of hospitals in Windsor. I got a job at Hôtel-Dieu on the psychiatric unit and was there for three years. By this time my husband finished his course, and he moved, he got a job in Ottawa. So we moved to Ottawa, where I did the post-RN program, and then when I finished, I guess they were looking for nurses for here. So I put in my application, and I got the job in Wikiwemikong as a community health nurse. So I came home, and by this time I had three children.

So I was here maybe a total of eight years or nine years, and then I quit. And then I got a job in Little Current, covering the other reserves with another nurse for another eight years, nine years. And then I worked in Nipissing First Nation for a total of seventeen years, before coming home again as health manager. When they say "interim" they don't mean it: it turned out to be a whole year. And then I said, "Well, I was supposed to be retired." But anyways, so I came home, and then I got another call: Could I come and do another interim position? And then COVID came along.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And now here you are.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: And here I am. When I came back as a nurse, these ladies in the community said, "What if we should make you parish council president?" What? I'd never been in the back of the church. I didn't know what was there. So I had to learn everything myself to know what's there, where do they keep this, and just look at everything and find out where all the things were.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: But this is the parish you grew up in, of course.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Over there. Our Lady of Grace.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me about your faith. Tell me how you live out your faith and why it's important to you.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Well, I suppose as children, we learned our prayers in the [Algonquian] language. And my father played the organ in church all the time. He took us to church every Sunday. Or maybe not every Sunday, but when the priest came. Sometimes it was once a month in the summer. We used to go by boat. We'd take our food and go by boat along the shore and go to the church, have something to eat, and then come back. In the winter, I don't know if we had any winter Masses. If we did, we went by horses.

But I remember coming here once to Wiki; we came by horses all the way from South Bay, which is about twenty kilometres. And it was in a wagon, and we were well covered with hay and stuff. I remember coming, I think it must have been for Christmas Mass. After I came back from residential school, I guess my dad taught us all how to play the organ. I think I was twelve years old when I first played the organ. So we got started that way. And, well, of course when we went to residential school we had to get up for Mass every morning, going to chapel. We would go across the road on Sundays to the boys' school that had a bigger chapel. And that's where we went.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Right. And where was the residential school you were at?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: In Spanish.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And where's that in relation to Wiki?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Oh, if you come through Espanola, you keep going straight west and it's about maybe an hour from there. I was just thinking about my grandson. They just had a baby this morning.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Oh, congratulations!

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Once we were going to Sault Ste. Marie, and on the way I had heard they were demolishing that boys' school. So I told my husband, I said, "Let's stop and look at where they're at in this demolition." So we pulled in to go toward the school. My grandson says, "Where we're going, Mama?" I said, "We're going to go have a look at the school, the boys' school, the residential school." "Is that where they made you wash and wash and wash until you became white?" he says to

me. I said, "Where did you learn that?" He said, "Somebody came to our school, and that's what they told us." I said, "Oh." So I had to do a little explaining.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wow. Tell me a little bit about your life here in the parish and how you're living out your faith in this place?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Well, I guess when I became [parish council] president I had to learn lots of things. Before then, I think the only thing that the people were allowed to do was to do the fundraising. They weren't involved in anything else in the church, just the fundraising. And I thought, "There's got to be more to the church than fundraising." And so that's when I started thinking about spirituality. We lived a very traditional way of life as children. We lived those teachings that they talk about. That's the way we lived. And so when I got a little bit older, I was thinking, "How come people aren't living the same way as we did?" That's what I used to see, the different ways of life such as alcohol and violence and those kinds of things. Our home was a house of refuge for these women that were experiencing violence at home. They would come, and their husbands would never come to our house because they were afraid of my father.

But to believe in the things that I was taught, the traditional things, the way of life and the meanings of these things, and then in a church, well, those things help one another and they make me feel stronger.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: He was a good man.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: He was a good man. He was a very spiritual man. He did all the prayers when somebody died. He went to all the wakes. He did all the prayers and the singing and the playing. That was what he did. But at home we did observe some of the traditional things like offering tobacco and doing smudging. My dad would do that, as well as some other ceremonies that we became aware of that was happening in the home. But then, when we went to residential school, we never spoke about anything. We never shared anything about how we lived. We couldn't.

I think that's what helped me in becoming a nurse. The basic teaching of that way of life that we had kind of helped us. When I did come home, there was this priest who came one day, and we were invited to the church, it became open, and he said, "Bring in your traditions, bring in your culture." I said, "Oh yeah, we do that." So we brought in the colours, we brought in the smudging. Mind you, that was very difficult at first. People wouldn't do it, because they were told this was evil and they would go to hell. I think they had that in their mind, and so I had a lot of explaining to do every Sunday. I would say, "These are the medicines that the Creator gave us to use for purification, to cleanse." On Good Friday, we set up the wake for Jesus after the three o'clock service. We set up the cross, and then I used to put the smudge bowl and the feather and everything up there. An elderly person who cleaned the church, she was always helping, was against that. She was one of those who was told, "Go to hell if you do this." Once I was in the back of the church, and she was busy cleaning

around, putting papers and books away. And I was sitting there when all of a sudden I said, "Well, what's going on up there?" I could see smoke. She was smudging.

I never thought I'd see that day. Yeah.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me more about that, Rosella. Because I think there is this view held by some, I think, in our country, that you can't be authentically First Nations and be Catholic. Where does that come from? What's your thought on that?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: I'll give you an example. I was working at the Wikwemikong Health Centre, and this lady come around just traditional, totally traditional, not Catholic. Then this was after we introduced the smudging and the colours and that in the church. She came around, and she said to me, "We have to take those things out of the church." And I said to her, "These are the things that our ancestors did. They used these ceremonies, they used these objects, they used these sacred items and the smudging, the medicines. " I said, "So if I want to smudge as a Catholic, I'll smudge, wherever, whenever I want. And no one is going to tell me otherwise. No one," I told her. She went to the chief and to somebody else, who told her the same thing. So then she just kind of backed off, I guess. She wouldn't speak to me; now she does.

And then there was a little later a young lad who was getting into the traditions, I guess, learning about all these things. He came to us at the church after we were finished one time. He was telling us the same thing, that we had to get these things out of the church. They didn't belong in the church. Our deacon Gilbert was there too. We listened to the boy. Then Gilbert said, "If you even practice one of those teachings that we have, respect, you wouldn't be talking to us like this." Well his tone of voice just changed.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: We were talking a little bit before we began the recording that there's nothing inconsistent between having Indigenous cultural traditions and the Catholic faith.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: No.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: What would you say to someone from outside the reserve, from outside Wiki, who would question how Indigenous you are because of your Catholic faith?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Well, I can't change being Indigenous. That's something that is me. I can't change that. But to believe in the things that I was taught, the traditional things, the way of life and the meanings of these things, and then in a church, well, those things help one another and they make me feel stronger.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: You had mentioned earlier about how you realize that church wasn't just about fundraising, that there is some spirituality involved. Tell me about how you began to enter into that spirituality. What did that look like?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Well, I think probably it was around the beginning of 1980s, when Anderson Lake [Anishinaabe Spiritual Centre] was being made. So I went there whenever I could. And I really liked that. It's a place of enlightenment. And that's truly what it has been. People like to go there because it's such a peaceful place, a spiritual place, and people like to go for that. Bishop Carter[2] had encouraged the Indigenous part of our culture to be in there. But somewhere along the line that was not there; I don't know what happened. And then I went to a meeting in Winnipeg, and somebody who had been to the Centre was also attending that event said, "There's something missing. You don't have that Indigenous part in that program anymore." Okay, I'll see what I could do.

I became more and more involved with the Centre. So back in 2016, 2015, I think, was when Fr. Peter Bisson was the [Jesuit] provincial. He asked me if I would start up the board. And so with his suggestion, we got some people together and we began the board. That place was built to encourage people to become more involved in the church. And so that's where I've been encouraging, using the traditional teachings to really help people to include both the Catholic and the traditional, to understand the meanings of these things. You have to know why you have the feather. What does it mean? You have to know why we use the medicines. What do the medicines do? Why do we do sunrise ceremonies? Why do we have the pipe ceremony? Why do we do a cedar bath when somebody's dying? That was not done, either, before when I first came here. But the elders of course took me under their wings, and one of them said, "We used to do a cedar bath when somebody died." I said, "Oh, okay, let me see what I could do." I was the nurse, so you can do these things. So I started teaching and talking about cedar baths. That was a long time ago, in the early seventies.

We had had a deacon who went through the program, and his wife. He died in hospital, and they called me to go, and I did the smudging there. Then his wife died just a few years ago, and so the family asked me if I would come to the house. So I went and spoke with the family and did a prayer. One of the daughters come and told me, said, "We're going to give my mother a cedar bath. Have you ever seen that done?" she says to me. I just said, "Yes, I have." Now it's done. Almost every person who dies, the family goes in. We don't have one certain person who does it all, because we have, well, fifty deaths a year here. So it's the family that does that.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And typically that would happen, and then they would be brought to the church for the funeral Mass?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Yeah. Well, if the person is dying at home, they might do it at home as the person is dying, or after they die, and they're in the funeral home. The funeral home is aware of this now, and they'll ask, "Are you going to be

2 Bishop Alexander Carter, 1909–2002. Bishop of Sault Ste. Marie, 1958–1985.

doing a cedar bath?" And then they'll do it at the funeral home, then they'll dress the body, and then bring the body home. I've tried to help the people to use both traditions: Catholic prayers, and then we have our prayers in the language.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: You are involved in something called Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle. Tell me a little bit about that and its work.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Yeah, I don't know who, maybe, oh, I think was Ron Boyer who called me as the deacon from Kahnawake. He said, would I like to be on the first Catholic Aboriginal Council? So we had to get approval of the bishop for me to be on there. We were only supposed to be on it for so many years. So my number of years was up, and I told the bishop, "You have to find somebody else." "No, no, you stay on there," he said. And then finally I said, "I have to get off now." But I had to find somebody to replace me. So that's what I did. And then in 2015, I think it was, before he retired, I got a medal from his ceremonies in Sudbury. I always forget the name of that medal. It's a merit medal given by the pope. So that's what I got, and then he says, "Oh, I'll have to find something else for you to do," he said. Then the next thing I knew, they were calling me to sit on our Lady of Guadalupe Circle. I said, "Okay." I was a member, I guess a member at large, because I don't belong to a religious congregation. For a couple of years Archbishop Murray Chatlain and I were co-chairs of the Circle.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And what's its role? What does it do?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: We try to meet once a year in person, with two meetings per year. We have a website where we have put our Indigenous prayers. It was a lot of our members from Our Lady of Guadalupe who were involved in the working committees to prepare in different ways [for the papal visit]. I was involved in liturgical preparation, where we were looking at creating prayers like novenas. When they were looking for Prayers of the Faithful, I got a call to write them up, which I did. When I did that, I was thinking about all the reconciliation things that you really want to be prayed for: acceptance, and for people to really come to terms with whatever's hurting them. All of that is truth and reconciliation and healing. That's what I was hoping for. I don't know if those prayers were ever used.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: At least they were written.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: At least they were written, yeah.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Now, maybe just one last question. Give me your reflections on the visit of Pope Francis to Canada.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: When the people were going to Rome, and I was working on those liturgical and the other committees, they said anybody working on those were not being considered to go to Rome to see the pope. And I said, "Oh, okay." So when they said the pope was coming, I thought, well, there's no way I'm going to be going to see the pope, because I'm doing all this work. So I was kind of resigned to that. And then I think it was Fr. Peter Bisson who wrote and said, "Okay, would you go to Edmonton?" And I was like, "I don't know if I want to go to Edmonton." I said, "Let me think about it." Ha ha. Anyway, finally I said, "Okay, I'll go." So yeah, I was glad I went. We met at the airport, because we were waiting for all the group members to come, because we were all flying together, and it was kind of hard. Then we went to Edmonton, to that Sacred Heart Church [of the First Peoples] for Sunday Mass, and I was thinking about all those prayers I did. So it was hard. But anyways, so we went to Maskwacis, and I think that was the best day of his visit. That was the best day, because all the Indigenous people who were there. They had the dancing, the drumming, and the regalia, and of course the speeches and the prayers in their language. They speak a different language from us, so I did not know what they were saying. And then to give the pope that headdress, I thought that was great. Whenever somebody comes to visit, we always give them something. Like at home, my mother used to have all these preserves, and when somebody came to visit she would say, "Oh, I should go down, get the preserves, and give them a jar."

