

## Thelma Meade: “I know where I go” An Aboriginal elder’s experience with the church

Deborah Froese

“God, if our language is not good and if the way we live is not good, why did you even make us? Now we don’t want to be Indians—but you made us as Indians.” This was the lament of Christian Aboriginal elder and teacher Thelma Meade during her

**Though Thelma never lost sight of Jesus, she admits to wariness toward the church. Her story represents one fragment of a historical canvas depicting the troubled relationship between Aboriginal people and those who came to North America in search of opportunity.**

boarding school years.<sup>1</sup> She has since come to embrace her identity, and in the process, she has evolved into a staunch advocate for other Aboriginal people, particularly women.

Thelma has worked with various organizations in Manitoba, including Mennonite Church Canada, Mennonite Church Manitoba, Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba, Winnipeg’s Core Area Initiative, and the Aboriginal Women’s Network. She founded Kikinamawin Training Centre in Winnipeg and served on the board of governors of the University of Manitoba. As an educator, she assisted in the development of *Reaching Up to God Our Creator*, a Mennonite Church Canada resource designed to foster

respect and understanding among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Her contribution to the resource included the creation of a curriculum connecting Aboriginal Seven Sacred Teachings with biblical principles.

Thelma is director of the Aboriginal Senior Resources Centre in Winnipeg and serves as an elder to the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and to the Ike Women’s Shelter board of directors. She is also an elder co-chair of Keteyatsak Elder/Seniors.

Though Thelma never lost sight of Jesus, she admits to continued wariness toward the church. Her story represents but one fragment of a broad historical canvas depicting the troubled

relationship between Aboriginal peoples and those who came to North America in search of new opportunities.

Thelma attributes the relational disconnect to fundamental differences in worldview. Author Christine Sivell-Ferri summarizes the contrasts in a government report about a native spirituality program among the Anishinabe people of Thelma's home community. "Euro-Canadian ordering is hierarchical and one-directional. It reflects European worldview. The Anishinabe spirituality and way of seeing the world is best understood with the analogy of the *circle* and an image of the community as a web of meaningful inter-connections among kin, the land, and the non-physical world."<sup>2</sup>

In his book *One Church Many Tribes*, Aboriginal speaker and author Richard Twiss refers to insights of R. Pierce Beaver: "The historical record of missions among the tribes of North America is a saga marked by enormous potential, great failures and profound sadness. With a few notable exceptions . . . those engaged in 18<sup>th</sup> century mission work disdained Native American culture and barred it from churches. Early missionaries failed to embrace the intrinsic God-given value of the people to whom they were sent."<sup>3</sup>

For Canadian Aboriginals, this legacy is most painfully identified through the dark and well-publicized history of church-led residential schools. Prime Minister Harper formally acknowledged their failure in 2008. "The legacy of Indian residential schools has contributed to social problems that continue to exist in many communities today. . . . In separating children from their families, we undermined the ability of many to adequately parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow."<sup>4</sup>

### **Generosity and leadership**

Thelma was born in the early 1940s on the Anishinabe reserve of Hollow Water First Nation, about 190 kilometres north of Winnipeg, where the Wanipigow River tumbles into Lake Winnipeg. She joined a large family, eventually becoming the third youngest of eighteen children, seven of whom died in infancy. The Barker family's five-bedroom home was often happily crowded, welcoming those with nowhere else to go.

Thelma's father, George Barker, worked for Manitoba Forestry and as a trapper, but he also spent forty years as the outspoken and politically active chief of Hollow Water. Barker played an

instrumental role in obtaining the right to vote for Aboriginals in Canada and in forming the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood, the precursor to the present-day Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs. Working as his assistant when she was in her late teens gave Thelma unique opportunities at home and in Ottawa to observe the political system at work—and to witness her father’s skilful approach to manoeuvring through it.

