

*In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Corinthians 5:19).*

The five days I spent in Vancouver, British Columbia was a rich experience with colleague bishops from the United States and Canada. We had gathered for the annual Bishops Academy and the theme was “First Nations Peoples: Spirituality, Theology, Reconciliation.”

It was significant that we met in Canada where 10% of the population is First Nations People, compared to 1% or less in the United States. A sign of this stronger presence were front-page newspaper editorials and news stories about issues facing First Nation peoples, something we rarely see in the U.S. media.

Canada has invested time and energy in addressing issues related to First Nations People or Native Americans as we might say. In 2008 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was organized in response to the abuse inflicted upon native peoples through the Indian Residential school system. The introduction to their work reads: “There is an emerging and compelling desire to put the events of the past behind us so that we can work towards a stronger and healthier future.”

The speakers at our event were Prairie Rose Seminole, ELCA Program Director for the American Indian, Alaska Native Ministries; Dr. Martin Brokenleg who served as Professor of Native American studies over 30 years at Augustana University, Sioux Falls, and The Right Reverend Mark MacDonald, the Anglican Church of Canada’s first National Indigenous Anglican Bishop. All of them referenced the work Canada has done in trying to come to terms with its history. As Prairie Rose told us, “you’ve done nothing wrong but you are benefitting from a history and a system of injustice and genocide.”

Through stories, a blanket exercise, and personal reflections we learned once again of the horror inflicted upon native peoples in North America – the displacement of populations, the dehumanization of people, the enormous suffering and death. The Church’s complicity also became painfully obvious, beginning with the Doctrine of Discovery. Papal rulings in the 14<sup>th</sup> century gave Christian explorers the right to lay claim to lands they “discovered” and to claim them for Christian Monarchs. In the centuries since, the Church has been involved “up to its eyeballs,” as one speaker said, in the dehumanization of indigenous people. “The Church participated openly and in animated ways, with ideologies and images that were intrinsically genocidal,” was the comment of Bishop MacDonald.

But there is the possibility for hope and healing. Reconciliation happens, said the bishop, when victims reclaim their humanity and not because oppressors suddenly wake up to the reality of their evil. Victims are reconciled with what has happened in their history and oppressors are invited to repair the damage to their own humanity as they are invited into this well of grace.

Bishop MacDonald spoke of churches as “incubators of reconciliation” and lifted up 4 ways that congregations can participate in God’s mission of reconciling love.

1. One is to accompany the suffering. Reach out and listen to the stories of those who have suffered and endured centuries of oppression and neglect.
2. Another is to be a place of truth telling. Reconciliation only happens as the painful realities are noted and acknowledged.
3. Another is for congregations to be places of exemplary transformation by which, I think, he meant that we listen and learn and grow and change from interaction with the other.
4. Finally, we are all called to deeper levels of discipleship. We are called to integrate the will of God into our lives. With this I am reminded of the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that it should be the ardent prayer of every Christian “to know and do the will of God.”

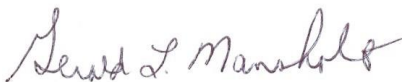
Bishop Elaine Sauer of the Manitoba/Northwestern Ontario Synod said she learned through her work with the Truth and Reconciliation process the importance of showing up. “We need to go, show up, and listen. Don’t look for resources or develop programs, just listen and learn.”

As I think about the many issues before us in this country, including coming to terms with our treatment of Native Americans, I think we would do well to listen and learn so that we can live into a stronger and healthier future. One of the recurring themes from our speakers was that God also meets us and speaks to us outside the realm of the Church.

One of the oldest Native American ministries in the Lutheran Church is right here in the East Central Synod of Wisconsin. Church of the Wilderness is a Lutheran congregation and part of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community near Bowler. Their ancestral roots are in Stockbridge, Massachusetts having been forced into relocation several times before ending up in Wisconsin.

I wonder if God might be calling us in this synod, surrounded as we are by a rich heritage of First Nations People, to listen and learn and to be an “incubator of reconciliation”. We grow into a stronger and healthier future when we build community, hear the stories of others, and are transformed by the power of the Spirit at work among us. God has given us this promise in the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Gerald L. Mansholt". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'G' and 'M'.

The Rev. Gerald Mansholt, Bishop  
East Central Synod of Wisconsin