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Even to watch the pope come down that road in his wheelchair, I could see what pilgrimage it was, because I was also on pilgrimage there. And I thought, "Yeah, that pope has to be very humble." Because he wasn't in the wheelchair before, just very recent, eh. It's the hardest thing to have to rely on something to help you.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: It was definitely a sign of humility.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Very much.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: A very powerful image. Any last thoughts, Rosella?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: When we went the next day to the stadium, I don't know, I didn't say anything Indigenous. Nothing. Well, even though Deacon Gilbert was in the procession carrying the [Gospel] book, that was the only Indigenous thing. Prayers, Masses, in Latin? Yeah. I don't know where that came from. And there was no drumming. They had it really long before, as part of the entertainment, I guess.

When I had asked the bishops [about the Mass,] they told me, "This is not for the clergy, this is for Indigenous." I said, "Where's the Indigenous in this whole thing?" We had survivors who were kind of in the back in that stadium, and bishops and priests right up close. It was the same thing in Sainte-Anne-de- Beaupré. I heard of Indigenous people wandering in the church, trying to find a seat, who couldn't find a seat to sit. I said, "That's not good." And close up in the front, clergy, dignitaries.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: It leaves a bad impression.

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: So I said, "Yeah, people have to know what reconciliation is." And they said, "This is a good first step. It's the first step for the pope to come and say what they asked for, make that apology." And I was talking to somebody who spoke Spanish. And he said, how he said it in Spanish, it gave you that feeling that he was truly sorry. So that kind of made me feel okay, because I couldn't understand the Spanish language.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Thank you, Rosella. Any last words you have? Any last thoughts on faith?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: On faith? No, I will continue on the way I've been praying and hoping that we can even work together here with people who have gone traditional. But I think we are. I was thinking about that young lad who told us, "Get these things out of here." He has come several times to play the drum. He came in here the one time when he had his hat on. I looked at him, and he took it off. Then when his friend came in, his friend took his hat off.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: That's in the church?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: In the church, yeah.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Respect?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Yeah. That's what it is. If we just work a little bit.

That happened at a wake too. I do the prayers, the closing prayers, and then the traditional man was there. And I figured, okay, if I do the prayers in English, then he can close it off by doing the ceremony. That would be the closing. Well, it wasn't right for his wife, eh. I wish that he should go first, but he was okay with that. Just little by little.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Integration?

ROSELLA KINOSHAMEG: Yeah.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. Thank you. Rosella. Thank you for taking the time.

Photos taken by Rev. Dr. Andrew P. W. Bennett.

Maria Lucas

Maria Lucas

This interview took place in Toronto, Ontario, on October 27, 2022.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Thank you again, Maria, for taking part in the Indigenous Voices of Faith project. Why don't we start off with you telling me a little bit about your own background and your Aboriginal background, and a bit about what you do.

MARIA LUCAS: Thanks again for inviting me to an interview. So, I am Black Métis. My Black heritage stems from Nova Scotia and the Black Loyalist history there, and my Métis roots stem from northern Ontario. Moose Factory is my ancestral territory. I have not been, myself, to Moose Factory, but it is on the to-do list to eventually get there and be able to visit, although I have made some connection with one community member from there. So that's my cultural background and context.

I grew up knowing that I was Indigenous but never really knowing exactly from where, until my adult years when my grandmother spoke about it more openly. And so I think by virtue of that I am a bit of a cultural orphan. I should also say that I was brought up Catholic as well. So, I often feel this sort of disconnect between understanding the context of my incarnation, when I could see that some of my other Catholic friends who grew up in a context where they were very much tied to their culture, whatever it may be, and that very much informed their faith journey.

And I couldn't say that it was the same for me. It was very much trying to figure out where the two sort of met. And it wasn't until my later years as a young adult that I started undertaking that journey myself, trying to understand where I come from and ask, what is my cultural background, what do I believe, what is my worldview? And as I undertook that journey and continue to undertake that journey, I'm seeing a lot of parallels between my Indigenous background and culture and the Catholic faith. More intersectionality than I think most people may realize. I often think that people think it's a contradiction to be Indigenous and Catholic. And I find that the more I discover, the more of a fit there seems to be actually.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Great. Well, that's fantastic. Tell me a bit more about your journey. Tell me how that started and just generally about your Christian faith and how it shapes your life.

MARIA LUCAS: Yeah, so it certainly informs everything that I do. I try to keep to some semblance of a plan of life, and consistency is key in that. I try to do a half hour of mental prayer in the morning and try to go to daily Mass as often as I can and do the rosary, but I don't do those things in order to check off a to-do list or check off a box and be like, "Okay, it's done." It's more because those are the places that I find strength, and those are the places that fuel my resilience to do the hard work of reconciliation. That is how I see it.

I work as a lawyer. I'm a junior associate at a law firm in Toronto in a very small Aboriginal law practice group. And I always say, it's small but it's mighty. And the clients that we serve are often in under-capacitated situations. And so I find that I'm often wearing many hats. I'm a project manager, I'm sometimes an administrative-support person, in addition to "lawyering" responsibilities, for example, legal research and analysis. And then at times, I'm also having to do the intellectual work and be a bit of an academic as well. It takes a lot of energy, a lot of discipline and focus, to do that work. I find that my faith is very integral to supporting it. Otherwise it's kind of just activism, and for me it loses its meaning if I'm not grounding it in some semblance of a prayer life.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me a little bit more about the journey and how you came to be more involved in your Catholic faith and at the same time discovering different aspects of your background. How has that shaped you as you've gone on to where you are today?

And as I discovered more about what it means to be Métis, I've discovered that it means exactly that, to be a bridge, because our origins as a people are a result of two nations coming together and producing a distinct nation known as the Métis nation.

MARIA LUCAS: Yeah, so as I said before, I grew up in a Catholic home and in the Catholic tradition, and parallel to that I grew up knowing that I was Indigenous but not really knowing what that meant. As I uncovered some answers to those questions I found that it's still an ongoing journey. I haven't arrived at the destination, if there ever really is a destination. So for me, the intersectionality that I find between the two, particularly around relationships, I think of the God we serve. He's a relationship. And that really, for me, centres the importance of relationship in my life. I'm not somebody who takes well to anything that's transactional. I'm very relationally oriented, and it's a disposition that I think we all need to actually foster. It's a disposition that Indigenous peoples tend to have because of our culture. We tend to see the world through a relational paradigm.

So that definitely informs my approach to all that I do. Like I said, even in my work with clients, on a certain level I get paid a certain amount to do the work that I do for them, but I think having a relationship with your client is also important because it helps to build trust and understanding. This is true particularly in the context that I work in, where Aboriginal law tends to be a very trauma-saturated environment

and a lot of Indigenous people have, rightly so, a distrust of the legal system. And so I find myself in a very unique position to be a conduit between the two—to be that bridge. And as I discovered more about what it means to be Métis, I've discovered that it means exactly that, to be a bridge, because our origins as a people are a result of two nations coming together and producing a distinct nation known as the Métis nation. I've discovered that I'm a bridge between the two. And I see really my law degree and my license to practice law, those are all just tools to be a more effective bridge.

When I look at the parallels with my own Catholic faith as I've come to understand it, you can always go deeper on that journey. God's always revealing things. But as I come to understand my vocation in reconciliation, I've come to understand that that very much aligns with a very core piece of our faith, which is the cross. The cross is reconciliation; it demonstrates reconciliation within Christianity. It's how we are reconciled back to the Father. But it also demonstrates, I think, that reconciliation is not an easy journey. It's going to be very arduous, because the cross is painful, but there's also a lot of beauty in taking up one's cross and carrying it. And you're not doing it alone. You can only do it with grace.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: As a Black Métis Catholic, what do you think your particular contribution is to this path of reconciliation? We've been hearing a little bit more, especially since the pope's visit, about the relationship between reconciliation and forgiveness. I was wondering if you could speak maybe a little bit about that from your perspective?

MARIA LUCAS: This is something I've been thinking about more actively, I think, over this past summer, just in light of the papal visit. And someone, a colleague at work who wasn't Catholic, showed that he understood that, he knew about the Catholic sacrament of reconciliation. And so he said, "Well, there must be some parallels between the two, I would assume." And I said, "Yeah!" That was actually a pretty deep question. It prompted me to really think. In order for reconciliation to be complete, forgiveness has to be very much a part of the equation. I think it's truth, forgiveness, and then reconciliation, if you were to put it as an equation. And we often just talk about truth and reconciliation, and I think we're missing that middle component about forgiveness. Because if one can't forgive the harm that's been done, then you can't really be reconciled.

And when I was talking about the cross earlier, about how that reconciles us to the Father, or the Catholic sacrament of reconciliation, when we go to confession, it's not just to say everything that we've done wrong and just get it off our chest and then walk away. No, it mends that relationship that's been broken between you and God, between you and your Creator.

That's very much what truth and reconciliation in the Indigenous context is about. It's about mending, doing our best with the imperfect tools that we have to mend the harms of the past in order to be able to advance into a future where Indigenous peoples are not on the lowest end of every socioeconomic determinant that we have. Rather, they are very much a part of and included within not just in Canadian society but very much in the structure and governance of this country.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: I think that's an excellent point. And again, that relationship between truth, forgiveness, and reconciliation, is this trio you need to have. So that's a very valid point. You'd made a point earlier, Maria, about how some people see it to be a contradiction to be Catholic and Indigenous. Can you say a little bit more about that? Why do you think it is that some people see that as a contradiction?

MARIA LUCAS: Yeah, I've been asked that by a couple of people, friends, reporters from the media have asked me, "Isn't that a contradiction?" And I don't think it is. It's not a contradiction. Is it a tension, in the sense that the history between Indigenous peoples and the church, and I would emphasize recent history in particular, makes it difficult some days to embrace being part of an institution? Yes. Some days it's very hard. Because I think how the Catholic Church is structured as an institution was key in the perpetuation of the injustices that we saw or have seen unfold, particularly in the context of residential schools. But if I was Catholic for the purposes of just being a part of this institution, I wouldn't be today.

If you are a human being, regardless of your cultural context, there's nothing more integral to your unity as a human person than to have a relationship with your Creator, I'd say. What your cultural context does is help you contextualize that relationship. It helps to inform it and it helps you to live it out, but it's not divorced from or a contradiction to it.

It's not about an institution. Again, I go back to this notion of relationship. It's about having a relationship with the essence of your being. I pray every day because it's very hard for me to go a day without speaking to the essence of my being and the reason for being here. I don't know how else to put it. It's truth that can only really be encountered through experience, I think, and a prerequisite to that experience is faith. So for me, it's not a contradiction. If you are a human being, regardless of your cultural context, there's nothing more integral to your unity as a human person than to have a relationship with your Creator, I'd say. What your cultural context does is help you contextualize that relationship. It helps to inform it and it helps you to live it out, but it's not divorced from or a contradiction to it.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Right. So there's an integration that's possible?

