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A Decolonial Vision of God: Relationships Between Indigenous Peoples and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada*

Danika Jorgensen-Skakum[†]

A Word of Introduction from Gordon A. Jensen

It happens all the time. In telling a story, invariably a person narrates the story from only one perspective. In the process, however, other perspectives of the same event, along with the voices of other story-tellers, are overlooked or even deliberately ignored. In the “large story” of the history of the Lutherans in Canada, as told by generations of recognized and respected Lutheran history scholars, the stories and perspectives of the Indigenous Peoples of Canada are conspicuous by their absence. Their voices have been silenced: most likely not deliberately so, but by a “sin of omission,” intent as they were to document the story from the Lutheran immigrants’ perspectives. And, to be honest, countless Lutherans reading these “Lutheran stories” have never noticed the omission of Indigenous voices. Danika Jorgensen-Skakum has noticed this omission, however, in a course she took on the history of the Lutheran Churches in Canada, and she decided to investigate. Since one of the main texts used in the course was Norman J. Threinen’s *A Religious-Cultural Mosaic: A History of Lutherans in Canada*, Jorgensen-Skakum wrote an earlier version of this paper, filling in some missing parts of this story. While Threinen’s book is the “conversation partner” in this article, it is merely representative of the Canadian Lutheran history books and articles that have not recognized the reality that Lutheran congregations were very often established on Indigenous lands. Jorgensen-Skakum, however, in a very gracious way, challenged the traditional approach that I had become accustomed to and comfortable with, daring to reveal that the story we have told ourselves as Lutherans is very one-sided and told from a decidedly colonialist perspective. This story, however, needs to be expanded to become multi-dimensional and more reflective of the whole story of Lutherans in Canada.

Jorgensen-Skakum does more than simply identify and name some of the residents of the land that Lutherans inhabited. She goes on to explore the tenuous and challenging realities of Indigenous-Lutheran relationships by examining the four documents or statements made by the ELCIC since its incorporation in 1986, and then concludes by laying a foundation for a de-colonized vision of God. Her contribution thus provides an important starting point for a healthy, creative new community of respect for all and the inclusion of all, a community that is based, as Lutherans would recognize, on God’s grace and vision for creation. For this reason, this article, with her permission, became an important required reading in the Canadian Lutheran history course that I taught. This article has encouraged many students in subsequent classes to reframe the stories we have had by adding other parts of the story, to revisit our history, and to begin helpful conversations that reshape how we live as people of God in community. Listening to each other, we hear the voice of God, calling us to the rich story of life in community and in creation. – Gordon Jensen

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[†] See the Foreword of this issue of *Consensus* for biographical information.

A Decolonial Vision of God: Relationships Between Indigenous Peoples and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) is—like most churches in Canada and other colonized nations—engaged in the ongoing colonial project, or the systemic confluence of colonialism, racism, patriarchy, capitalism, xenophobia, ableism, and other forms of oppression. Participation in the colonial project stems from attitudes and thought enshrined in the Doctrine of Discovery and the subsequent settlement of this land on Turtle Island. Lutherans, as early settlers, are deeply implicated in the appropriation of Indigenous homelands and forms of inward thinking that have prioritized ethnic groups of European descent or diaspora. Still, little has been written about the Lutheran Church[‡] in relationship with Indigenous peoples. This dearth of attention in the literature has fostered a sense of Lutheran innocence, particularly given that Lutherans were not involved in residential schools and subsequent reparatory negotiations post-Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I argue that this (false) sense of innocence impedes understanding decolonization and reconciliation, hampering the Lutheran Church’s ability to imagine a decolonial vision of God. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to sketch the relationships between the ELCIC and Indigenous peoples and lands, particularly as they have unfolded alongside Lutheran settlement and through church policy.

I approach this work as a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta and as someone baptized Lutheran by a mixed European family. My Métis ancestors are Sauvés, but also Pritchards and Cardinals, who have long lived in the Edmonton area, Red River Valley, Batoche, Duck Lake, Lac La Biche, and elsewhere. My maternal grandfather and his father were Lutheran pastors, establishing or leading churches in Standard, Olds, Edmonton, and Toronto. I introduce these ancestral and family claims as a White-coded person—someone who is presumed to be White and/or of European descent. It is my hope that, in so doing, I stand with other Indigenous Lutherans in the ELCIC (past and present) who broaden mutual understandings of Lutheran community and collective identity in pursuit of a decolonial vision of God.

