



INDIGENOUS VOICES OF FAITH

TAL JAMES

Interview by Andrew P.W. Bennett
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CARDUS



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Introduction

Indigenous Voices of Faith is a series of interviews conducted by Cardus in the fall of 2022, in which we asked twelve Indigenous people in Canada to tell us about their religious faith and experiences. Since 47 percent of Indigenous people in Canada identify as Christians, Christian voices are the primary but not sole focus of this interview series. The purpose of this project is to affirm and to shed light on the religious freedom of Indigenous peoples to hold the beliefs and engage in the practices that they choose and to contextualize their faith within their own cultures.

Father Deacon Andrew Bennett, program director for Cardus Faith Communities, interviewed Tal James in Saanich, British Columbia on November 1, 2022.

Interview Transcript

FR. DCN. ANDREW BENNETT: Tal, thanks very much for agreeing to take part in this project. Tell me a little bit about your Indigenous background.

TAL JAMES: All righty. My name is Tal. My Indigenous name is Yum'Yom al'athut. That part of the name comes from Penelakut Island, and that's where my father is from. My mother is from the Nisga'a territories in the Nass Valley, and I currently reside in Nanaimo with my wife, Christina, who was an import from Germany. We have two boys, Corbin and Connor, and they're in their early twenties.



FR. DCN. ANDREW: That's wonderful. Tell me, Tal, a little bit about your Christian faith. Tell me what it means to you and your life and how you live it out.

TAL JAMES: Well, I mean that's a pretty open-ended question. There's all sorts of stuff, but in general I'd just like to say that I think it's a miracle that I actually have any faith at all.

My parents were good parents to us, but I made a lot of choices in my life then and I did a lot of stupid things. But to make a long story short, I moved from an urban setting to living on one of the Gulf Islands and really living a lifestyle of drinking and a lot of partying, that type of thing.

Then about a year into that life, around seventeen or eighteen years old, I don't even remember the exact age, but we encountered some students over on Thetis Island who were at the Capernwray Bible School, which is part of the Torchbearers centers network around the world. Through our friendships and through our connection, I became a Christian.

One thing that I learned in that whole thing is that Christianity became very important in my life, in the sense that I wasn't judged for my past life. God was there for me. The people that introduced me, they didn't judge me for being an idiot. They just loved me. They loved all my friends and my family. In essence, that's what I believe Christianity is. It is us loving each other, specifically with the goal to introduce Jesus Christ into the lives of other people, and not to make those decisions for them.

I was fortunate to be able to go to Capernwray Hall in England in 1985, following up that first year of being introduced to Christ. In that scenario, I'd never really been away from my family or my friends, I always had them around me. It gave me the opportunity to explore my faith and understand Christianity, while studying his Word with the purpose of growing in my faith.

I think what happened in that whole scenario was that I really became myself. I discovered my identity as a Christian guy. I think that was a huge thing. I discovered that it was my faith. It wasn't the faith of my parents or the beliefs of my parents. It wasn't the belief of the people who introduced me to Christ. It was me, and it was my growth, and that it is very personal and meant a lot to me.

I had six months to reestablish who I was. I wasn't the drinking idiot. I was a young man who was venturing down a road, and I didn't know where that road was going. I just knew it was a lot better for me than where I was.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: You made the point about how coming to Christ revealed to you who you are, and that you saw that maybe for the first time. Tell me about how that conversion experience connected with your First Nations identity.

TAL JAMES: That's a bit of a longer road. Like I said, I grew up off res. I was an urban Aboriginal, I guess you would say. I was connected to a lot of First Nations communities through soccer and sport and that type of thing. I certainly wouldn't say I was connected in a traditional way. I just did my thing.

It wasn't until later on that I started to recognize my Indigenous background for what it was. That it was a special thing to be able to say, "I'm First Nations." I can't give you a specific date on that; it was a process. I think it wasn't until I married my wife, Christina, when I realized through her that I should become more in touch and in tune with my Aboriginal identity.

She moved to Canada, and she basically lost her German identity. She was trapped in no man's land, and she didn't have her German culture. She encountered First Nations and North American culture, and through that I started to learn about our national heritage.



And recognized that being from the Coast Salish speaking territories on Vancouver Island is special. Having roots in the Nisga'a territories is special, and they're God-given cultures that I recognize as being important in my life. I'm not a fluent speaker. I'm barely a speaker of either language, and that's quite unfortunate. But there are certain things and aspects in my life that I am learning in a lot more detail, like being outdoors on the land and on the water. That's a process too. I'd never be down that road if I wasn't a Christian. If it wasn't for my faith, I wouldn't have had the sound mind to be able to move forward in healthy ways, in the traditional ways of our people.