MARIA LUCAS: Yes.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: A number of people I've spoken to have emphasized this, this idea of inculturation, that the gospel is received by a particular people or not, and then it is that culture that accepts that fullness. And then it's not that the gospel changes, culture changes, or rather, they become melded into this new reality. And I'm wondering if you could speak to that point.

You also mentioned a few moments ago about history. We seem to focus a lot on recent history, but what about that broader history of the relationship between Indigenous people, Indigenous Canadians and non-Indigenous? We have roughly four hundred years of shared history now. Speak a little bit about that idea of inculturation and Christian faith and history.

MARIA LUCAS: So I think that really stems from, first of all, having an understanding that a very core part of Christianity, and Catholicism in particular, is its embracing of freedom and agency. That's key in order to find the gospel successfully being inculturated in different places around the world, because a culture has to accept it. And then once they accept it, once they exercise their freedom and their agency and the gospel is able to graft itself onto that culture, it brings out what's most beautiful in it, sort of like a highlighter, I guess you could say. And no one culture does that perfectly. You need all of humanity to really see the gospel in all of its fullness.

But what's key is that a culture has to accept it and exercise their freedom in accepting it. And I think we often maybe look at history in North America, and we reduce it to: missionaries came over and forced Christianity on Indigenous peoples and they had no say and they had no choice. Well, no. That did happen, in unfortunately many instances, but it's definitely not the only narrative and it's definitely not the full truth.

For me, a huge example and hero of mine is St. Kateri Tekakwitha. She's a woman who chose to convert to Christianity. No pressure, just a Jesuit walking through her village one day and she was like, "Hey, can we have this conversation about your faith and what this is about?" She was curious, and she asked those questions, those probing questions out of her own volition. So to reduce Indigenous-Christian relations to a narrative that's completely assimilative or oppressive doesn't do the history justice, in my view.

They made a movie about this in the '80s, called *The Mission*. And so in eighteenth-century South America, there were Jesuits who stood with Indigenous peoples during the Spanish-Portuguese invasion of their lands and died next to them trying to defend their land rights and their right to their territory. So I think we're missing out on a very rich history of Christian Indigenous solidarity and the application of

Catholic social doctrine in action. This is not a part of the conversation that we're having today.

And I know that when I speak, when I do talk in Catholic settings, I try to remind Catholics about that, that being in solidarity with Indigenous peoples is not contrary to our faith. It's very consistent with it. I think because Indigenous issues often get latched onto the leftist agenda, people think, "Oh, this has Marxist elements, and we can't get involved." And it's not at all about that. I mean, in my view, I think it only gets latched onto the leftist agenda because the left has been more open to having the conversation. But, it doesn't make Indigenous issues inherently leftist or inherently political either. Catholic social doctrine isn't political. It's moral.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: We've gone in some interesting directions, and it raises a really interesting fundamental question, because one could say that from the time of the apostles that the church has been engaging with Indigenous people. Because this small Jewish sect of Christians, to use your words, started walking through someone's village who weren't Jews and didn't know about the gospel. So, almost from the day of Pentecost, Christians have been walking through villages talking about their faith. So that's looking at the history even more broadly. Maybe you could comment on that.

MARIA LUCAS: Yeah, it's something that we're all called to do. We're all called to mission in some form or another. And as you pointed out, from the day of Pentecost, that was what Christ asked the apostles to do, to go out and spread the Word. The world was on fire, not literally, but with the words of the gospel. And I think what we've seen in recent history in Canada is, in particular, a major switch in the approach to missioning.

I wouldn't categorize it as evangelization or missioning. It was tied to a very violent project of assimilation and colonization. And so it can't be what Christ originally intended it to be. Again, I think it was the government and the church coming together and recognizing, "Well, we can use the church's institutional capacity and structure to carry out our plans for eradicating Indigenous people, either physically or through ideological colonization and assimilation." So yeah, it was an extreme departure from the early missions and, obviously, from what Christ originally intended for it to be.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: So what does that mission look like now? Here we are in 2022, we've gone through and we're still going through this period of truth, forgiveness, reconciliation, as you put it. What is the place and the role and the presence of Indigenous Canadians in today's church as a missionary church?

MARIA LUCAS: I heard a survivor say that Indigenous people have been doing a lot of work and investing a lot in healing within their own communities. And the survivor posed the question: What is the church doing to heal? What is the church doing to advance with us on this journey? And I think Indigenous peoples are uniquely positioned, by virtue of some of us having experienced firsthand the

atrocities that took place. I think because you have a personal connection to the issues you're that much more invested in finding out the truth.

But I think the Catholic Church in Canada has been completely unaware. There's been no awareness-raising or education on this point. And I know the responsibility for education and informing people on these issues disproportionately falls to Indigenous people. But I think that if we're called to mission and we're called to spread the word as a collective, it's our responsibility to walk with non-Indigenous Canadians on this journey of truth and reconciliation. But there needs to be reciprocity on the other side. There needs to be a willingness to walk, a willingness to be open, a willingness to learn and do some of the heavy lifting, because we have to do it on both sides. It can't just be one party doing it and not the other.

But I think about my own faith, and particularly the Catholic teachings on solidarity, subsidiarity, and human dignity. Those teachings fuel me in a way. They don't allow me to rest too much, and they don't allow me to lose my hope and my faith in this work.

In the context of truth and reconciliation, if you were to apply my understanding of evangelization, it's not a one-way street. It's a dialogue, it's a conversation. And that's, I think, what we've been seeing unfold in Canada, I would say really in the past ten years, since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) really started doing its work. But I think it's more in the public eye now. Pre-TRC we had the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and all of these other studies that were done in the '90s. So, the TRC certainly wasn't one of a kind, but I think it was the last study that was done that really thrust these issues into the public sphere in a way that doesn't allow people to turn a blind eye or to remain ignorant.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Excellent. Thank you very much. Do you have anything further that you'd like to say, particularly at a personal level, about your faith and where your faith is leading you now, how it relates to this wonderful work that you're doing? How is that sustaining you?

MARIA LUCAS: Yeah, it gives me hope. And I think that's a very important part of being a faithful Christian, is never losing hope, never despairing. Because I think, particularly in the area of law that I work in, there are a lot of reasons to despair sometimes. At times I feel like giving up and saying "Okay, the cards are stacked against us. There's no way we're going to be able to break through. There's no way we're going to be able to change structures to make them more equitable and accessible for Indigenous people." But I think about my own faith, and particularly the Catholic teachings on solidarity, subsidiarity, and human dignity. Those teachings fuel me in a way. They don't allow me to rest too much, and they don't allow me to lose my hope and my faith in this work.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Well, thank you, Maria. I really appreciate the time and the joyful presence that you offer. So thank you very much.

MARIA LUCAS: Thank you, Father Deacon Andrew.

Photos provided by Maria Lucas.

Melissa Mbarki

Melissa Mbarki

This interview took place in Edmonton, Alberta, on November 21, 2022.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Thanks again, Melissa, for agreeing to participate in the Indigenous Voices of Faith project. It's a real pleasure.

MELISSA MBARKI: Thank you for having me.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Please tell me a little bit about your own Indigenous heritage, and a bit about the work that you do.

MELISSA MBARKI: I grew up in a small Saskatchewan community. My mom's side of the family are Cree, and they spoke two languages. They spoke Plains Cree as well as Saulteaux. My grandfather on my mom's side was a pipe carrier. He was an elder, he was an advisor in our community as well as surrounding communities. I grew up in the traditional faith. I was very close to my grandparents when I was younger. It's not uncommon for grandparents to adopt their grandchildren. When I was younger, I was adopted by my grandparents. They raised me from the time I was six months old, until I was school aged. While I lived with my grandparents, that didn't mean I didn't see my parents and didn't spend time with my parents and siblings. It just meant that the majority of my time was spent with my grandparents, learning.

My parents knew each other from the surrounding community. They didn't go to school together, because there was a bit of an age difference between them. When I was born, everything about me was unexpected. For my grandfather, it was unexpected because usually grandfathers hand down their teachings to their firstborn male grandchild. It was quite interesting for my grandfather to have a mixed Indigenous child. He absolutely did not know what to do with me in the first year. He wasn't sure if he should teach me. He wasn't sure if he should take me to ceremony or what to do with me.

That all changed when I was about a year old. My grandmother said we were at a ceremony, and another elder there must have caught on to my grandfather's hesitation about certain things. And he told my grandfather, "You need to teach her. You need to teach her everything that you know. You need to teach her all that you know," because he said I was going to be able to speak to two worlds. I was going to be able to speak to the Indigenous world and the laws of our land and I was going to be able to speak to the non-Indigenous world and the government laws. I was going to have a place in that.

From that time on, my grandparents taught me the language. They took me out to every ceremony they went to. They exposed me to anything and everything. And that's where my teachings really came from. As a young child, even before I

could talk, I knew the protocol for certain things, and it was quite different for a child to be learning this, but my grandparents just wanted to teach me everything and anything that they could. My grandma often called me her ceremony baby. I grew up in a very traditional way. And by the time I got to grade one, or even nursery school or kindergarten, I didn't know any different. I didn't know about other religions, I didn't know about other languages, and I barely spoke English when I started nursery. I was learning the language at that age. It was actually a bit of a culture shock for me to go from this sort of bubble with my grandparents and then to public school. That was a big learning experience and a transition for me.

When I got to grade school, that's when I started learning about other religions or lack of. On my dad's side of the family, we weren't particularly close nor were they religious. My dad and his parents lived quite a ways from me, so visitations were maybe once a month. I was in school, and I was juggling between my parents, my grandparents, and my father. I was moved from one household to the other on weekends and I was trying to develop a relationship with everyone but I was closer to my maternal grandparents. Everywhere I went, I took my bundle of sweetgrass, my eagle feather and my tobacco/print/ribbon. No one understood the significance of these items but my grandparents and me.

They tried to transition me to my mom around the time I started school. But it was really odd for me, because she lived in a city. I didn't want to live in the city. I didn't want to live in an urban area. I wanted to live with my grandparents on the reserve. That's where my home was. At that point they had a discussion with each other, and they decided that it was best that I live with my grandparents. That's where I wanted to be. That's where my home was.

I went to school and began learning by books, which was also odd to me because prior to then it was all oral teachings. It was stories that my grandparents told me; it was the people they introduced me to and their stories. And there were no books. That was also different for me, having to actually take a book home and read it, or take a book home and study it. That was just so different from being out in nature and learning about the trees, all of the plants and animals. Even to this day, I still don't know what some of the English words are for them, because I only know it in Cree. So it's really hard for me to explain to other people certain trees or plants. I know the general ones, but some of the other ones, I don't know what their English names are. That's something that I'm still working on.

So, I was really immersed in our traditional ways. What's really interesting about it is that my grandmother was a residential school survivor and she believed in the Catholic faith. In addition to me learning my grandfather's traditional side of things, I was also going to church with her. She had me baptized, attending Sunday school and summer camps. She believed in the Bible, she studied it and read it. She had friends from the church. That was her community. And I think my grandparents were the first people in my life that showed me what true reconciliation is, because my grandfather didn't force her and she didn't force my grandfather. They supported each other. They didn't try to change each other. They didn't try to change each other's beliefs.

And as I started getting older and I started learning a little bit more about the church, I actually went through a period of where I was conflicted. What's the right way? Is the church the right way for me, or is it the traditional way? And when I was about twelve years old, I asked my grandfather this, and I said, "I don't know which one is right for me. I don't know which way to go." And he told me, it doesn't matter what I believe, it doesn't matter which faith I choose. He said, as long as I believe in something. And he said, "You can continue coming with me to ceremony, and you can continue going with your grandmother and supporting her when she goes to church events, or when she goes out with her friends, or when they get together for a prayer. You can support her with that too. That's not wrong." He told me, don't let anybody tell me what is wrong and what is right, because whatever I choose is going to be right for me.

