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Lest We Forget: Reflections on the Red Lake Shootings

A Challenge for the Church



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It is several weeks now since the tragic shootings at the Red Lake Indian Reservation in the state of Minnesota. Ten people died in what has been described as “the most deadly mass murder in Minnesota’s history.”

Life goes on and now the world is preoccupied with the death of Pope John Paul II and the appointment of his successor. Daily papers are saturated with articles and photos of this world-renowned and important person for the church and for the world. This historic event will preoccupy the media for close to a month and then they’ll move on to something else. Let us, however, not forget the people of Red Lake, who are as inter-related and inter-connected as any Mennonite community, municipality, town, or congregation. A community that is grieving. What would it mean for any of our congregations or communities to suffer the loss of ten people, including a number of our youth through such an act of violence?

It’s easy to forget the fact that Red Lake is one of the poorest communities in the state of Minnesota. Poverty usually means the availability of fewer resources to face any crisis. It’s easy to forget that this condition of poverty is not due to any failings of the Red Lake people, but owes itself to a much larger and irrefutable history.

It’s easy to forget that as a Native teenage boy, Jeff, the perpetrator in the shootings, is part of the least-trusted, most feared social group in northern Minnesota. Everyone who lives in that part of the country knows it, whether they admit it or not; Indian teenagers are generally viewed as a problem. This is not the fault of the teens, but a problem with the larger society. Its name is racism. Scott Richard Lyons, Leech Lake Ojibwe, who teaches writing, literature and Native American Studies, asks,

“What social institutions hold great promise and high expectations for Native teenagers? schools? businesses? mass media? government? No. As with other teens of color, Native kids are typically more feared than nurtured, more disdained than celebrated, and nearly always publicly discussed as carriers of problems, not potentials. One predictable result of this general lack of respect is low self-esteem. Little wonder that, as a Harvard study recently concluded, 1 out of 6 Native teenagers today has attempted suicide. Aside from perhaps family and friends, who in the larger society is acknowledging that their lives are worth living?”

It’s easy to forget that Native communities already face death far more often than other communities in our land. In the first week of April, there was a funeral for an 8 year old boy who committed suicide in a community in Northern Manitoba. When he was 6, his 11 year old brother committed suicide. There are so many funerals, so many funerals of young people. For these people grief is layered upon grief.

At this time there are those who remind us that the three leading causes of death among Native youth are accidents (many attributable to alcohol and drugs), suicides, and then homicides. There may be no other youth population in North America involved in so much dying. Let us not forget Red Lake, but the issue is much bigger than Red Lake. We are talking about youth across North America. We are talking about Native youth in our neighbouring communities, and in our cities.

How does God's Spirit, God's heart speak to the church through such an event? As a church we knew how to respond to Tsunami shock waves, but this too is nearly forgotten, no longer reported or talked about. How do we respond to communities such as Red Lake, Minnesota when waves of grief threaten to swallow them? How do we respond to Aboriginal neighbours who face death, avoidable death, so often? How might our prayer life and our relationships be affected as we invite God's Spirit to touch and shape our spirits in response to the tragedy and pain of the Red Lake Shootings, and other death plagued Native communities across North America.

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