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FULFILLING THE COVENANT

INDIGENOUS ANGLICANS HAVE LONG DREAMED OF A SELF-DETERMINING INDIGENOUS CHURCH AS PART OF THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA. NOW THE WORK IS UNDERWAY TO TURN THAT DREAM INTO REALITY.

◀ Donna Bomberry, advisor to the Indigenous House of Bishops Leadership Circle

PHOTO: SASKIA ROWLEY

In 1994, Indigenous representatives in Winnipeg gathered to write *A Covenant and Our Journey of Spiritual Renewal*. That foundational document pledged its signatories “to do all we can to call our people into unity in a new self-determining community within the Anglican Church of Canada.”

One of those representatives was Donna Bomberry, then-chair of the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples (ACIP). More than 25 years later, Bomberry is once again playing a central role in advancing self-determination for Indigenous Anglicans—albeit at a much higher stage of development.

The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada in 2019 [voted](#) to approve changes to Canon XXII enabling a self-determining Indigenous church. The task for Indigenous Anglicans now is to determine precisely what the Indigenous church will look like.

At the time this article was being written, the Indigenous House of Bishops Leadership Circle (IHOBLC)—a group composed of Indigenous archbishops and bishops of the church; clergy and lay representatives; and staff support—was in the process of discussing the future constitution and governance structures of the Indigenous church. The goal is to produce a document for the next Sacred Circle laying out the plan for incorporating the Indigenous church as a fifth ecclesiastical province within the Anglican Church of Canada.

To help guide this process, Bomberry is serving as an advisor to the IHOBLC, as well as co-chair of the focus group tasked with developing the Indigenous church.

“It feels good that we’re making this progress, because it’s been a long time coming,” Bomberry says.

“We all have an innate sense of where we want to go,” she adds. “It’s [a matter of] how to put it in words and writing, so that the people will know that we’re all on the same page, and that we’re expressing how we feel [about] the focus of our national church of Indigenous ministry.”



The COVID-19 pandemic has delayed work on the structure of the self-determining Indigenous church. A key document was due to be presented at Sacred Circle in June 2020, for example, until the threat of coronavirus led to the gathering being postponed until 2021. The pandemic has also served, however, to underline

the importance of one of that church’s key priorities: responding to the needs of Indigenous communities. Development of the Indigenous church’s constitution has been temporarily put on hold in order for leaders to focus on addressing local needs in the wake of the pandemic, such as increasing support for community ministries.

As part of this shift in focus, Indigenous Anglican leaders have been trying to create a strategy for providing more resources and more equitable compensation for ministry in remote areas as well as urban Indigenous ministry.

Properly compensating non-stipendiary clergy has long been a priority for the Anglican Church of Canada’s Indigenous ministries department. A far greater proportion of Indigenous clergy work without pay than non-Indigenous clergy, often volunteering their time on top of secular jobs. Many Indigenous communities do not have any ordained clergy, obliging them to rely on lay ministers such as deacons, lay readers and catechists.

National Indigenous Anglican Archbishop Mark MacDonald says that those representing the Indigenous church are hoping to bring together the tasks of structuring the communal life of the Indigenous church and better supporting non-stipendiary clergy. Their strategy rests on two pillars: developing lay ministry in support of ordained ministry, and deploying paid clergy to support these efforts in turn.

“We’re going in two directions simultaneously, in that we’re going ... towards a bigger development of lay ministers, who will for the most part volunteer their time and ministry, and also developing more resources to support them,” MacDonald says. “We believe that this is the only possible ministry strategy that will work in our situation.”

The appearance of COVID-19 has only increased the urgency of preparing ministry to meet the needs of Indigenous people at the local level.

Lay minister training, for example, has become a major focus for Indigenous ministry since the spring of 2020, when travel restrictions in place as a result of the pandemic resulted in a shortage of clergy to perform funerals.

“We need more workers in the field to help with the funerals,” Bomberry says. To this end, Indigenous Anglican leaders have been preparing lay ministers to

perform funerals in communities where ordained clergy aren't available. "They can go through the bishop and call upon other people from other communities to come in to help, if the bishop can't do that."

Through online studies and videoconferencing programs such as Zoom, a new cohort of lay ministers has now completed that training. Many ordained clergy also participated in the training as a refresher for presiding over funerals.

"Now we're looking at other training that can be developed and what the needs are—youth ministry ... and other lay work," Bomberry says.



Having shored up the training of lay ministers, the IHOBLC has now moved back to discussion of structural and governance issues, such as the constitution of the Indigenous church. And it's become increasingly clear, MacDonald adds, that this structure may in turn be determined in some way by spiritual practice.

For example, he says, a critical part of helping shape the Indigenous church is gospel-based discipleship, in which those present read and reflect upon a gospel passage to help guide subsequent discussion.

Almost every gathering by groups planning the self-determining church has been framed by gospel-based discipleship, which the archbishop calls "foundational to our collective discernment [and] our decision-making process," and which he believes will leave its stamp on the eventual constitutional structures of the Indigenous church.

Besides drawing upon the gospel, the spiritual practice of the Indigenous church is being guided by the need for what MacDonald describes as "a deep healing of the wounds of trauma that plague so many of us." Learning about and responding to the needs of Indigenous communities, whether in cities or reserves, is a key element of this process.

"We're developing a church, I think, that is a little different than how the church has been structured in the past," Bomberry says. The new church, she says,

will be one "that is trying to meet the needs of the people, because often we felt that our current concerns weren't heard or understood in the past decades—that the church didn't or couldn't respond to our needs. That comes right out of our covenant.