I ended up really going towards my grandfather's side. I was really immersed in that culture and traditions. I really got to know a lot of his friends and fellow elders that he worked with. We really built up this big community, and I felt that's where my home was. When I got to be a teenager, I knew where I wanted to be spiritually and religiously. I knew where my faith was. My mom had a period where she didn't believe, and she took a step back from it all. My grandfather respected what she was doing, because I think she was also in a period of questioning as well, what was right for her.

As a teenager, I knew exactly where I wanted to be and I kind of met my mom at that point because she had decided that the traditional way of life was her way too. And so, we met on a similar road, and we started our own journey together, and we started going to ceremonies together. At that point my grandparents were aging, and they weren't getting any younger and they were travelling less, so it was up to us to continue on. It was actually a really good place to be, because me and my mom started learning from each other. I knew things that she didn't, and then she knew things that I didn't, so we learned together. We also made our own connections with elders. We started to pave our own way in all of this.

This is the point where I started to really become involved in ceremony. It's not something that happens right away. When I was younger, we went to a lot of sweats. This is really common. We went to what we call night lodges. I never really got involved in the sun dances or rain dances until I was in my mid-twenties. And that, more or less, is another rite of passage on our journey. We make a commitment for a four-year period. Every summer for four years, we go to a rain dance or sun dance and we dance, we fast, and we do this four days at a time. Everything we do is in fours: four years, four days, etc. And a lot of it is not out in the public. It's not like a powwow, where they set a date and a place and that's where everybody shows up. These ceremonies are very sacred. They're not shared with the public.

How it happens is that usually families go together, friends that are interested, people that we know, people that we trust, we extend an invitation to. Because another fear in all of this is having it taken and sold by somebody else. That's always our biggest fear. And I think that's why we keep it so secretive. Not only was it illegal at some point in history, but what we're seeing today is that a lot of people just take it and use it as their own and try to sell it to other people, and that is just not right. It's a very secretive thing. It's hard to explain, because we can't take pictures and we can't take videos when we're there. Some people draw bits and pieces of it, but we can't do this as a whole. We can't take a video of it and say, "Okay, this is day one, day two, day three, day four." We absolutely cannot do that.

And there are protocols before going and after going. There's a lot of strict rules. It scares a lot of people off, because they think, "Well, I can't go sleep in the middle of nowhere with no phone for four days," or, "I cannot fast or not drink water for this amount of time." It is very hard physically but it's also very rewarding as well, because at the end it's almost like you let go of everything holding you down and you came out a different person.

When my mom passed away four years ago, I had committed to these ceremonies and I was on my second year when she passed. What ended up happening was I gained a large group of supportive people behind me and beside me that helped me through it. The ceremony itself and the people in my life really helped me through that grieving process. It helped me understand that I wasn't alone in all of this, that I had people who were there to help me. There's different phases, different things that we go through at different parts in our life, where these ceremonies help us through that. And I think that's one of the biggest learning experiences that I've had in the last few years, especially with COVID, dealing with family members being sick or getting sick or becoming ill or even being scared. It helped us throughout that whole process of understanding it and just being okay to express those fears. We had a lot of elders that told us, "Don't be scared of this. It's going to pass. Do what you can to be healthy, and everything will be fine." And they really helped us get through those couple of years of just unknowing.

That's what this has brought into my life. It's helped me keep grounded, and it helped me navigate my way through life, and it's just one of the most fulfilling experiences I think that I've ever had. I'm pretty young compared to most people in our circle but I'm at the point where I can start teaching others and I can start bringing them on board. Whereas, this doesn't usually happen until you're a little bit older, until you're getting into the elder phase of things. And maybe the whole point of this was for me to bring young people this way, and to help them, and to show them the way, and to guide them as needed. Maybe that's why we're seeing a lot more younger people coming to ceremonies.

It's definitely a shift that's happening. And I see a lot more people at ceremonies, whereas when I was younger I would only see a handful. Now when I go to a ceremony, we have to accommodate quite a bit of people coming in. We're starting to see a little bit of a change in it, but it's very hard if you haven't been born into it to find it. It's very hard to find those people to help you navigate your way through it. And it's not for everybody. We get that it's not for every Indigenous person out there, but if you really want this in your life and you really want to take this journey, there are people out there that will teach you, who will guide you. And sometimes it feels like it's hard to find the people, but if you reach out, there's always somebody there that will answer questions.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: That's very interesting background about this journey that you took. Now having gone on this journey and embracing this traditional spirituality, tell me about your perception of having that experience of your grandmother's Christian faith. Tell me of your perception of those Indigenous friends of yours, Indigenous people in your circle who are Christians and live out a Christian life or, for that matter, embrace another tradition. How do you see them? Because there's a lot of debate, it seems, these days around authenticity and indigeneity, and what's the role of faith in all of that? Maybe you could speak a little bit about that, given your experience.

MELISSA MBARKI: I'm going to speak from the experience I've had in my community, where I would say 40 percent to 50 percent were Christians. They weren't of the Catholic faith, but they were Christians. They took up a belief, and it's something that just came naturally within their family. A lot of my friends, a lot of my parents' friends, my grandfather's friends, were Christians, and even family members. For me, I have never seen any animosity towards anybody. They just accepted each other for what they believed in. As long as they weren't forcing it on us, as long as they weren't telling us, "You have to come to church," "You have to be saved," or "You have to read this." As long as it wasn't forceful, we were okay with it. We got invited to different events, we got invited to different kinds of religious gatherings, and if we could make it, we made it.

We're not taught to harm other people, and that's just not one of our teachings. And if there's animosity out there between the traditional way of life and, let's say, Christianity we figure out what the issue is and work on it.

But it was more of spending time with my friend, my mom going to see her friend. That's the kind of interaction it was. It wasn't necessarily that we were going for the religious side of things; we were just going to see our friends and to spend time with them. I had never really seen that animosity until people were burning churches. It was actually quite hurtful to see that happen. I grew up respecting everyone's religion, and that's what my grandfather had always told me to do. "You respect whatever people believe. Don't ever hurt them, don't ever harm them, don't ever do anything bad to them, don't destroy any of their property," because we always believe

that it would come back to us. He said, "If you don't want somebody going into your yard and destroying your property, then you don't do that to anybody else." And that's how I grew up.

So, to see that happen, and to say this was because they found unmarked graves. . . If my grandma had seen that happen, she would be really hurt. That would really bother her, because she was a residential school survivor but she was also Catholic and she believed in that faith. And if she ever saw anybody burn down a church that would be traumatic for her to watch. And for them to say that they were doing it on her behalf would even be more traumatizing for her than being in the residential school.

We're not taught to harm other people, and that's just not one of our teachings. And if there's animosity out there between the traditional way of life and, let's say, Christianity we figure out what the issue is and work on it. We want peaceful, respectful relationships with people of other faiths. I never grew up with hatred and animosity towards another's religion or beliefs. To see that all unfold, I was speechless for months, because I didn't know how to address it. And I didn't know if even anger justified it. Anger doesn't justify what happened. And if they truly wanted to know what a residential school survivor wanted, they should have went and asked one, and said, "Hey, how do you feel about this?" Or, "What is your take on this?" Because it's actually really harmful to the communities that do believe in that faith. And 40 to 50 percent of people on reserves believe in Christianity, or some part of it. And nobody ever asked how they felt about it. I can't imagine what they went through. And I just wouldn't want anybody to feel attacked because of what they believed in.

People need to stop looking at us like we're a monolith. People need to stop looking at us like we all hate the church.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: That seems to be a really important issue to address, because I think the media certainly didn't address that. They didn't seek out those voices. And so many of these churches were on First Nations territory, and they're predominantly the churches of that community. And somehow, there was justification to burn these churches down because, again, there's a sense that "Well, this is inauthentic, it's colonialist," or what have you. And where do we find, both as Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, an ability to really bring forth what is true and the true experience of people? There seems to be a preferred narrative out there that we see in the media and amongst a lot of elites, both Indigenous leadership, non-Indigenous leadership, where there's one narrative that gets advanced. Is that a challenge? How do we address a singular voice, when in fact that's not maybe exactly what the reality is?

MELISSA MBARKI: I think what needs to happen is people need to stop looking at us like we're a monolith. People need to stop looking at us like we all hate the church. A lot of the survivors that came out of the residential schools took Christianity or Catholicism as a faith. They took it as their own, not realizing this is what was

portrayed in the media, that we were all angry and that we all wanted churches to burn. That was really hurtful. And I think what needs to happen is that if you want to write a story about reconciliation, or if you want to have an opinion on it, talk to a residential school survivor first. Talk to a few of them, because what I've seen throughout the years of having a residential school on my reserve is that we are all in different phases of healing.

The ones that were abused left these schools very angry. They struggled later in life with mental-health issues and addictions, so they're going to have a different story. There are others who healed along the way, and they had chosen a particular faith to believe in, and that's what helped them through addictions. Each of those adults are going to have different stories, and not all of them are coming from an angry place. My grandmother had her issues. She wasn't diagnosed until later in life with PTSD. And this explains a lot of things that happened in our household. When a car came to our home, for example, if she didn't know who was in that vehicle or she didn't know who the driver was, she was on high alert. She literally made us hide.

When she was younger, she made her way through addictions, and she went to school and she became a social worker, and she came back and she helped tried to help our community as much as she could. She was physically and mentally abused, but not sexually abused, whereas some of her friends were sexually abused. Many people have healed from this trauma but they didn't heal without some sort of religious or spiritual belief system in place.

Not everybody is coming from an angry place. There are a lot of us who are advocating for mental-health services. A lot of us are advocating for things in our community that could help our people. It just sets us back when people resort to vandalism and do this on our behalf.

And I think that's a story that should get out there, that not everybody is coming from an angry place. There are a lot of us who are advocating for mental-health services. A lot of us are advocating for things in our community that could help our people. It just sets us back when people resort to vandalism and do this on our behalf.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Thank you for that. Any last thoughts, Melissa, that you'd like to offer?

MELISSA MBARKI: We're in a place where we're having these uncomfortable conversations about residential schools. I've been trying to advocate for services in my community that would actually help survivors of these schools, because I've seen the impacts and the devastation that they've done to my people. But I think what we're wanting now is we're wanting to heal, and I think we have to bring awareness to the services that we don't have and that we need [to] enable for us to heal and for us to move forward. I think that has to be the conversation. I think the longer we stay stuck looking at the angry part of this, the longer we're going to stay there. But if we start thinking about how we're going to move forward, that's actually what reconciliation is right there, because then we can have outside groups come in and

help us figure out what we need and help us get what we need. And I think that has to be the bigger story now, is how are we going to help communities, and how are we going to help Indigenous people transition into their healing journey?

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And as you mentioned, faith and spirituality plays a big role in that.

Religion and spirituality is important, regardless of what you believe.

MELISSA MBARKI: It definitely does. When I grew up, my grandfather always told me that if something is going wrong in my life, it means that I'm imbalanced somewhere. And he said, when I figure out where I'm not balanced and I start to work on that and I start to fix it, that would bring me to a more balanced place. And a lot of the times it could be different things, like it could be mental health, where I'm just really stressed out and run down. If I don't address that right away, that could turn into sickness down the road. He taught me, to always stay in balance. Spirituality and religion is a part of that, because it's a part of who we are. Prayer is important, regardless of what you believe, and that will carry us through the day and through the week, just like smudging. Smudging is part of my daily routine. I do it in the morning, and I pray for a good day, and that if I am speaking to someone or if I'm doing an interview, that I do it in a good way where people understand my message or intent. Religion and spirituality is important, regardless of what you believe.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. Thank you, Melissa. Thank you for giving me some of your time.

