

---

# A Community of Creation, A Calling to Friendship

A Conversation between Steve Heinrichs and Adrian Jacobs

*On a sunny afternoon in Winnipeg, Steve Heinrichs and Adrian Jacobs shared a beer as they discussed the question of land reparations. Adrian is Cayuga of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and Keeper of the Circle for the Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre in Beausejour, Manitoba. Steve is a second-generation Settler, and Director of Indigenous-Settler Relations for Mennonite Church Canada. What follows is an excerpt of their conversation.*

**STEVE:** In 1993, the Canadian government initiated the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP)*, the most significant inquiry into the fractured Indigenous-Settler relationship. The result was a massive five-volume report with over four hundred recommendations for justice and healing. And at the heart of those recommendations was a radical call—a call for the redistribution of land. Indigenous peoples needed enough land to secure their economic self-reliance, and they also needed land to provide for their spiritual and cultural needs. Many churches got on board and championed this Jubilee vision. But years later, very little has changed. Does this call still resonate?

**ADRIAN:** My experience of traditional people is that our values have allowed our people to adjust to the realities that we currently face. So even in the light of colonial imposition, where lands like the Dish with One Spoon territory of Southern Ontario are divided by borders and separated by the dotted and hard lines of Settler maps and laws . . . we still find ways to honor our connections, our relations, and our responsibilities to our homelands.

I think about an experience from my childhood. At Six Nations, surveyors were doing work for the Canadian Gypsum Company in order to exploit the mineral that was underneath our reserve. As little kids, we would see the surveyors go out and pound these four-foot-long, one-inch-square stakes into the ground and then mark those stakes with plastic orange markers. I had heard the resistance of my parents to this exploitation of our territory—and the gypsum mining was taking place right underneath

our family's property. So us kids, we would go out and find all these steel stakes, and we would do our best to wiggle them out of the ground and throw them away. I laugh about it now. But this is the kind of thing that has happened to Indigenous peoples repeatedly over the course of five hundred years of colonization.

We have been forced to limit our officially recognized territories to what the colonial system has dictated. So when, for example, the Caledonia land conflict happened back in 2006, we knew from the 1784 Haldimand Proclamation, from the Plank Road Land claim issue, and from our previous relationships with the government that that "disputed" land was still our land. And Canada knew it as well. Even the local white people knew it! My dad would play hockey with some of these older white men, and they would say, "You know that the land they're trying to build a development on is your [Six Nations] land," even though the official position was that this is Canada's land, and the developer has the proper permits, and so on.

What I hear then in the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* is a willingness of Indigenous peoples to compromise with Canada, saying, "What we need is more land. We've got rightful claims on this land. We aren't looking to get it all back. We've even taken efforts to buy back some of our land with our own money and have it recognized as part of our reserve. But we need more—we need a significant and fair share." Yet Canada doesn't respond. And the reason that Canada does not respond and actually return land and recognize greater reserve lands is because land forms part of their tax base. So it doesn't matter what we propose as compromise—and RCAP was a compromise—the colonial system doesn't like it, and it doesn't want to recognize it, even though we have a just claim.

People have made trillions of dollars from this land, and we've gotten crumbs. From an Indigenous understanding, the fundamental question is, "Where is the sharing of the fruit of the land?" Here in Manitoba, in Treated territory, you have hydro dams all over the north that are wrecking the local trapping, fishing, and harvesting economies of our communities. Yet Manitoba Hydro, a provincial utility, makes plenty of income, and they turn around and sell the energy made off of Indigenous territories at bargain-basement rates to the United States. Where is the benefit that's coming to us? It's still our land. Where is the equity? We are not looking for the tables to be turned and for you to be thrown out of the land. But where is the inclusion in the wealth of this land? We took care of this land and all the other-than-human relatives. When Europeans came here, there were lots of fish, lush forests and berry patches, pristine waters. And now

look! If you allowed us into the development and care of the land, then together we could find a way to care for those seven generations to come.