Colonization and Lutheran Complicity in the Canadian Context

Many Indigenous theologians have written about the centrality of land in shaping worldviews and experiencing the Divine. In many cases, Indigenous relationships to the land—predicated on mutuality, responsibility, and care—are in opposition to those relationships forged by European settlers. Clara Kidwell, George Tinker, and Homer Noley describe this difference, observing that “Christians do not think of themselves as belonging to the land, especially when it has been reduced to a commodity ... Earth is simply a stopping place on the way to heaven, rather than being a source of identity as it is for Indian people.”¹ Indeed, Lutheran settlers in Canada established and cultivated their identities through ethnic-religious affiliations. Some may lay claim to farming backgrounds or stories of weathering harsh winters and seasonal conditions, but these ties are tenuous by comparison—often not recognizing the intrinsic agency of the land and/or ignorant of the

[‡] When necessary, the term “Lutheran Church” will be used to represent the presence of Lutherans on the land now known as Canada, taking into consideration the various iterations of Lutheranism over the centuries.

ways these relationships emerged through Indigenous displacement and the “civilizing” ethos of agriculturalism.

In fact, the wider Church[§] sanctioned and desired such displacement—as evidenced by the Doctrine of Discovery: a Papal Bull–inspired “political and legal argument ... used to justify the colonization of the Americas in the sixteenth century” and the “conver[sion of] the Indigenous peoples of the Americas.”² The Doctrine relied on the assumption that Indigenous peoples were not “using” the land appropriately:

This Doctrine of Discovery was linked to a second idea: the lands being claimed were *terra nullius*—no man’s land—and therefore open to claim. ... Under this doctrine, imperialists could argue that the presence of Indigenous people did not void a claim of *terra nullius*, since the Indigenous people simply occupied, rather than owned, the land. True ownership, they claimed, could come only with European-style agriculture. Underlying these arguments was the belief that the colonizers were bringing civilization to savage people who could never civilize themselves. The “civilizing mission” rested on a belief of racial and cultural superiority.³

The Doctrine of Discovery linked European colonization with Christian mission, agriculturalism with civility, and Whiteness with superiority.⁴ These connections persist even today, influencing the way Lutheran settlers and others relate to the land and Indigenous peoples. To establish this trajectory, however, I now turn to the history of the Lutheran Church in Canada.

Lutherans first arrived in Canada September 7, 1619 on an expedition led by the Danish navigator Jens Munk.⁵ Munk and his explorers had hoped to find passage to India, but after they landed on Turtle Island—likely on the territory of the Chipewyan and Woods Cree⁶—most of them fell ill or otherwise died over the course of the winter.⁷ Lutherans then returned with English fur traders, who had been sent by Charles I after 1627 “to drive the French out of Canada.”⁸ Participation in the fur trade made the English campaign against the French more attractive to these settlers, and so a number of German Lutherans came up from Maine to settle along Canada’s East Coast—the territory of the Mi’kmaq.⁹ Later, after the American Revolution, German Lutherans would be recruited again to fight on the side of the British.¹⁰ Many of these Loyalists moved into Quebec,¹¹ in what was probably the land of the Mohawk, Mahican, and Abenaki.¹²

Gradually, like other settlers, Lutherans began moving west, increasingly motivated by the state’s incentivized civilizing project. The Canadian Proclamation of 1792, for example, “offered 200 acres of land to anyone who wanted to settle in Upper Canada ... [and] required only modest registration fees and settlement duties.”¹³ German Lutherans were among those who capitalized on the offer, relocating from the United States—including William von Moll Berczy, who established a sixty-six-family German settlement at Niagara-on-the-Lake and then Markham Township¹⁴ on the lands of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and formerly the Wendat, Tionontatehronnon, and Neutral nations.¹⁵ Similar settlements were established at Unionville and near York.¹⁶ By 1861, there was enough of a critical mass for the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Canada to be organized. Ultimately, as Bryan Hillis writes, “At the time of Confederation in 1867, about 70 percent of non-British