MELISSA MBARKI: Thank you for having me. I've been looking forward to this, so thanks for inviting me.

Photos provided by Melissa Mbarki.

Dr. Rose-Alma McDonald

Dr. Rose-Alma McDonald

This interview took place in Saint Regis, Quebec/Akwesasne Mohawk Territory, on November 28, 2022 and has been edited for clarity.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Rose-Alma, it's wonderful to have you with me this morning, and thank you very much for participating in this project.

DR. ROSE-ALMA MCDONALD: I'm very honoured. Thank you for thinking of me.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me about your own Indigenous background and a little bit about your work and your family.

DR. ROSE-ALMA MCDONALD: Well, I'm Mohawk from Akwesasne. We're the only First Nation in North America that borders New York, Ontario, Quebec, Canada, and the US. I kind of have a foot in both. I have a home in New York State on the reservation, and I also have one in Quebec on reserve. I was born to an Akwesasronon family—my mom and dad were both Mohawk, but my grandmother on my mother's side was a Bourget from Valleyfield, Quebec. She was a sister to Monsignor Joseph Bourget, who was the pastor here for about forty-two years. She came to help him at the rectory and met my grandfather Lawrence Hopps and married him. She only spoke French, and he only spoke Mohawk. So I come from a family that's very religious, in the sense that Monsignor Bourget was, "Uncle Priest." I don't remember him, because he was gone by the time I was born. But I know a lot about him, because of the way that our family lived.

I grew up on the reserve, and I've lived here all my life. I'm sixty-eight. So growing up, there were always nuns and priests at our house. My mother was in the Altar Rosary Society and the Mohawk Choir. My father was the president of the St. John the Baptist Society, and he was an usher, bell-ringer and did collections for the church. My whole life I was a cradle Catholic.

I have beautiful pictures of my mom with me as a little girl. We always had a beautiful nativity scene at Christmas time, and I have pictures of her with me in front of the nativity at church. As soon as I turned eighteen, I went to university, for fifteen years. I have a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Oswego State University, and then from St. Lawrence University, which is a beautiful private university, I got my master's degree in education (EdM). Then I also got an advanced master's degree. I went on to Pennsylvania State University. They had a Native American leadership training program, and I went there and got a Doctor of Education (EdD) in educational administration.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Fantastic.

DR. ROSE-ALMA MCDONALD: I'm a certified school-district administrator and a permanently certified teacher. I have all this academic background, but I only just came back to the church five years ago. I left the church for twenty years. Part of my leaving was because of my family.

Our church was built in 1752, so it's very old. Our community has always been very Catholic. We're a community of fourteen thousand people, Mohawks, and so I would say the majority are Catholic, especially during the time of Monsignor Bourget. They were very strict in those days. Everybody got baptized, we have church records going back to 1752. And so, if you look, all of our people were baptized, but now there's this evolution of Long House, traditional belief. It is a spiritual way of living that's based on Mother Earth. They have ceremonies at certain times of the year.

When I went to university, because I'm Catholic I went to the SUNY Newman Center and I connected with the priest there. He was young. This was in the seventies, and they were introducing guitar music in the church. It was a young church, "young" meaning the parishioners were students like myself. It was relevant. I had my own peers. Everything was more geared to young people and students. Whereas here, the Masses were still in Latin, way back when, and the priests were very strict, like the Orthodox Church.

When I married an Orthodox, what I found out, is that they are now today what we were, back in the fifties, sixties, seventies. I got married, and then I got divorced after 13 years. Well, when I got counselling from the priest the first thing the priest said to me was, "It's your fault. You're travelling all the time, and you're working all the time, and you're not paying attention to [your] husband." Everything was wrong with me because of not being the conventional type of female. At that point I said, "This church has no relevance to me." The other big criticism that I had is that we did have a Mohawk priest when I was growing up in the fifties and sixties, his name was Father Jacobs. He was also very strict, but at least he was Mohawk. We could relate to him, and he understood our culture. After him, we had this other priest, his name was Father Arsenault, and he was a young, funky kind of priest, and we all loved him. I used to go to CYO. You know what CYO is?

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Catholic Youth?

DR. ROSE-ALMA MCDONALD: Yes, I used to go to the Catholic Youth Organization. After Father Arsenault left, we got a string of older, non-Indigenous priests, very old fashioned, very conservative, who didn't want to acknowledge our culture in the church. I think that was my other issue. We did have the Mohawk choir. My mother was in the Mohawk choir. So we did have that, but the priests didn't integrate the culture in the Masses. I mentioned St. Kateri Tekakwitha to you. We have two feasts

for her annually. One is, in April when she died, and then October is when she was canonized as a saint. So, we celebrate her twice.

I've been back to the church for about five years, and they do smudging in the church now, they do the four directions, and they have reintroduced a more regular Mohawk Choir. Many of the prayers in the Mass are in Mohawk. When we pray the "Our Father," we say it in Mohawk, we also sing it in Mohawk.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Rose-Alma, tell me a little bit more about what it was that brought you back. What brought you back to the faith? And maybe say a little bit about that integration you just referenced. How is it important to have that integration? Because there are a lot of people that would say that you can't be authentically First Nations or authentically Mohawk if you're Christian. Give me your thoughts on that as well. But first tell me a little bit what brought you back.

DR. ROSE-ALMA MCDONALD: Well, like I said, I didn't want any part of this church, and to say it bluntly, it was just too white for me. I still have issues with that, because as a woman in the church, a woman could never be a deacon. I am a lay minister, Eucharistic minister, a sacristan, an altar server. I mean, when I came back, I shocked the heck out of my whole family. I went from one extreme to the other. Now I love the church and I can't live without it.

What happened was my father died. He was one of the ones that was pushing me hard, and my brothers were still pushing me to go to church. Then a friend of mine, an elder, died, and her daughter reached out to me. I went to the wake, and she asked me as I was going out the door, "Can you do the eulogy for my mom?" She said, "My mom loved you, and she would want you to do this for her."

The night before the funeral, I sat down with her and developed the eulogy and went to the church the next day for the funeral. When I went, I saw this new priest, he's been here ten years now, named Father Jerome Pastores. He's Filipino, he's young, and he's Indigenous. After the funeral he reached out to me and came over for coffee

one day and said, "How come you don't come to church?" And I said, "Well, do you really want to know?" It just wasn't relevant to me. So little by little he coaxed me into coming back to church. I started to go to church, but not every week.

When I went back to church, everybody said, "Welcome home, you're back." One of the elders, when we were leaving church one Sunday, said to me, "It's so nice to see you back at church, Dolly. You can come to church every week you know, it's only *fifty-two times a year*. You can do that." I never forgot that, because when you did the math, it's true, "OK, well, that's not so bad."

Anyways, so the priest, Father Pastores, once he got me going to church a little more regularly, he said, "You have a nice smile. How about if you be a greeter for the church, because you've got a big smile and people love you," so I said, "OK." That I could agree to, because all I had to do was stand at the door and say "Welcome." It changed the culture of our church once we started having a greeter, because the minute they came around the corner in the door, their face lit right up. "Hi, Dolly," and then hug, hug. They felt so welcomed to the church. They were so happy when they came in the door to come to church. When they'd leave, I'd be at the door saying goodbye to them.

Father Jerome convinced me to be the greeter. Then he convinced me to be an altar server for funerals. Then he convinced me to be a Eucharistic minister. Then he taught me how to be a sacristan. And then, well, just about everything that you do in a church, I was doing it, and loving it because I realized, "Oh, this is what I was born for." I had been raised, and I had been groomed to do what I do now.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: What does it mean to you?

DR. ROSE-ALMA MCDONALD: Well, I was just going to say I'm starting to get emotional, because he also convinced me to be the parish secretary for two years. I did the work of seven people. I did the finances, and I was the sacristan, all of it, plus the parish secretary. Oh, and I do the bulletin.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Ha ha! I understand well.

DR. ROSE-ALMA MCDONALD: Then I started realizing that there's a lot of politics in the church. It tested my faith. But I had started to relearn what I was groomed for. Like right now, Advent is my favourite, time of the year, with the Advent wreath and all the preparation for Christmas, all the religious pieces of it, and the Midnight Mass. And then there's Easter time, with the sunrise Mass.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Is that the Easter Vigil?

DR. ROSE-ALMA MCDONALD: I would be there, altar serving with Father at six in the morning.

So, I've learned some lessons in terms of my faith. And then when Kamloops happened, I just couldn't cope with it, because in my academic training I had written papers about residential schools and their impact. Then all the people that had issues with the Catholic church emerged, which are a lot now. We have a congregation of maybe five hundred people, but we're a community of fourteen thousand. When I was growing up, the church was packed every Sunday. So the residential schools grave findings kind of shook everybody's world, not just my world. I was hurt. How could these nuns and priests do those things, that were very well documented, to our Indigenous children? It tested my faith again. I keep getting these tests of: why am I Catholic? And at that time there was piles of shoes in front of the church, and orange paint on the pavement in front of the church, and just a lot of resentment around the country. We went to an event at the diocese, and there was an Akwesasne elder there with us. We spoke about the residential schools with the bishop, and the elder said to him that "The church is an institution. The universal church is an institution. It's God, it's us as the church. But the people that did these things were humans. They weren't gods. They were human beings who have flaws just like every other human being." The elder said she was able to separate one from the other. "This is my church that I love. This is my God that I love. I can still be a Catholic." So, I'm finding because of Kamloops that clergy are not perfect.

So the residential schools grave findings kind of shook everybody's world, not just my world. I was hurt. How could these nuns and priests do those things, that were very well documented, to our Indigenous children? It tested my faith again.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: No, we are not.

DR. ROSE-ALMA MCDONALD: It's been a hard lesson. I still do the communications and liaison for the church. So, I have really close relationships with the bishops in Valleyfield in Ogdensburg, and the Archdiocese of Ottawa, because we're in all three dioceses. I think they're learning from us. You know what I mean? Because I'm an Indigenous woman and I have Indigenous opinions.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: What does St. Kateri Tekakwitha mean to you as a Mohawk Catholic, especially dealing with all the things you've been talking about? What does she mean to you, what does she mean to the Mohawk Catholic people?

DR. ROSE-ALMA MCDONALD: I used to work on the Navajo Nation Reservation, and the Navajos are like us. They're in New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado. I went out to work there, and I made friends. We drove by this church, and lo and behold I saw a statue of St. Kateri Tekakwitha. I was surprised. I was amazed that she's been a beacon for us in terms of indigeneity and Catholicism. She's the most

beautiful example of a Christian. They have St. Kateri Tekakwitha conferences every year. Did you know that?

FR. DCN. ANDREW: No.

DR. ROSE-ALMA MCDONALD: Yes, they do. For at least the last eighty years they have a yearly St. Kateri Tekakwitha conference. At our St. Kateri Tekakwitha feast earlier this year, there was a young man, an Indigenous man, who came from Arizona. He donated a St. Kateri icon that is very, beautiful. He came to present it to us, and we had a community dinner after. I asked him, "Tell us a little bit about yourself." We were stunned. He told us he had addictions, drug addictions, alcohol addictions, and at one time he was at rock bottom, he was in dire straits. Then he said that his mother asked him to go with her to a St. Kateri conference, and there he saw two or three hundred Indigenous Catholics. He'd never been introduced to a group of Indigenous Catholics, and there they were from all over the country. They call them Kateri Circles, and they're groups that form within parishes and among their Indigenous members. Their goal is to follow and support St. Kateri Tekakwitha. So he went to that conference and he was reborn there, and now his life is completely different. He doesn't drink, he doesn't smoke, he doesn't do drugs. That's the power of St. Kateri.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: A great intercessor.