STEVE: As you share, Adrian, I think of the ways in which Indigenous nations were able to not only care for the more-than-human environment but also to flourish as Nations and peoples. Here we are, doing this interview in downtown Winnipeg, which, yes, has incredible grassroots Indigenous movements of beauty and resilience, but it is also Ground Zero of colonial fracture. There's a lot of Indigenous sisters and brothers, older ones and children—an overwhelming number—here who are on the blunt and deadly edge of ongoing colonial dispossession.

ADRIAN: Yes. Exactly.

STEVE: Going back to RCAP and that call for redistribution, we know that many churches advocated for Jubilee and tried to push the government of Canada. They created petitions, they did mass education efforts, they advocated and lobbied. But it didn't shift the powers. And in some churches, there was significant internal pushback against land redistribution. I'm interested in hearing what you think churches should be doing today. What does it mean for communities of faith to honor Jubilee now?

ADRIAN: I understand the challenge from the standpoint of being a pastor. You're torn between the call of the pastor to provide comfort, to help people grow, to feed and encourage them, protect them and help them be rooted in their identity. To provide comfort is a genuine pastoral concern. And yet the other dimension of life and leadership is the prophetic, where you call a community or someone out on their inequitable life. The whole idea of sin is saying that there are things you or we as a group are doing that are not right, that we must change, that we must repent of, and that we must turn from.

I was called as a pastor, and I worked with people to provide comfort. I know how truly important that is. And I have five children, and my life was about nurturing them in their identity, encouraging them, letting them know that their uniqueness is valuable, is accepted, and is needed as the gift of God inside of them. And it's when you have that spirit of your work as a pastor—the shepherding, comforting spirit—that the prophetic voice is possible for people to respond to. When the two come together, that's when we have genuine leadership. This is what Canada and what I would call the National Church has failed to do.

I say “National Church” because, in my understanding of the Scriptures, the church community represents the larger nation too. When Christ calls Ephesus to account in Revelation 2, we know that there were a bunch of congregations in Ephesus. But he refers to them as one and calls them “the Church of Ephesus.” And, as in Matthew 25, where Jesus says that the nations are held to account, I believe that God will call Canada to account, and, on that day, God will call upon the Church of Canada. And there will be no “But I’m not a part of that!” And this is where my pastoral heart breaks, for when a nation is judged, everybody suffers—innocent babies, children, women, men, elders . . . the whole nation suffers when there is an accounting that is recorded in Scripture. And if God does not hold nations to account, then what is just judgment and justice anyway? Then justice is just a bunch of bullshit that means nothing. So, as a pastor and a father, I understand the prophetic witness and its consequence in the light of family. And no one wants to see their children and their community suffer. But, just like Covid-19, everybody suffers the consequences of this deadly pandemic.

Canada and every church finds it easy to be the chaplain of the status quo. But Jesus, who was the best pastor and who is the shepherd that we call on, is also the prophet in our midst who turns over the tables of the money-changers and indicts the economic system that is exploiting people’s sins and vulnerabilities in order to profit themselves. Jesus says, “No more!” Where is the repentance for the love of money in the church, for the systems of greed that dehumanize people and put themselves before human dignity?

When people begin to hear about the Indigenous situation, they are floored by it, and sensitive people ask, “So what can I do?” I’ve often said, “Listen to our story until you are reduced to a puddle of tears, and stay there until God resurrects you.” And that may not even happen in your lifetime. “And when you do stand up, you will find that you are hand in hand, not just with Indigenous peoples but also with all those who have been victimized by unjust systems.”

The church is never going to be comfortable with a prophetic dimension, but the idea of being a Christian is being a martyr. It requires the death of something. Maybe not literal death but a dying of something, and you’re going to feel the pain of that. And I’ve lived with that for sixty-four years of my life. I’ve lived with the idea that I’m suffering different things at different times, not because of stuff that I’ve done—and I’ve done stuff that I deserve to suffer for, and I’ll take that stripe any time—but suffer-

ing that comes my way just because I am Indigenous. And as much as people say, from the other side of the equation, “But I never did that,” I can say right back to them, “But I never did anything either, and I’m still suffering!”