[§] “Church” here refers to the corporate and imperial Church often synonymous with power and leadership.

and non-French immigrants to Canada were Germans, who played an essential part in establishing Lutheran churches.”¹⁷

Following the purchase of the prairie provinces from the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1870, another state initiative would recruit settlers to western Canada (which was also erroneously considered uninhabited or underused according to *terra nullius*)—many of whom were Scandinavian.¹⁸

With the Dominion Land Act of 1872 and its offer of 160 acres for any male immigrant twenty-one years of age or older, western Canada was open for business. Close to 1 million immigrants arrived from Britain, the United States, and rural regions of eastern and southeastern Europe between 1900 and 1914. Lutherans in eastern Canada and the United States supported the fledgling congregations of similar ethnic backgrounds by sending missionaries and pastors to support the work in the Canadian west.¹⁹

The railway, especially, made this settlement possible,²⁰ extending the colonial enterprise in a multitude of ways and further entrenching Lutherans in the colonial work of nation-building. Indeed, the railroad is arguably an infrastructure of Whiteness, if not white supremacy, built as it is on the exploitation and subordination of land and Black, Indigenous, and Chinese communities. As Deborah Cowen argues: “The Canadian Pacific Railroad is known as a national achievement that materially and symbolically built and connected the vast landscape that gets called Canada today, but it was also deeply implicated in both the dispossession of indigenous peoples, the unfree labor of indentured Chinese workers, and the racist exploitation of black rail car porters.”²¹

Moving still farther west, the land of British Columbia was also colonized by Lutherans. Norwegians were the first to arrive, around Aldergrove and Matsqui²²—likely on the homelands of Stó:lo nations.²³ Norwegians also sought to establish “a Norwegian colony near Bella Coola, a village on an inlet between Vancouver and Prince Rupert,”²⁴ and the land of the Nuxalk.²⁵ Once again, state incentivization spurred this migration:

To encourage settlement in the province, the British Columbia government in 1893 offered assistance to those who would establish colonies. Discontented with the rigorous winters and the depressed economic conditions in their area, a group of Norwegian farmers decided to take advantage of this offer. They sent a two-man delegation including a pastor, Christian T. Saugstad, to tour the Pacific coast with an eye to securing land suitable for settlement. Saugstad and his companion travelled up and down the coast on steamers, fish packers and Indian canoes. At Bella Coola, they saw the valley. Impressed by the number of salmon they saw, the two men determined that this was the place for their colony. The government promised to reserve the valley for them if at least thirty families would locate there. Each family would receive 160 acres free. A road would be built when thirty homesteads had been established.²⁶

This passage from Norman Threinen highlights the hardships and dreams of Lutheran settlers, while making Lutheran-Indigenous relations invisible. Tellingly, Threinen notes that Saugstad made use of an “Indian canoe” while seeking to settle Bella Coola; this canoe must have come from somewhere and from someone. The omission of detail reveals a

familiar pattern in the history of Canadian Lutheran-Indigenous relations: Lutherans are indebted to the First Peoples, Indigenous communities, and lands—not only for providing the necessities of life, or tools that were required to navigate settlement, but because in Canada, the Lutheran Church was established via a colonial nation-building project built on the displacement, misappropriation, and erasure of Indigenous sovereignty and nationhood. The very roots of insular ethnic Lutheran identity in Canada,²⁷ which made the Lutheran Church sustainable over the last few centuries, were only possible because white supremacy and missional (mis)direction in post-Doctrine of Discovery nation-states assigned precedence, resources, and worthiness to White settlers of European descent. Still, the Lutheran Church often denies complicity in the historic relationships of colonization, abdicating responsibility and the need for restitution. In the next section, I will explore how this denial impedes contemporary relationships with Indigenous communities in policy and practice.