DR. ROSE-ALMA MCDONALD: Yes! She's a common link for us as Indigenous people to connect with each other in North America, because there are Kateri Circles in Canada too. There's St. Kateri Tekakwitha. How much more Indigenous can you get? Plus, she was Mohawk!

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Thank you for that. That's wonderful. Tell me, is there anything else you'd like to say or any other thoughts that you have about your faith, about being Catholic and Mohawk?

DR. ROSE-ALMA MCDONALD: Well, I surprised everybody, including myself, in terms of embracing Catholicism after twenty years away. So I've had a few epiphanies in the sense that, this is why my mother made me do so much in the church growing up. When I'm working, volunteering and doing stuff in the church, I remember that. I keep remembering I'm Catholic and I'm still Catholic. I will stay Catholic because of the way I was raised.

We went to see the bishop in Valleyfield last Wednesday. It was his birthday and he's seventy-five, and so they had a big mass. There were four of us that went from here. It meant a lot to him that we were represented at that mass.

On the way home, I was thinking this is why I do this. Because I was sitting with somebody from here that had never been to the cathedral, I saw the church through her eyes, and I thought, I guess I'll always be a Catholic, but it's not easy. That's the thing. It's not easy as an Indigenous person.

The other thing is, we have an Indigenous priest, thank the Lord. He sings the "Our Father" in Mohawk. He thinks like us. He talks like us. He acts like us. He gives me hope.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Well, you've been blessed with great perseverance and faith, and that's something to be thankful for. And I can see you're very thankful for that. So thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it, and I look forward to a visit to Akwesasne soon.

I guess I'll always be a Catholic, but it's not easy. That's the thing. It's not easy as an Indigenous person.

Photos provided by Dr. Rose-Alma McDonald.

Dcn. Rennie Nahanee

Dcn. Rennie Nahanee

This interview took place in North Vancouver, British Columbia, on November 11, 2022.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Deacon Rennie, it's wonderful to have you take part in this project. Tell me a little bit about yourself, your Indigenous background, your work, and your family.

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: I am an elder in the Squamish Nation, located in North Vancouver, British Columbia. I'm a deacon in the Catholic Church located on the reserve. I was ordained in 2015, and fortunately I was placed in my home church where I was baptized and had confirmation and was married there. So, that is a great big thing for me.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: That's wonderful. Now tell me just a little bit more about your faith. Tell me about your Catholic faith, what it means to you, how you live it out as a member of the Squamish First Nation and maybe a little bit about your diaconal ministry as well.

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: I was born a cradle Catholic. My mother and father went to residential school, and most of my older siblings did too. I went to Indian day school, as it was called. My introduction to the church began when the sister, one of the nuns that was a teacher, asked on Monday morning in our religion class who went to Mass. And everybody put up their hand except me. This went on for maybe a month, and I decided to go down to the church and see what it was all about. It was amazing, because there were elders in my church at that time serving the Lord and very happy with what they were doing. They were smiling. You could see love in their eyes. And I thought to myself, well, who's going to replace them when they get old? That answer would come many years later.

So, I never went to a residential school myself, and I think I was kind of shielded from all the bad things that happened in residential school. I just grew up in the church, watching my elders, and everything seemed fine. But even when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed, I thought to myself, well, I've learned from my elders in my own church, and I will continue the work that they started, and nobody's going to move me from that.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Well, that raises an interesting question. Some in the media or in other elite circles in this country would question whether it's fully authentic for a First Nations person to be a Christian. What would you say to that idea?

And our feelings, our thoughts about Creation, the way that we lived and carried out our everyday lives, and the way that we helped to preserve the land and the animals that we used for food, our spirituality and our culture were similar to the spirituality of the Catholic Church.

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: Well, I'm pretty sure we had a belief in the Creator even before the missionaries came to British Columbia. And our feelings, our thoughts about Creation, the way that we lived and carried out our everyday lives, and the way that we helped to preserve the land and the animals that we used for food, our spirituality and our culture were similar to the spirituality of the Catholic Church. And I believe that's why our people accepted it. I don't think anybody can separate themselves from God, even though they say so. Otherwise they wouldn't exist. It was God that created everybody, whether they like it or not or they choose to dismiss him. I do not choose that. I have all my trust and faith in the Lord our God, and I serve him. I bow to no man.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Well, tell me about that diaconal service. What does your diaconal ministry consist of?

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: Well basically it's assisting at the altar in our church, which I did this morning on Remembrance Day. I also assist the archbishop when he goes and does confirmations or installations or other things. I usually proclaim the gospel. But also I serve when we have our Indigenous Mass on the fourth Sunday of each month. A good portion of the Mass as laid out in the Sunday Missal, which is translated into our language, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh sníchim, is used on that Sunday. I always like to do the Lord's Prayer in our language, and preaching is in English and our Squamish language. Now that I'm retired, I have been going out to different events in our community and being out there with the people. The last time I saw you, I said I was going canning.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: That's right.

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: And I did help with the canning of the sockeye salmon, which they provided. There were fifteen of us. We all had different jobs and, well, we had to filet the fish, which I've never done before. Actually, I've never even canned before. But, fifteen of us made the job quite short, and we got that done in two hours. And they cooked it most of the night, and the next day they said we can come back and take a case home with us.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: A pretty good deal?

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: Oh, it's a very good deal.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Now, I remember you telling me that you do some translation work for sacred texts and different liturgical books. Can you say something about that work?

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: Yes. So, we hired one of the speakers of our language in the Squamish Nation. His name is Aaron, and he translated the Sunday Missal, including the responses, to fit with the way we would respond to things at Sunday Mass. We cannot translate the readings, because there's too many. There's a cycle of three years [of] readings plus a year with all those different readings. I mean, the costs would be horrendous. And so we just do that in English, and I call that a hybrid Mass,

which is suitable for now. But if we get a grant that I'm hoping we will get, I will have a translation of the funeral rites and vigil. And that will be pretty much in the language, with no translation.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: In addition to translating liturgical books into the Squamish language, in what other ways have you integrated particular Squamish traditions that maybe predate Christian mission?

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: So, right now we're borrowing some songs from the canoe journeys, and we're singing their songs at the entrance, as the first song. The people are dressed in regalia, and instead of a Christian song, we have our own Squamish song to welcome people into the church. That's once a month. Eventually I hope it will be maybe two, and then eventually three, possibly four times. So people get an idea of not only our words but our songs. And our songs are just as valid as any Christian song. Now somebody might say, "Well, they're not quite theologically correct," but we get the message as the people, we are hearing it. Maybe we don't speak the language, but we are hearing it in our hearts and our minds. And that is probably something which goes beyond some of those Christian songs.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me a little bit more about the parish there. It's one of the oldest parishes in the Lower Mainland, I think, and the church is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, church. Tell me about the importance of that church within the nation.

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: That church was built in 1884, the present-day church, that is. We had one before then, but it burned down, because in those days we didn't have electricity and so they used candles—a very dangerous thing to do. That church has a shared history with not only the Native people in our Squamish Nation, but non-native people that come and choose to celebrate the Mass with us. That shared history exists because it's our people that built that church and our people participated in that church. You know, back in the 1800s or later, it was a little stricter than it is today. Sometimes they'd even go and check people's houses and make sure they're clean and make sure they're not eating meat on Friday, and all those Catholic things.

From that church and the residential school, a number of great things happened. We had our own orchestra, which is about forty people, and all of them could read music. There were actually two orchestras, a large one and a smaller one. We had a choir, and they were very good, they were sometimes put on local radio stations. So you can see the way that our people were attached to that church from a long time ago. And then of course there was the residential school, and when the students got out and married, had children of their own, they still came and helped out at the church. There was no talk of reconciliation and all those other things.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Well, that's certainly a dominant topic within First Nations communities and the broader Indigenous population, but also for so many non-Indigenous Canadians. We have been thinking more and more about reconciliation especially when Pope Francis came on his pilgrimage, as he described it, to Canada

in July. Tell me a little bit about how you view that whole process of reconciliation as a Catholic deacon, maybe also in light of the pope's visit.

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: Yes, I think the big bang theory, if I could put it that way, was when they discovered the unmarked graves at Kamloops, because the bishops of Canada were not totally in agreement on inviting Pope Francis. So when they discovered those unmarked graves, not just the Native people across Canada but the non-native people got involved and started asking questions to the bishops of Canada: "What are you going to do? What are we going to do?" And I think that helped to push them to finally unite together and as one, and invite Pope Francis to come to Canada.

I do have some questions about that, because a lot of them are politicians, Native politicians, and, pretty sure, residential school survivors. I'm not sure how many people that are actually still in the church have been there through this whole thing.

When the Vatican did decide the Pope would come to Canada, they chose different sites, I believe perhaps with some guidance from Indigenous people. I was hoping that they would come to Vancouver, but Edmonton was just as well, I guess. I wasn't going to go to that Mass in Edmonton, because I reconciled a long time ago, but God works in strange ways. Prior to all this, one of the staff people in the Archdiocese of Vancouver sent me an email to ask me to fill out this form about being active clergy. This went out to Indigenous people across Canada. I filled it out and never heard anything. And then a week before the event, I got the call from Father Cristino, who asked me if I'd like to tend to Pope Francis at the Mass in Edmonton.

And I was thinking—I should have said, "Well, I'll check my calendar, father, see if I got time." But I didn't. I said yes right away. Well, then I had to figure out, how am I going to get there? Where are we going to stay, and do we have money? But all that was taken care of. And my wife, Emma, had friends up there that let us stay in their brother's house, fed us, gave us a room. They took us to places for meetings and things like that. And it all worked out. I got to shake the hand of Pope Francis. Before we went there, our Filipino friends said, "If the Holy Father shakes your hand, don't wash it." In case it can still pass some blessings onto them. And then we got a rosary, a papal rosary. Three Native deacons in the back got that as well as some seminarians, some of which I think might have been from British Columbia, I'm not sure. So that's the highlight of my diaconal ministry, which is now in its seventh year, I guess.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Oh, that's a wonderful blessing. Well, I'm glad you had the opportunity to be there for that Mass. Is there anything further you'd like to say or any other reflections you have on your life of faith and the faith of the community you're in?

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: Well, I'm still waiting for some kind of response from the bishops of Canada. They're supposed to collect $30 million. I don't know how far they've gotten with that. I have my application in to the archdiocese, too, to continue the work that I've started. But the reconciliation is not something that's going to change overnight. There have been five hundred years of occupation, with all the troubles that we've been through. Yet from looking at the footage of the other places that Pope Francis visited in Alberta, there were good signs that some people are ready to reconcile.

When I was up on the stadium at Edmonton and looking out on the people too, I kind of felt maybe the way Jesus felt when he'd seen all those crowds coming towards him: with compassion, seeing that some are smiling, some are happy, some are sad, some are wondering what's going to take place next. But I believe it will happen, because Pope Francis is the last person that anybody can approach, after him is God, and you have to die to get up there and it's a one-way trip.

Indigenous people in this country have not been sitting around waiting for the church to approach them. Our Native people have found reconciliation through going back to their culture, through their songs, their dance, and their stories, and teaching young children these things.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Well, we can all approach him every day, of course.

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: Yes. Yes. So I feel very grateful that Pope Francis did come to Canada and did make the apology on behalf of the Catholic Church, because unlike other faiths we do not have a national organization in Canada, like the Anglicans, for example. Although we have the bishops of Canada, they do not represent Canada. They represent their own diocese. So, we'll just see what happens. Indigenous people in this country have not been sitting around waiting for the church to approach them. Our Native people have found reconciliation through going back to their culture, through their songs, their dance, and their stories, and teaching young children these things. They can have some pride in them, in being Indigenous in this country. I've seen it.