I'd probably still be a drunk if it wasn't for Christ. I wouldn't have the opportunity to learn from my elders, who have some knowledge about life on the land. Some have knowledge about life on the water, hunting and fishing skills. Those things are really important, and those things were taken away from us.

As a Christian man going down this road of—some would throw out the catch phrase of the “red road”—learning about that is so important. So many of our young

people today don't have those skills. For me to help some people learn some of that, or even relearn, is great. For some of the people I encounter, it just starts coming back, that knowledge comes back. If it wasn't for my faith, I wouldn't be able to say, "I'm an Aboriginal guy." It's a completion of who I am.

We had talked earlier about identity, and my identity is First Nations. Some people might say, "Oh yeah, well, you can't be Christian." And we talked about this. "You can't be Christian and First Nations, because of your Native spirituality." Or this or that. I would argue and say, I can be Christian, *because* of my Native spirituality, because First Nations spirituality encompasses everything we do.

I see a struggle in the church, where spirituality is on Sunday, or maybe Saturday night, depending on your denominational brand. But it's a completion in my thinking. My culture and spirituality was complete, and through Christ in my life, my spirituality is more complete. My culture is more complete. I can live it more in a pure way, by being connected to the Creator in a number of different ways.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: This is such a crucial point that you raise. And a number of other people I've spoken to as part of this project have talked about this whole question of enculturation. When the gospel is encountered by an individual or by a group of people or a people, a nation, the choice is to either accept it or you reject it, and you have free will to do that.

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What does it mean to you as someone who lives within this community, within this First Nation? What does it mean to have received the gospel, and how does that relate to your mission as a Christian within that community?

TAL JAMES: Well, as far as my purpose in the community, I believe we as Christians have a responsibility to fix what we broke in Jesus's name. We spoke a little bit earlier about being a sell-out. I'm not a sell-out to the white man's gospel. I'm not a sell-out to a church organization or parachurch organization. I'm a sell-out for Jesus.

When I'm called, and I am called to do a certain work, I'm going to do that wholeheartedly. My life is a spiritual act of worship or service. I run an outdoors program called ROOTS (Reclaiming Original Outdoor Technology and Skills). We do kayaking, archery, camping, and canoeing, and basic survival skills.

I'm starting a program called the Fish Club with another guy. We do a little bit of fishing, some hunting, you know, hunter-gatherer stuff. To me, it's vital that we relearn these things, because in Jesus's name we were forbidden to do these things. We were forbidden to speak our languages. The government was the war club that the church used against us. I believe it's our responsibility to bring these things back

to the First Nations communities. To me, this is one of the most vital spiritual acts that we can be involved in.

I think one of the things that people in the church might say, looking at this, is, “Oh, that’s a wonderful act of reconciliation.” Ten years ago I probably would’ve agreed with that, but I don’t believe it’s an act of reconciliation. I think it’s an act of restoration from what was taken and stolen and robbed from our First Nations communities across North America.

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Reconciliation, I think, is the wrong term that we’re using, in the sense that reconciliation would assume that there was a good relationship, when there never, ever really was. In some areas there were some good relationships, such as up and down the Fraser, where the Jesuits had a positive influence and the First Nations people were having positive experiences, but there were struggles and strikes that came after that. When a good work got started, some of the crooked bunch got in the way and took away, overran, and overwrote the good that was already happening in Christ’s name.

There’s a struggle now with the perpetuation of these things in ignorance, where the people of the church don’t necessarily understand all the intricacies of what has happened. I work with North American Indigenous Ministries, and I’ve been given a lot of room and freedom to do some work that falls along the line of Christian ministry, and I think this is probably one of the most important. Because it’s not just me coming in and saying, “I have a solution for the community.” It’s saying, “I’m sorry, I need to give back what was taken.” I put myself in that category, because I am a Christian. First and foremost my identity is that I am a First Nations believer.

I would encourage people of other cultural backgrounds who are believers to see how they can bring back what was stolen rather than come in with a prepackaged solution. We want to plant a church, and in four years we’ll be done and move on. That mentality is just planting a church, that comes from the perspective of an outsider rather than meeting the need of the community.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: I think this idea of restoration, as you called it, is really, really crucial. The restoration is that we are restored in Christ. This way you’ve explained restoration as being part of your ministry as a Christian I think is very beautiful. I mean, it recognizes that incarnational aspect that we recognize in one another, that image and likeness of Christ. To be able to represent that to fellow members of your First Nation as a Christian is a really beautiful thing to do, with lots of challenges, certainly, but a very beautiful thing to do.