Barker practiced *Midewin* or native Ojibwa spirituality until he became a Christian in his later years, while Thelma’s mother, Ida Barker, was a devout Christian. More soft-spoken than her husband, Ida exhibited a strong community presence in her own way, dedicating her time and energy to the Anglican Church and caring for the community as a midwife and healer, utilizing the medicinal properties of local roots and plants.

**Thelma watched her mother burn sage for its soothing scent when someone in the community faced difficulties, and at the same time she prayed to God. Hymn singing and Bible reading were regular events in the household.**

Traditional practices were intricately woven into Thelma’s perspective on life. To care for Mother Earth, Thelma turned vegetable peels back into the soil. She collected and cared for various roots and plants used for medicines and teas. Thelma watched her mother burn sage for its soothing scent when

someone in the community faced difficulties, and at the same time she prayed to God, whom she addressed as “Manitou.” Hymn singing and Bible reading were regular events in the Barker household.

“[Mom] had a lot of expectations, and I guess in one sense it was good. She seemed to be a leader in the community,” Thelma says. “I knew about Jesus [when I was] very, very young.”

### **A community divided**

Although there appeared to be a natural acceptance of differences in the Barker home, life in the wider Hollow Water community was not as simple. Interdenominational friction divided residents.

During Thelma’s formative years, families in Hollow Water belonged to the Anglican Church or the Roman Catholic Church and attended schools associated with those denominations. Roman Catholics were forbidden to attend the Anglican Church

or school, and those who did so risked excommunication. While Thelma's family was Anglican, many of her friends were Roman Catholic. "There was a very strong division there," she recalls. "The majority of the community were Roman Catholics."

Children from both denominations met to play after school, exacerbating the sense of division that arose when school or church resumed. "I sensed that our friends were over there. . . . This is not fair," Thelma says. "Their rules were *vibrantly* strong."

People from both denominations were discouraged by their families from developing close relationships with those belonging to the "other" church. Though this created problems in a small community where everyone crossed paths daily, it did not prevent relationships. Out-of-wedlock pregnancies were common. Ironically, strong family commitments to one denomination or the other eventually drove many expectant young couples apart, creating many single-parent families.

Denominational politics also damaged the self-worth of many individuals, who, Thelma surmises, felt they could never live up to the expectations of the church. "It was very detrimental to both sides."

As Hollow Water chief, George Barker was caught in the middle of the conflict. "It was my dad who closed the Anglican and RC schools down in the community," Thelma says. "He said enough is enough [with] this fighting. We're all Native people and we're all God's people. The Creator put us here. This is going to stop."

Barker determined that all children should attend one school. He negotiated with the provincial government and the Frontier School Division, eventually establishing a consolidated school. Community churches and individual families became responsible for religious training.

By the 1970s, the elders who provided leadership and garnered financial support for the Anglican and Roman Catholic denominations had died, and no one assumed their roles. For a brief period, a Baptist pastor and his wife came to Hollow Water. Mennonite pastor Jake Unrau visited from the nearby Métis community of Manigotagan and held evening prayer meetings at the Barker residence. Although a Mennonite church was never formed, Unrau and George Barker collaborated to establish the

Wanipigow Producers Co-op, encouraging economic self-sufficiency in commercial fishing and lumber.

Whether by coincidence or consequence, as church influence in Hollow Water faltered, years of intergenerational trauma bubbled to the surface. Low self-worth, depression, and spiritual emptiness were expressed through increasing addictions and family violence. As the community struggled to cope, native spirituality resurfaced, and the door opened for a new program, Community Holistic Circle Healing (CHCH). Using elements of native spirituality such as sweat lodges, fasting, healing of the inner child, and growing self-awareness, the program brought survivors and offenders through four stages or circles of confession and healing. “When they brought that program . . ., they brought

**“I looked at the churches, and I thought, I don’t know if I could trust people, to share with them. I had to be a completely different person when I would go there, because if I was me, I thought I wouldn’t be accepted.”**

out a lot of things that were in the core of the people that they could not deal with in any other way,” Thelma says.