I was at a powwow, which may not belong to us as Squamish, but back in the early days, when we were searching for where our culture had gone, we needed to get it back from somewhere. The powwow is like the summer celebration in the sun. And so, I was attending one of the powwows held in the gym just about a week ago. The age group were little tots, and they could barely walk, but they're dancing. Then there were teenagers, all in the regalia, and elders also dancing. So we are practicing our culture. Our language program started in this community in the eighties. We even

had a band member, Louis Miranda, who was actually Chilean but he married a Squamish woman. He spoke Spanish, but he also learned Squamish.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Amazing.

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: He taught that to the Spanish people. Once for our Remembrance Day memorial, I approached Louis and I said, "I need a name for our cenotaph, and it has to do with serving our country." And so I left him with that for a week. I came back to him, and he had a big smile on his face and he said, "We do not have a term for serving your country. Serving, to us, is serving food in the Long House, a place like that." So he gave me another name: "those who went to war," in our language, and that is inscribed on the monument today.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful.

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: "Those who went to war." I might have thought I knew everything when I approached him, but he was an elder and he knew better how to express those kinds of things.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And was he also a Catholic?

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: Yes. He was Catholic, and he also helped out with the Shaker Church too, which is a Native religion. But his contribution is the language. He and a number of other elders who've worked with him have passed on what they learned when they were children. We also have a director of the language program who has a doctorate in linguistics, I think. And so our language now deals with past tense, present tense, and future tense and is continuing to develop. It's just that we need places to practice that language. And I believe our church is one place that we could practice four days a week and during funerals.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: It's interesting, I was reflecting with someone else that I was interviewing about the role that those early Jesuits like St. Jean de Brébeuf played in creating a written Huron language, and especially "Jesous Ahatonhia," that great Huron Carol written in the Huron language.

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: Yes.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Do you see the church as being, again, that vehicle through which Indigenous culture can be developed and promoted?

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: Well, let me say something about the Huron Carol first, which was the first inculturation of Indigenous culture. "'Twas in the moon of wintertime, when all the birds had fled. That mighty Gitchi Manitou sent angel choirs instead. . . . Chiefs from far before him knelt, with gifts of fox and beaver pelt." Our culture is in that song. Another deacon was looking to do a pageant on

Christmas Eve, and I said, "You should go with the Huron Carol. It's only about three minutes. And have people play those different parts in there, in the regalia. I think that would be really cool." And he didn't even know about the Huron Carol. He's not Native, but he sounded pretty excited about it, and I hope he does it.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful.

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: Yes. So, with inculturation and the church, the church tends to move very slowly, for me anyway. I watched the Amazonian synod, and Pope Francis wanted the Amazonians to bring their culture into the church. There were people on the other side saying, "Well, we don't want your culture here. We don't want these false idols and stuff like that." That same old junk that we heard a long time ago. Our culture is our culture, and that's what it is. Pope St. John Paul II, when he came to Canada he said that Indigenous people would have a new way of expressing the gospel message, and that the message does not destroy the culture but it purifies it. I wish more people actually heard that. I'm doing my best to make his words come true in my church at St. Paul's in North Vancouver with our inculturation. Other churches around the world, Spanish churches, the Filipino church, the Korean, the Chinese, they all celebrate totally in their language. And I believe that makes that more fulfilling to them, hearing the Mass in their language. And that's what I feel needs to happen in our church. And I'm doing my best to make those changes while I'm still a deacon. I don't know if an ordinary person could do that, who's not clergy.

Pope St. John Paul II, when he came to Canada he said that Indigenous people would have a new way of expressing the gospel message, and that the message does not destroy the culture but it purifies it.… I'm doing my best to make his words come true in my church.

So, it may happen someday. We've been in operation for over a year now in bringing the language to our church. Over time, I think people will probably accept that. The church is finally speaking our language and allowing our customs and culture to come into the church. When we have funerals, we do our Catholic thing first and then we have the Native thing after. So I'm thinking, why not combine those two together? That's another thing I have to work on. We're side by side, but we're not together. We have to join our hands together.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Well, I wish you many of God's blessings in that ministry, brother deacon. Thank you again very much for taking the time to speak with me.

DCN. RENNIE NAHANEE: Thank you.

Photos provided by Deacon Rennie Nahanee.

Dcn. Gilbert Pitawanakwat

Dcn. Gilbert Pitawanakwat

This interview took place in Wikwemikong, Ontario, on October 11, 2022.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Gilbert, you were born and raised here in Wikwemikong?

DCN. GILBERT PITAWANAKWAT: Yes, just as a child. I left here maybe about nine years or ten years old. I went to school in North Bay. So we were boarding there. And then when I finished there, I was two and a half years in Toronto, at George Brown College at the time. I forget what the prior name was. They call it George Brown now, but it had a different name at that time, eh? Anyway, Institute of Trades, that's what they called it before. Anyway, that's where I went. And it was in Toronto that I did my work in the plant. So following that, when I got here in 1980 I started to work with the priest in Kaboni. And that was the guy that was charged with that sexual abuse, Father George Epoch. He had a very bad name. Everything was revealed after his death. But all the time I worked with him, I never found anything myself, regarding his offences and stuff.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: It must have been very hard.

DCN. GILBERT PITAWANAKWAT: It was terrible. Just to know what he was up to really. And he was in Cape Croker for a bit. He wasn't very healthy. He had a heart problem. So, many times he had me step in to do the service when he was away. And so I took it on. I wasn't ordained yet, but he says, "I'll pray over you. You just go ahead and do it. I give you permission." So I just did what he told me, and I covered for him quite a bit. And then, finally, he left, and then he passed away.

But I continued with the other priests that came here, and I worked with them. And that's where that fourteen years was, prior to my ordination. And then an elder deacon who was here, he was quite old himself. Deacon Angus was his name. He came and approached me back in the 1980s, when he knew I was working with the priest in Kaboni. It was during a blizzard. And I see lights shining toward our house, and I could see this person struggling to get to my house. And that was him, eh? And he says, "Gilbert," he says, "we'd like you to join us deacons. And would you be interested?" And I says, "Yeah. Well, I'm helping out now. I don't know what the difference would be." And he says, "You may have to be ordained." "Well, let me think about it." But anyway, I went on and did my work helping the priests.

The deacon program was new at that time, so it was not very popular either. Deacons weren't recognized. You go in a church, and people walk in, they say, "Oh, Deacon is doing the service," they would just walk out. It didn't work, at first. It was hard, eh? And it was like an insult when that happened, eh? And same thing with giving Communion, eh? They said, "No, I don't want to take Eucharist from a deacon."

They didn't have any understanding of the role of a deacon. Nobody did. It was new. It was something they hadn't seen before. And we had struggles, even in my time, that's years after. I was ordained in '94. But there were other deacons who were ordained way back. It was in the late '70s. But they weren't recognized. So some of them went out to give Communion to the elders. And some elders would refuse. They would say, "No, I'm not taking that from you."

FR. DCN. ANDREW: They wanted the priests.

DCN. GILBERT PITAWANAKWAT: It was hard. They wanted the priests, yeah. So everything was a struggle. Even smudging was a struggle. People walked out when people smudged, eh? But this was the tradition of the people. It's cleansing yourself with the sacred medicines. And these sacred medicines were always recognized. But they weren't practiced, because of the colonial structure that the government had in place over our people. So they've had laws where this thing was not allowed. But it came back when the deacons came back. They said, "We have to use what we have. If you want to recognize us in the church, we need to practice some of our own traditions. And you got the Catholic tradition. What's wrong with my tradition?" And then, of course, some priests said, "We had no business taking away your tradition. No business." There are all kinds of denominations. And why only with the Native people would you prohibit their traditions? Everyone else is allowed to do theirs.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: That's right.

DCN. GILBERT PITAWANAKWAT: So, that became a big question. And then the church started to say, "Okay, we need to start working with you people. We need to start to make changes that are appropriate. So we accept your drums, we accept your smudging. Gradually, we'll accept perhaps even an ordination of a married priest." And they tried that, but they didn't get any response from Pope John Paul, eh? Maybe this one, I don't know if they had approached him over that again, but the other one, though, didn't allow it, so . . . But they said, "We should allow it," because of the decline of priests. We don't have priests filling the shoes anymore. We used to have a priest here for all the churches, at one time. They're not there no more. There's only one priest.

And the load's heavy, eh? The population is not getting smaller. It's getting bigger. It's now, I mean, three times bigger. So imagine, we had several priests here for the little population before, where the population has burst at the seams. And then now we only got one priest. And something don't make sense, eh? But the deacons came in helping out, eh? I cannot imagine Father Paul Robson being on his own at

all, including DOSes. DOSes step in much like us, and they do their share of the workload. And much of the fundraising is by the DOSes.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: What do the DOSes do?

DCN. GILBERT PITAWANAKWAT: Ministry, and taking care of the churches, and fundraising.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me a bit, Gilbert, about how your Anishinaabe identity relates to your Catholic faith. You have already touched on it in some ways.

Whether you pray according to [Anishinaabe] tradition or whether you pray as a Catholic, there is one God.

DCN. GILBERT PITAWANAKWAT: For me, I don't see a difference. Personally, when people say, "Oh, you're this. Oh, you're that." For me, there's one God, one God. Whether you pray according to [Anishinaabe] tradition or whether you pray as a Catholic, there is one God. And for me to be a judge on how they pray or, it's not up to me to be doing that. And the traditional way, I respect that, because what was taken from them has done more harm than what anything can be worth, because people give thanks every day. First thing in the morning, they would offer tobacco, they would offer their prayer, and give thanks for the sunlight, thanks for the trees, the Mother Earth, and the water, and things that give life to us. They are God's gifts to us. That's what we receive. And that was the prayer of the Native people. And every time before they planted or harvested, they would offer prayers. It was something very close to their hearts, eh? And when they were told, "No, this is paganism," it hurt them. It really, really hurt them and did more damage. They were forced to pray in a language they don't understand. And when Latin was used, nobody understood the prayers. It almost was meaningless. And the priest was facing the other way too, on top of that, in saying Masses, eh? But that's how they were forced to be in line with the church. And it bothered them. It did bother them.

And anyway, when the language was translated to English, then it was a little bit better, because we have picked up the language, eh? Prior to that, they didn't understand any of the stuff. Now, today, they make connections. But when they equate the Catholic church practices with the traditional, everything equates, everything. With the Eucharist, for them it was the pipe. The pipe was the connection, and it was through the pipe that everyone shares. That was the Communion. And the smudging, preparing yourself, cleansing your five senses and asking for pardon and asking that no evil spirit will be in your presence as long as you are praying. And the medicines, they knew, for sure, took away the evil spirit, because whenever they experience anything negative or anything that shouldn't happen in any situation, they always used the smudge and that thing would go away. So they found power in that. They knew it's there.

And there are so many things that happen that are unexplainable, and they knew what it was. And the sacred medicines were the ones that they held sacred to help them to lift their prayers up to the Creator. It was meaningful and sound for them. And as much as a priest is praying at the altar, it's the same thing. So they looked at both practices and everything they equated, it's the same. It's no difference. Really, there aren't. What's wrong with the Catholic people not understanding us? That's what they're saying. And it's true.

But for myself, I was brought up Catholic, because that thing was underground when that happened. And I was brought up Catholic, and I just hung on to it, though I respect these people who practiced tradition. I don't judge them. I'm not going to judge them either. It's wrong for me to do that. Who sent me to be a judge of anybody? And when you turn to Scripture, eh, you see all the stuff that it says there about what you should be doing and practicing. It doesn't match with someone looking over someone's shoulder and saying, "You shouldn't be doing that and this." There's only one Judge.

