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Staying in the Conversation

PHOTO NOAH CLARK (UNSPASH.COM)

Jodi Spargur (*third from right*) with Indigenous leaders at 7 Commitments gathering



An interview with **Rev. Jodi Spargur**



BY **RENÉE JAMES**

Jodi Spargur is a catalyzer of healing and justice with Red Clover Initiatives, Vancouver, a partner project of Canadian Baptist Ministries. She is an ordained pastor and consultant with Canadian Baptists of Western Canada. Passionate about catalyzing movements of justice and healing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in Canada, her consulting work also spans adaptive organizational change during times of transition, and effective neighbourhood engagement. She's currently working on her doctorate in Indigenous Theology and Ethics at NAIITS.

How did you get involved in this area of truth and reconciliation?

The church I planted in Downtown Eastside Vancouver in 2009 became a primarily Indigenous church, not the multicultural community I had thought I would be planting. I began to see the impact and legacy of colonization and residential schools on my friends.

I was invited to represent Baptists at a gathering of residential school survivors and church leaders from different denominations. We were to discuss how we could use the moment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings that would be held in Vancouver to catalyze a sustained movement for reconciliation, led by residential school survivors but intentionally engaging the church. This required very hard and honest conversations about the Church's role as a perpetrator of violence in the residential school project and what would be required for true reconciliation to occur even among us in the room making these plans. We sat in that circle for three hours, once a month, for five years.

Five years! What changed in you as you sat with that group?

In the early years I'd seen myself being there as a bridge-builder. I'm an immigrant to Canada and a Convention Baptist. We didn't run residential schools (or so I thought at the time) so I was this person who could broker healing and right relationships. But in the process of sitting with that group I was broken.

For two and a half years as I journeyed with this group, I'd sob when I opened my mouth to speak about this area. This isn't me! In one of the meetings, as we sat in the circle, I went down on my knees and said, "I don't know how healing can happen." An elder crossed the circle, came to me and said, "Your tears are good for a time, but you cannot walk with us from down there. So stand up."

I knew I couldn't "other" those who'd done harm with the Residential Schools System. I had to identify with them. So the question of standing up and owning that I was the accused in this situation was key for my growth in understanding where the work of true reconciliation began. "You church folks see yourselves as people who have a corner on this Truth and Reconciliation process but this is a legal process and you stand as the accused." These were hard and important words spoken to our group by the TRC Commissioner Marie Wilson. My own healing was only possible when I understood this.

Tell us more.

Chief Robert Joseph, hereditary chief of the Gwawaenuk First Nation, was one of the key organizers of this group of residential school survivors and church leaders. He offered us two key teachings. The first was this: If I wanted to be part of the journey of truth and reconciliation I needed to start with the knowledge that people who looked like me came to Indigenous communities in the name of Jesus and did much harm. Until non-Indigenous churches know their place in the story – that they were wounders, not healers, right relationship cannot unfold.

In the context of faith, standing as the accused, as those who wounded, can stand as an invitation, not condemnation. Shame isn't the final word on the white Church and residential schools. It does however serve as a point of identification of our need as the Church – those who follow the way of Jesus. It's from that point of need, and only from that point, that healing and redemption happen.

What was his second key teaching?

Chief Robert Joseph identified the work of reconciliation as primarily spiritual work, and if people who prayed weren't part of the work, then we would not see healing for future generations. He asked me: "Jodi, would you help people who pray, stay in the conversation?"



Your insights and lessons learned are so rich. We know they come from the cross-cultural relationships you've built with Indigenous brothers and sisters. What are some best practices moving forward to help us start and stay in the conversation?

Consider how we preach the Gospel

Read Eric Law's book *The Wolf Shall Lie Down With The Lamb – A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community*. He's a priest, cultural anthropologist and an internationally known consultant in the area of multicultural leadership. In this book he depicts the cycle of the gospel as the journey to the cross and then the journey from the cross to the resurrection. He goes on to suggest that some people groups live the resurrection. The call of the gospel for them is to learn the path to the cross. For others, they live in the crucifixion and for them the whole gospel is learning the path to resurrection. We need each other to experience the power of the whole gospel but we also need to not assume that the challenging part of the gospel is the same for everyone.