"Our communities are different: north and south, east and west," she adds. "We're bringing our experiences together to help be a church that is responding to the needs—poverty, racism, missing and murdered women and girls, suicide. Those are very real and tragic events that happen in our communities, and we need a ministry that can respond spiritually to the needs of the people."

Representatives and leaders in national bodies such as the IHOBLC, ACIP, and the Indigenous church focus group are also active in ministry at the local level, allowing them to relay the concerns of their communities.

Videoconferencing and other forms of online communication, which have seen increased use due to COVID-19, have provided another avenue for Indigenous Anglicans at the local level to convey their own thoughts, feelings and concerns.

"The pandemic has offered us a kind of unique opportunity," MacDonald says. "We've been able to gather with Indigenous Christians all across the country and interact with them in ways that are somewhat constrained by the technology. But we have been able to daily interact with people from all over the land, and I would say that kind of local involvement has become as significant to our common life as the more central bodies [of governance]."



Elders are another source of guidance for the emerging Indigenous church, having long played a key role in forging the path towards Indigenous self-determination within the Anglican Church of Canada.

Lydia Mamakwa, bishop of the Indigenous Spiritual Ministry of Mishamikoweesh, recalls hearing conversations about self-determination among elders in the early 1980s, when she first became involved with the



Lydia Mamakwa, bishop of the Indigenous Spiritual Ministry of Mishamikoweesh, pictured here at a 2017 training event for Indigenous ministry in the church.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

church in what was then the diocese of Keewatin.

The self-determining Indigenous church is “not something new that has sprung up in the last few years,” Mamakwa says, “but rather we are building on what the elders have been saying all along.”

Today, the elders continue to provide counsel for bodies like the IHOBLC as they hammer out the structures of the Indigenous church.

“What we do is we consult with them,” Mamakwa says. “I consult with them ... the elderly people and the clergy, and they all say the same thing. That’s what we are building on—to implement and have their vision fulfilled.”

Mamakwa says her own experience leading the Indigenous Spiritual Ministry of Mishamikoweesh has also provided her with valuable lessons in what the self-determining Indigenous church might look like, and the elements most likely to provide it with strong foundations.

Along with the importance of seeking the wisdom of the elders, those lessons include the need to maintain strong communication with rank-and-file church members—a particular concern in a diocese like Mishamikoweesh, which has a relatively small population but a large geographical size.

“We try to keep everyone informed, all the communities, [about] what we are doing, even though it’s hard because of the remoteness and not everyone uses social media,” Mamakwa says. “I think it’s very important to keep the people informed and to have them onboard, and that they know what the goals and the aspiration of why we are doing what we are doing.”

Another lesson Mamakwa has gleaned from her time at the head of an Indigenous diocese is the importance to Indigenous peoples of retaining their identity through their own languages and cultures.

“Our elders have always said that we [need] to keep our language and to use it, and to help others that cannot read or write their language,” she says.

Mamakwa points to an annual gathering in Mishamikoweesh in which elders from surrounding communities help teach people about traditional spirituality, culture and life skills.

“Part of why we did that ... is because of what the elders have said all along—to keep our identity, and not to lose those traditions.”



As this article was being written, ACIP was scheduled to receive an update during the summer on lay ministry

training, youth connections and documents on the constitution. Still, Indigenous leaders say much work remains to be done on the self-determining church.

One of the areas that has seen a delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic is the work of the Jubilee Commission, tasked with finding ways to fund the self-determining Indigenous church.

"I think that they've had to pause for a moment, as we see how the pandemic is going to impact our corporate life," MacDonald says of the commission—which he describes as "in a process of more active discernment than they had expected to be at this point in time" due to the pandemic.

"They are in the midst of continuing to work on data gathering from dioceses," he adds. "They're trying to describe in a better way the way in which resources have been used, are used and will be used. I've been able to observe a number of ways in which that work is continuing. But it's been a while since they've had a meeting.... I think there's a sense that we have to wait a bit while we find out what's going on in a broader way in the church before we can get too concrete on some of those plans."

Although the next Sacred Circle has been postponed, discussions will continue on these and other challenges Indigenous ministry encounters across Canada. And in the time of COVID-19, the Anglican Church of Canada as a whole also faces many of these same challenges, such as the difficulty of reaching people in remote areas or those without high-speed internet access.

Another pressing concern for Indigenous Anglicans is the need to develop more resources in traditional languages. While the Anglican Church of Canada has created many new resources in English over recent decades, such as the *Book of Alternative Services*

and revamped hymnals, Mamakwa notes that many Indigenous communities where traditional languages are spoken are obliged to use older resources. Cree speakers, for example, still use a 19th-century Cree translation of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*.

"We're behind in that way, keeping up with the current resources that are being used in the Anglican Church of Canada," Mamakwa says. "We have two hymnals in my area, and we're still stuck with those ... not that we don't like them. People still love them. But it would be nice if we had [translations of] the [current] hymn books."

Funding has been provided for a Bible translation project that began in 2014, which has focused on translating the Bible into languages such as Naskapi, Oji-Cree and Plains Cree. But Indigenous Anglican leadership members are striving to find ways to continue funding the work of translation.

Asked what she would like the Anglican Church of Canada to know about the developing Indigenous church, Mamakwa says there's a need for Anglicans to keep informed about the work that has been done to create it. They should read and educate themselves on the 1994 covenant, she says, and more recent statements that lay out the reasons why Indigenous Anglicans want a self-determining church.

"Most of all we need their prayers and their support ... and for them to know that this is not to divide the church, not to break up the Anglican Church of Canada, but rather that the Indigenous Anglicans would like to have a self-determining church within the Anglican Church of Canada," she says. ■