Lutheran-Indigenous Relations: Policy and Perspective

Lenny Duncan makes a number of prophetic calls to action in his book *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.* These Gospel-centred calls are intended for the ELCIC's sister synod in the United States, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and include restitution for the abuse of Indigenous lands and peoples: "Explain that the sanctuary is on ground soaked in indigenous blood ... and that you owe a debt for that."²⁸ Generally speaking, Lutherans are comfortable with the concept of blood in sacramental practice. However, they seem to be considerably less comfortable with addressing the blood *beneath* the altar:

As an ethnic and introverted group, Lutherans have, in general, been oblivious to the Canadian Aboriginal population. Not having been a part of the mainstream church establishment, Lutherans were not involved in the residential school system. Their mission work in Canada was limited to the newly arrived immigrants of similar European ethnic background.²⁹

As indicated in the introduction to this paper and elsewhere, the lack of Lutheran participation in the residential school system does not negate the need for decolonization or reparations; it is entirely feasible that, given the resources, the Lutheran Church would have been involved in residential schools. Moreover, any lack of participation stems from the Church's historic insularity, defined by an inward-focus—a definition of sin that I will explore below. The legacy of this insularity—supported by a misinterpretation of Lutheran doctrine—is the Church's avoidance of anything deemed too political: "Hence, even with the social justice, or 'social change' agenda of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, one will rarely find the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada speaking out on social or political issues unless they do so in concert with the Canadian Council of Churches or Kairos Canada—an umbrella group for social justice coalitions among a number of Christian churches."³⁰ The problem, of course, is that Lutheran presence on this land is itself political.

The other issue at hand stems from the occlusion of Indigenous participation in the ELCIC. Perhaps the Church is so curved in on itself that it can only really "see" the Lutherans who look like the ghosts of their Lutheran settler ancestors. The reality is, Indigenous Lutherans already exist, some passing as "White," others made almost hyper visible as

tokens, or seen through a stereotypical lens. Hillis, for example, in describing the problem of ethnic insularity writes,

As a result, only rarely will one find an Aboriginal person in a Lutheran congregation. Other factors are probably relevant here. As Pastor Lindsay Hognestad of Trinity Lutheran in Regina said, “It is perhaps not so much that Lutherans do not know how to deal with Aboriginal people, although that would be to some extent the case, but it seems clear to me that in general we don’t know what to do with the poverty they represent.”³¹

What seems “clear to me” is that the Lutheran Church has a narrow view of Indigeneity—a limited view of who, what, and even *how* Indigenous people are represented in Lutheran congregations and ministries.

In 2008, Hillis’ interviews with Lutheran clergy revealed that “support for Aboriginal ministries at the national level was weak, even while local congregational support ... was high.”³² In the last 12 years the ELCIC has released a number of policy documents that may have solidified national support. I know that many rostered leaders are engaged in “Indigenous ministries.” However, it remains that Lutheran policy documents and general praxis lack meaningful direction on decolonization and engaging a decolonial vision of God, reflecting a continued muddling of positions on behalf of leadership.

As of August 2020, the ELCIC had produced four official statements related to Indigenous peoples on its *Indigenous Rights and Relationships* webpage. These documents are meant to guide rostered leaders and lay people within the church on building respectful relations. The first, written one year after the formation of the ELCIC, is the product of an ecumenical initiative led by Project North in response to Canada’s constitutional negotiations in the early 1980s. This pastoral statement, *A New Covenant: Towards the Constitutional Recognition and Protection of Aboriginal Self-Government in Canada*, calls on readers to engage with constitutional reform and “develo[p] a new covenant between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples,” recognizing that treaty commitments had not been upheld.³³ Invoking the spiritual connotations of the word “covenant,” this document affirms the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination and argues that those rights should be constitutionally enshrined.³⁴ The *New Covenant* document is indicative of the twentieth century’s growing Indigenous rights movement in the 1980s, which prompted “many people within the churches ... to re-evaluate both the broader history of the relations between the churches and Aboriginal peoples, and the specific history of the residential schools”—work that ultimately led to many church apologies.³⁵ However, in more recent documents post-1987, the ELCIC leans disproportionately toward learning and thinking, couching itself more comfortably in general language about affirmation or applying to government.