According to him, we've made the preaching of the gospel monochromatic. We often get our messages mixed up about what the call of the gospel is to a particular group. I don't believe the gospel calls Indigenous people to sit in suffering more than they already have. I believe the gospel calls the settler (white) Church to walk toward the crucifixion. White people need to learn from Indigenous peoples about how to live in hope because there's a different hope that comes out of starting at the crucifixion and moving to hope. And our Indigenous brothers and sisters must be invited to sit in resurrection. We need to do these calls together and pray that the Spirit is binding us together.

My hands-on mission is really mission to the Church. Indigenous people have received our version of gospel for a long time but I'm not sure the Church has received the gospel in the same way and so as a consequence the Church isn't a good conversation partner.

2 Recognize the importance of the land

These are teachings I've received from Indigenous Peoples and I'm moving deeper and deeper into what they mean. Do we know the conversations that happened at first contact? How was the land to be shared? Theologically, Christians are meant to be people who live up to their word so what were the commitments made that we, as covenant people need to honour? The invitation here is to seek and find out and then become committed to the idea of reclaiming and repairing. How do we become people who look for what's been broken and torn apart and be committed to repairing those things?

We've bought into the Doctrine of Discovery which was a theological document designed to theologically justify the theft of land by casting Indigenous Peoples – their cultures and everything associated with them – as evil and therefore to be obliterated. One of the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was for churches to repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples, such as the Doctrine of Discovery, and terra nullius. As we do that work of repudiating, we have to pay attention to our ways of seeing and talking about the land.

3 The gospel has been given to Indigenous people

I've learned that we need to let go of our sense that we enter into relationships with Indigenous communities and people with conversion as our primary outcome. Yes, conversion will happen as this work is done well, but healing is what we need to attend to first. Remember, the Church has been a site of wounding for hundreds of years in our relationship with Indigenous Peoples.

So how do we begin the conversations and build the relationships that lead to healing?

First, know what was asked of Canadians in the TRC Calls to Action. These Actions form a starting point of which we need to be aware. Educate yourselves: Which of these things might particularly be impacting the nation that is your closest neighbour?

Second, we have been asked to use the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) as a framework for reconciliation. Know what that document says and how these principles might apply in your context.

One of the principles of UNDRIP is free, prior and informed consent. Some churches have realized they never asked permission to do what they have been doing on reserves. So ask your Indigenous neighbours what they would like you to say or do as you come alongside them. Ask if they are OK with what you're doing on their land. Some will say: "Leave us alone."



We aren't known for listening to those we've impacted; for listening as they decide whether or not they want to participate in a program; for listening to what they'd ask of the Church in partnership.

What's the one takeaway you'd like readers to remember?

When I started the church plant in Downtown East Vancouver, I said that I didn't want to pastor an Indigenous church – I felt inadequate and those feelings grew as the months unfolded. So I reached out to Cheryl Bear and asked for a contact who could offer me some guidance and help. One day Hector Hill from the Gitsegukla First Nation showed up. He'd been sitting in a coffee shop across the street from the church, watching me for weeks. He wondered whether our church was going to be a sandwich church or a clothing church. I felt more and more inadequate as he ran down that list. "But you aren't any of those things," he said. "And that's why I've come – because your hands are empty, and so they're open for friendship." Hector became my mentor.

My hope is that people will understand that individually, and collectively, we can come vulnerable, broken and empty-handed, and that in fact this is the best way to come into conversations with the potential of healing and flourishing. We don't have to be afraid of the unknowing. Yes, we want to know and understand where we're heading, but we're being invited into a beautiful journey by Indigenous Peoples and we don't know the outcome. That's a gift and we can let Creator-God reveal something He's never before. I've experienced deep transformational relationship when I wasn't afraid of being empty. **1**