

Sociologist advises vigilance against evangelical 'spiritual warriors' set on converting Indigenous peoples

March 23 2018, by Geoff McMaster



Cindy Jacobs, an influential member of the New Apostolic Reformation movement, claimed to have a vision that God wanted to release the “spirit of reconciliation” among churches in Manitoba, which has led Canadian followers to focus recruitment drives in the province, particularly in Winnipeg's north end. Credit: University of Alberta

A new evangelical sect targeting Indigenous people in Canada is an ominous trend that should be closely watched, says a University of Alberta sociologist.

In an exposé published last fall, The Walrus reported that an American evangelical movement called the New Apostolic Reformation, or NAR, has been moving north, using sociological research and "spiritual mapping" to locate vulnerable populations it deems possessed by demons.

"It is important that there's enough knowledge about the group in the communities they target, so people have the ability to understand what's coming in and how to deal with it," said Robin Willey, a post-doctoral fellow who has studied evangelical movements in Canada.

"There is certainly something suspect about using research from the social sciences to shape strategy appearing to specifically target vulnerable populations," he said. "It is troubling to say the least, and basically amounts to a form of neoliberal recolonization, where Indigenous populations are encouraged to 'colonize' themselves."

According to The Walrus, NAR has already established a foothold among Canada's Inuit people in the North, but most recently the movement has been recruiting new followers among the impoverished Indigenous population of Winnipeg's north end, using the language of reconciliation to promise social transformation and healing.

But there are strings attached. NAR believes in the acquisition of wealth to bring about its vision, and that means collecting tithes. The top "apostles" have been known to pocket millions every year, following the prosperity gospel, which promises material wealth and physical healing to those who give generously, reports The Walrus.

The sect's theology derives from the late Peter C. Wagner, who foretold of apostles infiltrating what he called the seven "mountains of culture"—education, government, media, arts and entertainment, religion, family and business in the name of God.

"That's pretty much everything," said Willey, "but NAR also lists business as the most important of the seven mountains, and it's only through the accumulation of wealth that you can start fuelling influence into the other mountains."

Instead of focusing on personal salvation, as does mainstream evangelicalism, "NAR extends it to people groups, nations, communities and geographic areas. So instead of exorcising demons from a single individual, you can talk about exorcising demons from an entire people, group or community," said Willey. Convinced they are soldiers in God's army, NAR apostles aim to eventually take over governments and save the world from corruption and idolatry, establishing God's new kingdom on Earth.

"They talk about saving some of the most impoverished populations on the planet," said Willey, including those in Africa and South America.

"The interesting thing about them (in the Canadian context) is they have this language of reconciliation, which plays so well in vulnerable Indigenous communities" suffering from the cultural devastation of residential schools and their legacy of physical, sexual and substance abuse.

According to The Walrus, the movement arrived in Manitoba after one of NAR's apostles, Cindy Jacobs, had a vision that God wanted to release the "spirit of reconciliation" among Indigenous and non-Indigenous churches in the province. The result was a recruitment drive called "Awakening Manitoba," in which followers are inducted in emotional prayer services or faith-healing rituals.

"They believe that humans have dominion over the land—taking the biblical directive literally—and can sell that sort of thing to Indigenous people," reminding them of their preordained rights as original stewards

of the land, said Willey.

"But what comes along with that, somewhat ironically, is that there is only one religion and one religious practice that is OK."

Under NAR's prophecy, the only way to rid a population of demons is to destroy former religious practices and burn ungodly possessions—such as drugs, pornography, [heavy metal music](#), even sweat lodges—in the name of purification. It is a clear violation of calls in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report for faith groups to "respect Indigenous spirituality in its own right."

According to some estimates, there are chapters of NAR in all 50 American states. Membership numbers are hard to arrive at because followers don't officially sign on to any church, seminary or ministry. American lawmakers such as Mike Huckabee, Michele Bachmann and former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin have all been drawn to the movement.

In assessing the threat in Canada, however, Willey said numbers matter.

"If this group is really quite small, say, sitting around five per cent of the evangelical community, how much do we really need to worry? My understanding of the evangelical movement right now is that it is becoming more segmented and more diverse."

Though acknowledging NAR has clearly arrived in Canada, Willey said he hasn't yet seen signs of it in Alberta. But that doesn't mean it won't show up here soon.

"This is a colonial discourse, and as settlers we have a responsibility to ensure people know about it," he said, to avoid substituting one form of colonialism for another.

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Sociologist advises vigilance against evangelical 'spiritual warriors' set on converting Indigenous peoples (2018, March 23) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-03-sociologist-vigilance-evangelical-spiritual-warriors.html>

| |
|--|
| <p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p> |
|--|