Those who supported native spirituality condemned Christianity, and yet another struggle of faith struck the small community. “When that happened, a lot of people pulled back [from CHCH], because there was enough Christianity in them that they weren’t going to have it totally crushed in front of them,” she reflects.

Thelma’s nephew, an alcoholic in search of healing, asked for her opinion of CHCH. “I told him that I found my Creator, my God, and I trust my God and my God will help me, but if people feel that they can be healed through the sweat lodge, through the Creator, I don’t disrespect that, but for me, I know where I go when I’m down and out.”

### **Boarding school**

Anglican boarding school plunged Thelma into a deeply personal faith-related trauma. At the age of fourteen, she was forbidden to refer to her way of life in Hollow Water or to speak her mother tongue. She became increasingly aware of a distinction between the cultural practices of lifestyle and faith. Loneliness and continual pressure against her roots eroded her sense of self-worth.

Mistrust of the school's administration left her feeling she had nowhere to turn. "If you had something to talk about or if something happened . . . , you only dealt with the head people, but . . . everybody knew whatever you did," Thelma says. "I wouldn't even tell them if I was lonely, because there was no confidentiality. . . . I wouldn't let go of anything. Everything was just in here all the time." She taps her chest.

With her parents' encouragement, Thelma remained in boarding school, but she continued to struggle against a theology that

**Thelma told herself, "People like me, who went to school and who've got something to show for it, should stand up—I should stand up—for the rights of my people. . . . I started to say 'my people.'"**

seemed to emphasize God's commandments over grace and redemption. "There were things in my heart that I wanted to deal with. I looked at the churches, and I thought, I don't know if I could trust people, to share with them. I had to be a completely different person when I would go there, because if I was me, I thought I wouldn't be accepted."

Not surprisingly, Thelma drew away from the institutional church. She kept her distance for many years. "How come Jesus never instructed everybody to have a church? Why

did he go all over and preach everywhere? And he loved poor people. This is the big question I always had in my head."

### **Identity and purpose**

After graduating from clerical school in the late 1950s, her first of many educational achievements, Thelma encountered a new level of discrimination and racism in the workforce. But this time, she drew on her parents' leadership examples and told herself, "People like me, who went to school and who've got something to show for it, should stand up—I should stand up—for the rights of my people. . . . I started to say 'my people.'"

She gradually reclaimed her heritage and sense of self-worth through various courses and seminars, finding the courage to challenge people and circumstances with new grit. Standing up for herself and other women—and affirming the God-given equality of all people—became her mission. "It took me [time] to heal inside . . . , to know who I was, that I was just as good a woman as any other woman. . . . I used to cry every time I said bad things to

somebody. . . . I used to just condemn myself, because I thought that was what you were supposed to do. . . . I don't anymore. I ask for forgiveness."

It wasn't until 1969, when she and her husband, Norman Meade, moved to Manigotagan, that she began to find a place in church again—a Mennonite church. "I knew that I needed to get closer to God," she reflects, "and I wanted my children to know God. I knew that [faith] had kept me from going through real turmoil in life."

In Manigotagan, the Meades met Edith and Neill von Gunten, who are currently co-directors of Native Ministry for Mennonite Church Canada. "Neill and Edith were like angels who fell from the sky," Thelma says of the timing. With similar interests and children of the same age, the couples connected instantly. Thelma stepped back into the church and gradually acquired the univer-

sity education that bolstered her ability to help others find their way.

**"If we are your partners, let your hair down," Thelma suggests. "Be a person. Get to know us." "You've got to be open like Jesus was, open to everybody."**

Thelma credits the Mennonite Church with bringing the Word of God to Manigotagan, but also for assisting in other areas of need, such as education, economic development, and counselling. Through the Mennonite Church, the Meades have travelled throughout Canada and the U.S. and participated in two Mennonite World Confer-

ence assemblies. "All of this gave Norman and [me] strong personal strength in our journey . . . walking with the Lord. It also helped us to learn the ropes of parenting, [how to] deal with forgiveness. . . . We needed that continual support in our lives."