Tell me a little bit more about your broader ministry.

TAL JAMES: Well, I look at the kayaking, the archery, the outdoor stuff, that’s a lot of the fun work. But on the other side of that is a lot of the hurt and the pain that’s

happened as a result of the church organization. I can't really say the body of Christ's church, but the church organization. A lot of those hurts happened in Jesus's name. Part of what I believe is important for me is to help people deal with those hurts and pains as well.

Not only that, but to help celebrate the good things. I do funerals. I do weddings. Each has its place in our society, and each thing is necessary. Especially as a servant of the Creator, I want to help people deal with those eternal things or those lifelong things, acting as a facilitator to God. In essence, I'm a mediator. I'm the secondary mediator between the Creator and our people.

I have struggled in the past with some of the stuff, with hurtful things, and it's been very painful. I've come to the place through the guidance of a number of people, counselling, counsellors, that these burdens are not mine to bear. I hear the burdens. I hear the struggles. In the past, I held on to those to my detriment, but I need to release those at the foot of the cross, because that's where the first mediator comes in. He's the one that needs to deal with those things, not me.

I hold them, and I deliver them. But more importantly, I try to let my friends, my family, and people that I encounter know that they have that possibility too. That is, it's not solely my responsibility, and I can tell them about that original mediator between the Creator and themselves. Hopefully somewhere along the line somebody will say, "Oh, I get it." As a Christian, it's taken me probably twenty-eight years to figure that out.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Amen. I mean, I think one thing that all of us that are in pastoral ministry realize sometimes is that we have suddenly taken on the role of being the saviour, when we are not the Saviour. He's already done all the work. Our role is to be, as you say, that mediator. To be that minister to him, to others, to bring him to others.

TAL JAMES: Yeah. I think actually my friend Mark, who put us together in conversation, he was one of those voices that helped me pass that dark spot in my life. He basically said, "You're bearing the burdens of your society on your shoulders. Stop it. Quit playing God."

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Good advice.

TAL JAMES: Yeah. Obviously, he said it in a nicer way, but that's the brunt of it. Stop playing God, because it's a burden that none of us can bear, not one of us. Because I may never, ever be able to deal with your struggles, or anybody else's for that matter. I have a hard-enough time dealing with my own struggles. It's the same



thing: bring those to the foot of the cross and say, “You know what, Jesus, take this. Because I just can’t handle it.” A lot of people overlook that.

I think there’s a lot of people in the church out there, regardless of your denomination, that have this God complex. Dealing with that as a person is difficult and also dangerous. I think in the church of the past a lot of those people had a God complex. The church in the past gave us First Nations people an ultimatum: “You’re either with us, or you’re going to hell, but you got to be like us before you can be with us.”

And so there was the expectation that we were Christians, and then we’ll beat the devil out of you after. There’s a lot of stuff behind that whole thing. We should never, ever have the expectation for somebody to have our faith before we share our faith, and that’s wrong. I think a lot of that goes on still in today’s church still. Our deeds need to match up with Christian deeds before we can truly have salvation. I think that’s a very subtle, dangerous thing that our churches struggle with today.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: One last question. What do you think is the particular role or roles that can be played by Indigenous Christians in Canada?

TAL JAMES: I think being true to your culture and continuing down the path of understanding where you come from as an Indigenous person is important. Strengthen and fortify who you are as an Aboriginal and never, ever forsaking the Creator, through his teachings in the Scriptures. There’s so much that lines up scripturally to all our First Nations cultures, and we need to recognize that.

I’ll say it again, and I think I said it earlier, that our cultures were complete, and in Jesus they’re more complete. I think that’s a big thing and a big step for a lot of us. You’re going to have a lot of non-Indigenous people look at you and question your actions based on your Aboriginal heritage. Don’t take that to heart. They’re the ignorant ones who don’t want you to flourish.

Those of you who are Christians, First Nations Christians, you come to the table with the same gifting that non-Aboriginal people have. For them to say, “We want to make room for you at the table,” correct them. You are already at the table, and encourage them to step back and allow your gifts to flourish. Because it’s one in the same spirit.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. Any last thoughts?

TAL JAMES: Oh, man. Yeah. To me, it’s a blessing to be able to be part of both cultures, the church culture and First Nations culture. Personally, I’m far more full and far happier having both of those two things. These two places of being come together, and we are able to learn things to see how we can bridge the gap in society.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. Thanks, Tal. God bless you.

Photos provided by Tal James.