The next document, *An ELCIC Resolution on Encouraging Right Relations*, came 14 years later in 2011. This resolution “affirms that we are all treaty people,” “endorses the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [UNDRIP]” and “commit[s] to implementing the values and principles of this declaration within the work and structures of this church.”³⁶ It also affirms the “work and goals of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission” and asks congregations to account for their “relationship-building activities.”³⁷ Although someone could feasibly look at both the *Resolution* and the *New Covenant* to find similarities as far as affirmations go, the main difference appears in the way the ELCIC addresses the

state. In the *New Covenant*, the Church—as an ecumenical body—lobbies for self-determination to be enshrined in the Canadian Constitution. The *Resolution*, however, is about urging the national government to take UNDRIP seriously. There is obvious distance between the two strategies, with one supporting a pre-existing internationally recognized document, and the other intervening more directly in the operations of the state on behalf of the Gospel and also Indigenous church members.³⁸

Notably, the *Resolution* urges delegates at the next National Convention with the Anglican Church to “ensure that the rights of Indigenous peoples, and our ongoing reconciliation focus, are priorities.”³⁹ Consequently, the two church bodies released the *Joint Assembly Declaration* in 2013, though I would not say that the declaration goes as far as the 2011 Convention had hoped. The *Declaration* focuses on “Homelessness and Affordable Housing” and “Responsible Resource Extraction.” Without much irony, the *Declaration* declares, “As we look across Canada, we are disturbed by the reality that around 400,000 people are without a healthy place to live and that homelessness has continued to increase despite years of unprecedented economic growth and prosperity in our country.”⁴⁰ Since Anglicans and Lutherans were both involved in Canada’s colonization, and Anglicans in particular were responsible for a number of residential schools, it seems in poor taste that this *Declaration* would admit discomfort with houselessness but fail to recognize both church’s complicity in the very phenomenon which disproportionately affects Indigenous people.⁴¹ Moreover, both parties come together to commit to learning, praying, and joining “partners” or agencies to “address” houselessness—a commitment which, frankly, lacks teeth.⁴²

The section on “Responsible Resource Extraction” names Indigenous peoples specifically, calling for “act[ion] in support of our partners in defining their own development goals, including supporting Indigenous communities in Canada and elsewhere in exercising their right to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent; and to act to embed enforceable legal obligations based on FPIC in Canadian policies and practices with respect to resource extraction.”⁴³ This is a very interesting document, which presupposes that Indigenous peoples’ communities are elsewhere, to be supported beyond the church walls. Unlike the 1987 document, the *Declaration* fails to recognize the existence of Indigenous peoples within the church. The *Declaration* also walks a fine line between aggravating those affiliated with the oil and gas industry and allying with Indigenous voices. Once again, the ELCIC’s position is somewhat muted. Compare, for instance, the *Declaration* with the *New Covenant*—an explicit move beyond simply “affirmation,” demanding concrete action and constitutional amendments:

We maintain, however that it is not sufficient to simply affirm the principle of Aboriginal self-government in the constitution. All too often, intransigent governments at provincial and federal levels in the past have found ways to either ignore or resist implementing the rights of Aboriginal peoples. If [any] kind of self-government is to become a reality in Canada, then both federal and provincial governments need to be constitutionally obliged to negotiate and implement the terms with Aboriginal nations and peoples. This calls for the recognition of Aboriginal self-government as an enforceable right in the constitution.⁴⁴

In 2015, following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's release of findings and recommendations, the ELCIC's national bishop, Reverend Susan C. Johnson, published a *Pastoral Letter regarding the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. In this letter, Bishop Johnson denotes the harm of residential schools and encourages those in the ELCIC to actively engage in the process of reconciliation—rhetoric that should now be familiar to us based on previous documents. The same year, the ELCIC National Convention also passed a *Resolution on the Doctrine of Discovery*, repudiating the Doctrine “as fundamentally opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and our understanding of the inherent rights that individuals and peoples have received from God.”⁴⁵ The release of this document followed the Anglican Church of Canada's repudiation in 2010 and the World Council of Churches' repudiation in 2012. For many Lutheran settlers, as for many Anglicans, these repudiations reject the very doctrine that made settlement possible. However, there seems to be little engagement at the congregational level and a dearth of meaningful action that could make this repudiation truly transformative. Indeed, while many of these documents offer a progressive and comprehensive theoretical foundation for Indigenous-Church relations, it seems that they often remain theoretical rather than practical—particularly post-1987. While there is certainly a need for greater reflection, learning, and thought among churches and ministry groups, there is also space for clear and decisive action following the leadership of Indigenous groups, along with broad-scale shifts in liturgy or otherwise. In the final section, then, I imagine some potentially transformative directions for integrating a decolonial vision of God in the spiritual and theological praxis of the ELCIC.