### **Breaking down the barriers**

Thelma still sees traces of racism and stereotyping in churches. "I used to try and blank it out of my mind, but it's there," Thelma says. "You can feel it and you can hear it."

Thelma's five grandchildren sense it too. They usually attend a First Nations church some distance from their home, but one Sunday Thelma introduced them to a Sunday school nearby. When she attempted to take them there again, they protested. "There's too many yellow-heads there, and you can't even say

anything. They know everything,” her six-year-old granddaughter commented bluntly.

Thelma chuckles. “I guess she wasn’t given a chance. That really helped me, because that’s how I felt all the time.”

Education, Thelma believes, is the only way to bridge the difference between cultures. “If there is no understanding, there is still all of this stereotyping, and there’s still this myth that Indians can’t learn, Indians are lazy.”

Through Mennonite Central Committee’s Aboriginal Neighbours program, Thelma and Norman presented a workshop about Aboriginal culture and history. “Some women broke down and cried when we finished talking about how we were treated,” Thelma says. “Like in a residential school, you lose a lot of things. And people are saying, ‘Oh, they’re given so much money.’ The money they give out is peanuts compared to what a lot of people lost. When you go home, you question how your people are living. That’s destroying your family.”

Continued misunderstandings trouble Thelma. “Maybe it’s not racist, but there is a lot of stereotyping and a lot of saying, ‘Those people over there.’ ‘Poor Indians.’ Maybe not those exact words but, ‘Oh, we’re trying to help those poor Indians.’ It bothers you. It really bothers you.”

She suggests that there are better approaches to mission than the traditional ones. “Here, I’ll do it for you. Oh, I’ll run around for you. I’ll do this for you. This is what you need—” Thelma waves her hand. “Throw that out the window. “Work *with* the people. Find out what [their] needs are.”

Budgeting and finances create challenges, too. From an Aboriginal perspective, wealth is a God-given resource designed to meet needs, to be shared with no strings attached. From the Western point of view, however, wealth must be managed logistically, with a balance sheet in mind. If churches want to build strong connections with Aboriginals, Thelma encourages them to take another look at their approach to financial support. “You’ve got to drop some of your robes as you come—and maybe hand them over,” she chuckles.

But more important than money is the development of relationships that allow all parties to feel valued. “If we are your partners, let your hair down,” Thelma suggests. “Be a person. Get



to know us.” “You’ve got to be open like Jesus was, open to everybody,” she says. “It’s really a lot to do with two different cultures. But there can be understanding with two cultures.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thelma differentiates between boarding school and residential school by the living arrangements; although she lived away from her home in Hollow Water, she had room and board in one location of Winnipeg and travelled by city bus to attend school in another.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Sivell-Ferri et al., *The Four Circles of Hollow Water*, Aboriginal Corrections Policy Unit, Report APC-15-CA (1997), 127; [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/16/b3/dd.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/16/b3/dd.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> R. Pierce Beaver, *The Native American Christian Community: A Directory of Indian, Aleut and Eskimo Churches* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1979), 31, 46; quoted in Richard Twiss, *One Church Many Tribes* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2000), 26.

<sup>4</sup> Prime Minister Stephen Harper, “Prime Minister Harper offers full apology on behalf of Canadians for the Indian Residential Schools system”; <http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=2149>.

## About the author

Deborah Froese works for Mennonite Church Canada as director of News Services and PrayerNet coordinator. A member of First Mennonite Church of Winnipeg, she serves on the newsletter editorial committee and leads the grade 9–12 Sunday school class. She has written a picture book, *The Wise Washerman* (New York: Hyperion Press, 1994), illustrated by Wang Kui; and a young adult novel, *Out of the Fire* (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2001).