So what do I see as the church’s response? I see weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. I see crying and praying and repentance. I see a melting to the spirit of Jesus. That is what I think the answer is, as hard as that is and as rarely as that occurs. I just don’t see much of a difference taking place otherwise. Because you’ve got all these programs and government plans and money, and it’s still the same, and it often gets worse. And I don’t know what else will change it but genuinely changed hearts. And I thought that’s why Jesus came in the first place, to change us from the inside out.

STEVE: You know better than I do, Adrian, that when non-Indigenous people engage this land conversation for the first time, we often quickly jump to the questions concerning our own personal property, or, if we’re privileged, what we might do with Grandma’s farm or the parent’s cottage that the family has inherited. But I hear you saying something different—don’t jump to the property questions; you can’t go there until you’ve actually sat with the pain. Am I hearing you right?

ADRIAN: I think that’s partly right. And I should say that when it comes to sitting with pain, there’s only so much one can take. In my classes, I’ve assigned a textbook on the Indian Residential School history. And some of the students can only read two or three pages before they need to stop. They feel it so deeply and are so burdened. And I understand that. There’s an exhaustion that comes when you read seriously; you’re caught up in the story and you feel really bad. And you should feel bad because that’s a human response. But I know that there’s limits to our energy. And I’m aware of that for myself. And that’s why I write poetry and listen to music and do those things that are helpful to express the things that I’m going through.

When it comes to the land question, the thing to recognize is that there’s a major difference between the colonial and native perspectives, which produces different answers and even different questions. From the colonial perspective, the answer is always litigation, court decisions, compensation, and land restoration with clear and certain boundary markers . . . a response that seeks finality and certainty. And from that colonial perspective, people are afraid that Indigenous peoples will attain some form

of power. “What’s going to happen to us if they are in charge?” But the reality is, they are afraid of their own system. Afraid that they will be on the receiving end of that system that preys on vulnerable peoples. So if Indigenous peoples get some power, they think they will experience what Indigenous peoples experienced and be kicked out of their homes, have their connections to the land destroyed, kept from fishing and harvesting the land, and so on.

Yet the reality and promise of Indigenous peoples is something radically different. We will share all things and teach you how to fish. We will show you how to harvest, and we will let you know how trapping can take place in order to maintain the viability and well-being of the land. We will provide the things that we need to take care of ourselves and our communities, together. Indigenous peoples have another conception of how we can be together—and the conception is, “Friends.” Because that’s what the Two Row Wampum—the original treaty of this land—was all about. The first row of beads describes the relationship between the Dutch and the Haudenosaunee, and it’s the desire for friendship. That’s what you’re invited to. Not adversaries. Not debate partners. Not court adversaries. We’ve got to go back to what we said to you in the first place. The land is rich, the land is bountiful, the land is wild, and the land can kill you . . . but we will show you how to live, and we will show you how to harvest, and we invite you into this abundance and into this beloved community that’s not just people but also the community of plants, of fish, of trees, of birds, of thunders, the community of sun and moon and stars and all the things we’re inviting you to enjoy in the abundance of this land. We will share that with you again. You just need to realize that that’s what we’re inviting you into.

We are partakers of this land, and you don’t shut us out . . . you don’t shut us out of our own pharmacy, which is the land, and you don’t shut us out of our own grocery store, which is the land, and don’t shut us out of our own church, which is the land and the ceremonial places, and you don’t shut us out from Mother Earth.

The community of creation—that’s what you’re being invited to! Sounds like a good idea, doesn’t it? Sounds a lot like what Jesus is going to do when he comes back to this earth anyways. And if there is going to be a Jubilee, it can’t be limited to some parochial limited vision, but it means something much more. It’s for all the peoples and nations of the Earth.