

A calling that heals

Vincent Solomon

I was ten years old when I first heard God call me into the ministry. I was at the back of the church trying to sit still so that I would not get into trouble with my mom. Suddenly, during the sermon, I heard God say to me, “One day you will be a priest too.” That powerful moment stayed with me into my teen years.

I moved from Norway House First Nation to Winnipeg in 1986 to study at the University of Manitoba. While there, I experienced culture

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shock and racism that was so severe that, after I completed the year, I vowed that I was not coming back to further my studies. At the time I thought, *So what if God had called me into the ordained ministry, and the only way to do this is to go through a seven-year education of first obtaining a Bachelor of Arts and then a Master of Divinity? Besides, God is the one who sent me down here (to Winnipeg) to experience all that prejudice and pain.* I returned home


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Many months later, God penetrated my anger and brought me to a place where I could hear afresh God’s purpose for me. The first thing that I heard was that I was to go back to Winnipeg so that God could heal me in the place where I had been broken. The second was that my studies could resume when I was ready. After many arguments with God, I relented—in exhaustion and protest, I might add—and boarded a bus for Winnipeg.

Back in Winnipeg, I managed to get a job as a waiter and tried to live as faithfully as I could, despite the fact that I was back in the “city of barbarians.” Most of the time I walked around dazed, in pain and discouraged. When the restaurant changed hands, the new owner took a dislike to me. One day, after hearing for the millionth time how stupid and inept I was, I prayed that God needed to do something, or I was going to quit.

Half an hour later, an elderly man walked in and proceeded to one of my tables without waiting to be seated. I thought that he was weird because, while sipping on his coffee, he stared at me the whole time I was waiting on others. Reluctantly, I returned to his table to see if I could warm up his beverage. He said, “No, thank you.” Then he added, “I never come this way, but God has sent me to tell you that you are doing a good job and not to give up.” In that moment, my legs almost gave way. All I wanted to do was to fall on my knees in repentance and thanksgiving. However, because of the crowded restaurant, I thanked God in my heart and silently cried with gratitude instead. As he walked out the door, I tried to catch up to him to thank him for the message, but he disappeared as soon as the door closed behind him. To this day, I am taken back to that moment whenever I am discouraged.

Over the years, God has been faithful in his promise of healing, and I have tried with God’s help to be faithful in my calling as a priest to the



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people of God. My original plan was to go back up north after my theological training to minister in an Indigenous community, but God had other plans. So here I am, thirty-three years later, in a city that I have found to be not so “barbaric” after all.

God’s calling has taken me to places of refreshment and of anguish. I have met many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who follow the Jesus path. They encounter Jesus in many ways. They see God in the people they meet,

in the places they go, through Scripture, in their families, and in the church community.

I often hear stories of God self-revealing in extraordinary and supernatural ways to the Indigenous peoples of Winnipeg. God has provided for those in want and has sent others to comfort those in need of a word or a touch. God has provided healing and has sent someone to protect them in times of trouble.

To some people, these stories must sound unbelievable. In an urban setting and culture, it is often easier to reject such stories as nonsense and to dismiss them as the imaginings of a troubled mind. However, in the Indigenous community, whether in the city or on the reserve, these

stories are common and are believed to be truthful. In part, this is because Indigenous peoples have grown up with a sense of the spiritual all around them. They do not compartmentalize the physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. All exist and are just as true and real as what our senses reveal. Furthermore, we have been brought up to believe that the “Father of All” (a traditional Cree term for God) is all-loving and powerful. So why should the Creator not show this might to God’s people—especially to those who have been hurt and marginalized in the most unbelievable ways by other people and by Canadian society as a whole.

Remarkably, I have heard testimonials of God speaking through Scripture to bring comfort, encouragement, words of love, and, when needed, words of reproach. Most of all, I hear words of joy and expressions of thankfulness for God’s grace, love, and presence in the lives of God’s people.

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During our worship times, I often sit in awe and wonder as I look at the people. Some of them have good reasons not to be there. Some have been hurt by the church, especially by its leaders. Even now, Indigenous people have been told by the church that their traditional teachings and ceremonies are of the devil. We have all heard, as did our ancestors before us, that in order to be “good Christians,” we need to become white and to conform to

the “civilization” that surrounds us. The resilience of the people and their grace to forgive are revealed every time they walk through the door of the church building. Their attendance in a service speaks of their faith. They have come not to commune with an institution but to meet and listen for their Creator. They come to worship because they have met the living God.

Our church community also includes non-Indigenous folk who have experienced God in their lives. These people have found a home to belong to, with a people that love and want them. It is a place of true reconciliation between peoples. It is a place where Christ is tearing down dividing walls and building a new humanity (Ephesians 2). God is encountered and witnessed in our time together. Our hope is that others who come to worship with us will see this.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul asks the church to make his joy complete by being “of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (2:2). In doing this, we reveal God to one another and to the world.

About the author

Vincent Solomon is Cree from Norway House First Nation. Currently he serves as Priest at Epiphany Indigenous Anglican Church in Winnipeg and at St. Philip’s Anglican Church at Scanterbury in the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation. Vincent is also the Indigenous Ministry Developer for the Diocese of Rupert’s Land.