Indigenous Presence, Indigenization, and a Decolonial Vision of God

The Right Reverend Mark MacDonald, the first National Indigenous Bishop in the Anglican Church of Canada, points to “the problematic influence of Western notions of individual autonomy on church teaching and practice” in his discussion of Canadian churches' responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's findings and recommendations.⁴⁶ He notes that “Though the churches have, often resolutely and sacrificially, responded to the revelations of their complicity in the IRS [Indian Residential Schools] by apology and major changes in policy, they have yet to integrate the findings theologically or in their spiritual practice.”⁴⁷ Indeed, Canada's predominantly White congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) are now turning their attention to reconciliation in this post-TRC landscape. However, “reconciliation” can easily look like “assimilation”—particularly as churches with declining membership look to attract or otherwise engage Indigenous members (again, presuming that they are not already included in the pews/ministry settings). This strategy fails to embrace the necessarily transformative and radical potential of reconciliation. After all, it is not about an accumulation of symbols, ceremony, or peoples; it is a renewal of worldview, profound vulnerability, and, above all, complete surrender to the Divine: “True inculturation of the Christian faith among America's indigenous peoples has very little to do with pipes on altars, or church decorations, or ‘fulfillment theology,’ and everything to do with thought worlds and systems.”⁴⁸

Rosemary McCombs Maxey, a Muscogee pastor in the United Church of Christ, argues that early colonial missionaries and their contemporaries have always “consistently tried to make indigenous [sic] people participate in the church as acculturated Euro-American Christians.”⁴⁹ Certainly, colonization has impeded and continues to impede the Church's

understanding of God, from the Doctrine of Discovery to the manifestations of prosperity gospel currently at work in various ministries and in popular representations of Christianity. However, just as Indigenous peoples are already among the ELCIC, so too is a decolonial vision of God—a decolonial God, if you will—at work in the church and beyond. What’s more, Indigenous people across Turtle Island are already working with this God; they have been working with this God since time immemorial.

A decolonial and Indigenized relationship with God/Creator is predicated first and foremost on a foundation of mutual care, grace, and the multidirectional recognition of agency, dignity, and intrinsic spirituality. It is embracing a space- or place-based approach to theology and putting emphasis on the community rather than the individual. Renewing the church’s decolonial vision also necessarily involves confronting Christian settlers’ emphasis on Whiteness.

For the ELCIC, a good starting point would be renewing their Confessional understanding of sin, justification, and the community. Paul Schultz and George Tinker note that:

[A] true Native interpretation will speak of justification as an act of God that brings whole communities or congregations into a healthy relationship with their Creator. Hence any Native American interpretation of justification would understand the justification of the person in the context of a whole community’s relationship to the Creator. When we understand God in relationship with the whole community, then the community must see itself in relationship with one another—and even with all of creation.”⁵⁰

This should sound familiar to Confessional Lutherans. Writing on justification in the fourth article of the Augsburg Confession, Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson observe that “Justification by faith can only be opened by a word addressed *to me*, from outside of me.”⁵¹ Justification, like Baptism, Holy Communion, and most every other theological practice, tenet, or sacrament in the Lutheran Church, is based on relationality. You receive forgiveness so that you may forgive others, and you are strengthened by God so that you may strengthen others: “The gospel has a power which can set people free to live once again meaningful lives in their communities.”⁵² In these terms, it is vitally important to understand sin relationally: “Sin is not doing bad things but rather it is not trusting God.”⁵³ The pain of sinfulness is community fracture or exclusion via inward-thinking, and is illustrated best by Adam and Eve’s eviction from the Garden. In this regard, it is most helpful to remember (with Luther) that “The true believer trusts the unconditionality of God’s promise and lets God be God.”⁵⁴ I hope this brings the Church some comfort as it moves to decolonize, trusting first and foremost that the Creator is bigger and more expansive than any could ever imagine; it is not the Church’s job to limit the God of all creation.