But there's a lot of pressure coming from where it's said, "Oh, no, no, no, you're not allowed this." Well, what are we not to allow? We allow them to do their portion. And Father Doug McCarthy explained it well one time. He says, "If they take away the bread and wine, the Eucharist from me," he says, "what would I be? I wouldn't be a priest," he says. "They take that right away from me." The government said, "You're not allowed with the bread and wine at your altar." "I'm done," he says. "I'm finished. I'm wiped out." And he says, "You do the same thing to a Native person when he's praying with his traditions and how he understands God and how he prays, he says the same thing. You're taking away everything from them. How is he supposed to pray?"

FR. DCN. ANDREW: So, do you find these things are better integrated now?

DCN. GILBERT PITAWANAKWAT: Yes. It has been needed for a long time. Most of this background stuff has evolved not only with the government but with the Catholic Church, and not only the Catholic Church but with all other churches that

were involved, Anglican, Baptist, and whatever. It's appalling, what happened. It's very, very simple. But we make it complicated, because we beat around the bushes of other stuff and then say, "Oh, this and that, this and that." Well, the Native people are very zeroed in. They can see what happened to them. They can see what was done to them. And they get access to this stuff now that they didn't before. They can go to the archives in Ottawa, and they are given access there because of the legal rights they have. And United Nations is in there, allowing them to focus a lot on their rights, eh? So they're discovering so much that, even though they know it's there and even though they're aware what had happened, a lot of this stuff is not released. But they know it's there. So when it comes to the point, eh, it's a dirty shame. It's a really, really dirty shame. And we don't deal with it with just a simple, "Oh, we're sorry." That doesn't cut it. There has to be a change, and the church has to recognize the change.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: What sort of change do you think needs to take place?

DCN. GILBERT PITAWANAKWAT: I've been at a few ordinations, and the speaker at these ordinations has always said, "We have to start working with First Nations people as a church. We have to. There are no ifs, ands, or buts. We have to make changes, and right now we have to make changes." I've heard this many, many times. I don't know what changes they're referring to. Maybe these tiny words that they throw here and there are not a change. What you need to see is a real change in the church. And so that's the basis of it. For me, personally, I have never had differences. Whether it's traditional beliefs or Catholic, I have never had differences. For me, it's one God, whether I pray that way or pray this way. But I don't judge, I don't dare judge nobody in their practice. Even Jehovah's Witnesses, they want to believe what they believe. That's their right. If they were brought up as a child like that, that's what they were led to believe and that's what they follow, eh? And of course, God is the final judge. He's the one who's going to say, "You know what you did." He's not going to say, "You did wrong because you prayed this way." That's how he was brought up. It's a pure sickness to say, "Well, how you pray is wrong." You were brought up as a child like that. And same with me, I was brought up as a Catholic. My prayer is always centered on God, not the title or whatever you want to call it. I pray and follow what's in Scripture and stuff like that. It's not to say, "Oh, my mind is somewhere else, and I'm going to go and push that guy away from his religion." That's not my job. And that's what I see with the church. The church for so long has been condemning: "What you're doing is wrong." And all the books that you read of the intentions behind the stuff that took place, it's a shame. So now we have to rebuild, because the church has to rebuild itself and recognize what the Natives are telling them.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Having just been in the church next door here in Wikwemikong, and then also having been to, for example, St. Francis Xavier Mission in Kahnawake, it seems to me like there's a really good integration of both Catholic belief and how different aspects of Indigenous culture have been brought into the church and welcomed in the church. They see that there are these parallels that exist.

DCN. GILBERT PITAWANAKWAT: Well, that was the colonialism that was there before. That's how this church started. It was our way, and people caught on with it. That's how they prayed. And because of the government's actions still behind it, they were forced to pray that way. Mind you, they know what was being done to them. And now that thing is coming out. That's what really separates the church now. And it's at a point where it's very difficult for both of us, the Catholics and the traditional believers. With all the sexual abuse and with all the knowledge of what they find in the archives and with the government and even with the Vatican, it's overwhelming.

There is discrimination in the church. And inasmuch as the church may say there's none, that's very, very wrong, because I, myself, as a deacon, I have seen it among the clergy.

Now, how do we start to deal with it? Do we deal with it, or does the church deal with it, to reconcile I mean? We've been in there with them all along. And now when this is coming out, then something is wrong. And you just cannot wipe it out overnight. They have to see more openness, more integration of both cultures, and an understanding of who they are too. There is discrimination in the church. And inasmuch as the church may say there's none, that's very, very wrong, because I, myself, as a deacon, I have seen it among the clergy. Everywhere, I see it. And it's not only toward Natives. Even among themselves, priests are not doing the right things.

I was invited to an ordination. The priests and the bishops were told, "You guys sit aside over there. You guys sit aside over there. Him [Deacon Gilbert], he's helping me," the bishop said. "I invited him. He's going to help me. You guys sit on the side over there." They didn't like that. And a lot of them came to me and they said, "Why were you chosen? How come we're not part of this celebration?" They were told to sit on the side. And very openly too, they were told, "You sit on the side. This guy's going to help me with this ordination." You see that? Why would these bishops feel that way? Why would the priests feel that way? They did. I said, "I have no answer here. You ask the guy up there. I'm not going to argue." It's just foolishness to see this in the church.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Now you assisted at the papal Mass in Edmonton. What was that experience like for you?

DCN. GILBERT PITAWANAKWAT: It's not something new. I mean it. I'm there to do my job. And my priority is the guy up there.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: God?

DCN. GILBERT PITAWANAKWAT: It's not so much how we interact or. . . Well, that's important too, but to be done the right way. But my focus is on the Master himself. It's not so much this big excitement there and, "I'm going to be seen." No, none of that. I go there humbly, and I do my work humbly. That's my faith.

I don't want to sit up there where it's high. I would prefer to sit where I don't want to be seen but still be part of it. But unfortunately, I was called to read the Gospel and to be a participant with bringing the Scripture to the altar and the preparation of the gifts there. That was an honour. But it's not an honour I look for. It's serving the Creator, God. That's my focus. I'm not there because I'm Catholic. I'm there because of God. And if I join the traditional people in their prayer, I'm there for God. I'm not there for their tradition or I'm not there for Catholic tradition. I'm there to praise God and his works. That's why I'm there.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful.

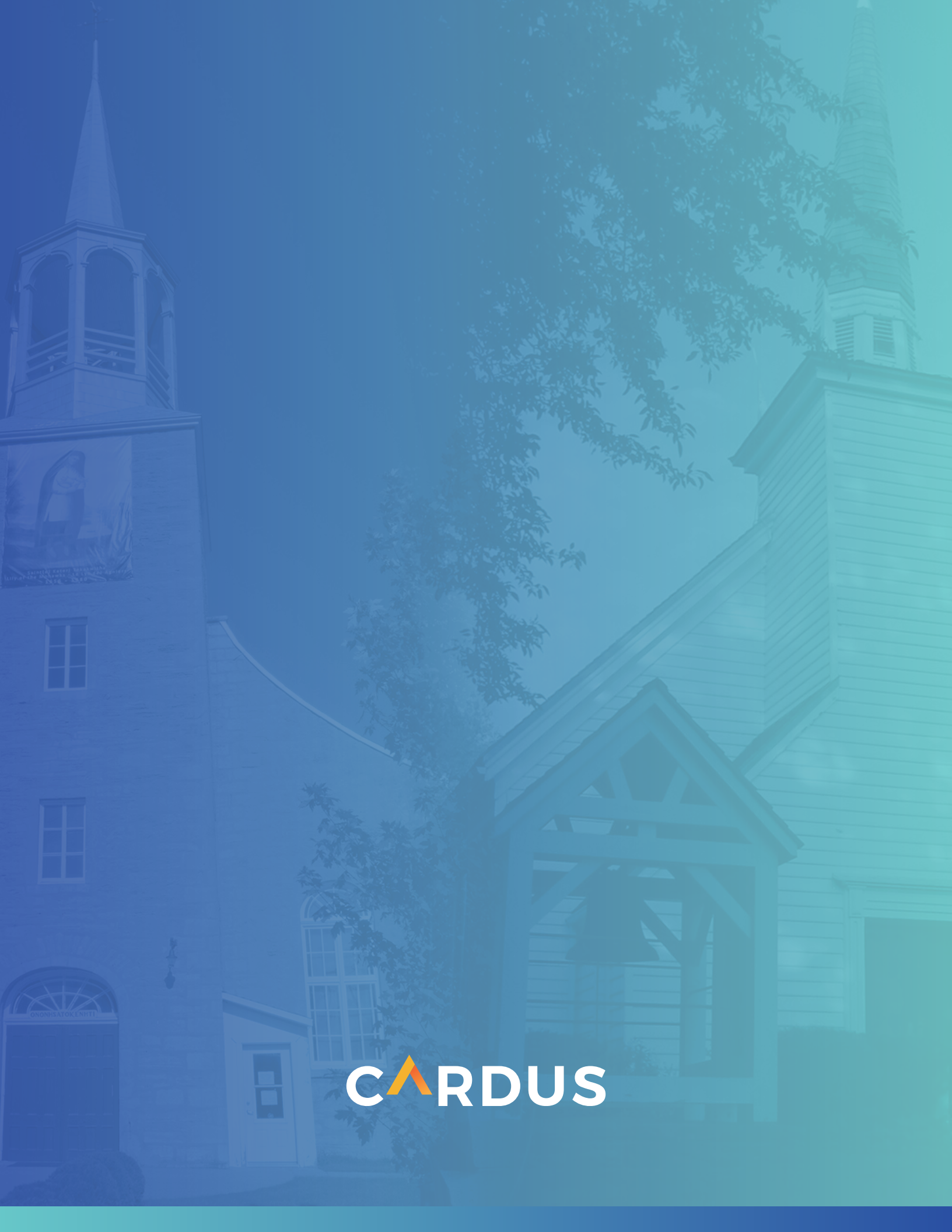
DCN. GILBERT PITAWANAKWAT: That's how I see life. I'm not there to judge nobody. I'm not there to look down on anybody. And then, when I look at people, I see God in them. I see God in people. Every day I see a lot in people. When I see someone, he's God-sent. Whether I shake their hands or visit with them, I see God in that person. That's how I view life. And that's important to me.

There are so many things that I see are wrong. We were in Sudbury, and we pulled up into a mall, eh? And in that mall, there was a man sitting in the snow. Nothing. He has nothing, barely any warm clothes, and he looked pitiful. He had a cup in front of him. He wasn't even looking at you. He was just there, humbled, wanting help. So we pulled up. And oh, my gosh, I was so heartbroken just looking at this man. And I told my wife, I says, "We better get some money and help this man out." So while I pulled my wallet out, she was pulling out her purse, and a cop pulled by really fast and the cop says, "Out of here. Out. I don't care where you go. Out. They don't want you here." He was so brutal with this poor man. We never even had a chance to help him. I was so heartbroken. Why didn't this cop take this man to a warm shelter place somewhere and get him some food or something . . . These are supposed to be protectors, servants.

And why don't they find a place where they can rehabilitate, instead of prisons? They put so much money in there, where they can build institutions, where they can train these people for something, and work with them on a probation site somewhere where they can straighten them out of it a bit. But not just like an animal, lock them up in a cage. There's so much that I see that really disturbs me in society. A lot of times, these people who end up in there are so poor that they go and do something stupid in order to live. That's survival for them. As a Christian, it breaks your heart. It just really, really does.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Thank you, Gilbert, for your thoughts. I very much appreciate your time.

Photos taken by Rev. Dr. Andrew P. W. Bennett.


CARDUS