It is only the Church’s job to trust, and to understand that its visioning of God is deeply rooted in specific contexts: “All of us experience God as through a darkened glass. The color, the shape, and the size of that glass is always a mirror of our particular culture and our particular time and place.”⁵⁵ In order to see past that darkened glass, it is important to re-examine the colonial past, present, and future of the Lutheran Church. For the sake of the Gospel, the Church is called to be accountable to its participation in the colonial project, and the ways in which its actions or inactions have contributed to white supremacy. For the sake

of the Gospel that liberates and gives life to everyone—and not just one group—the Church is called to be accountable to the ways in which the Doctrine of Discovery and subsequent Church-state relations influence its relationships and priorities. Such accountability is part of acknowledging the land we inhabit, along with the baptismal calling to be engaged in justice for all.⁵⁶

The other part of forging a place-based theology and Church ethos is reorienting to each other and Creation. As Vine Deloria Jr. writes:

Developing a sense of ourselves that would properly balance history and nature and space and time is a more difficult task than we would suspect and involves a radical re-evaluation of the way we look at the world around us. Do we continue to exploit the earth or do we preserve it and preserve life? Whether we are prepared to embark on a painful intellectual journey to discover the parameters of reconciling history and nature is the question of this generation.⁵⁷

Frankly, reconciling with the land and its people means listening to the land and its people. While this could look like “making friends” with berries, as Michif herbalist Kalyn Kodiak recommends, this also means becoming politically and tangibly engaged with Indigenous resistance, following Indigenous leadership and bodily living the Gospel.

Finally, it is important, in order to hear the gospel ring clearly, to address the pervasive Whiteness in the ELCIC by truthfully naming it.⁵⁸ Schultz and Tinker ask, “If we accept a White Jesus, if that is the image we see, have we not also adopted an image of salvation, of health, wholeness, happiness, that also comes to us via a White Culture and comes to us with a White value system that may require us to compromise the value system and culture that is our heritage, and with which our people may feel most comfortable?”⁵⁹ The trouble with White Jesus has been documented since at least the 1960s by Black theologians and allies,⁶⁰ but more recently by pastor Lenny Duncan. Again, Whiteness is not only about what Jesus looks like, but the whole system of Whiteness that operates to denigrate the Other. Duncan argues that we need to address the White iconography of Jesus and the Church, since “we access God primarily through symbols and ritual.”⁶¹ Therefore, a decolonial vision of God, which reflects the heart of the Gospel, will also reflect a richer, more honest view of the land, its peoples, and the broad spectrum of Creation, relevant to a community’s histories and experiences on colonized and often unceded territory.

Conclusion

If the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) is serious about the Gospel, and serious about reconciling and decolonizing for the sake of the Gospel that brings communities together, the initial step is to stop “navel gazing” and turn outward. Lutherans have been and continue to be complicit in the ongoing colonial project since first contact with this land, and are called by the Gospel to grapple with the ways in which colonization functions through them as components of the larger Church. It will not be easy, however. Yet, the Church has a wonderful opportunity, rooted in its baptismal calling, to no longer hide behind any self-assigned “innocence” and instead envision decolonial relationships among each other and all kin. This means boldness in policy documents, accountability in congregations, financial investment in Indigenous ministries, and decolonizing liturgies and symbols. For too long the ELCIC has relied on a small subset of ethnicities, consequently

investing in bodies, visions, and directions that return the mirror image. Now it is time to meet God again—the God of this land.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Clara Kidwell, George Tinker and Homer Noley, *A Native American Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 141.
- ² “Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada,” *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (2015), 46. http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf. Pope Alexander VI issued the Papal Bull in question, “*Inter Caetera*” in 1493. This document can be found at: <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/alex06/alex06inter.htm>. Accessed July 4, 2023.
- ³ “Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada,” 46.
- ⁴ “Whiteness” denotes more than skin colour or ethnicity and refers to a system of power that has variously categorized people as being “White” or “Other.”
- ⁵ Norman J. Threinen, *A Religious-Cultural Mosaic: A History of Lutherans in Canada* (Vulcan: Today’s Reformation Press Inc., 2006), 1.
- ⁶ “Cree,” *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition*, February 2020, 1, EBSCOhost; “Chipewyan,” *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition*, February 2020, 1, EBSCOhost.
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