

Ep 27: Spiritual Covenant with Adrian Jacobs

Show notes:

Phil Monture, A Global Solution for the Six Nations of the Grand River

- https://youtu.be/G_BQiOc8m2E?feature=shared

Conflict in Caledonia: a timeline:

- <https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/conflict-in-caledonia-a-timeline-of-the-grand-river-land-dispute/>

National Film Board of Canada "Six Miles Deep"

- <https://youtu.be/9pDjJpZaag4?feature=shared>

Two Row Wampum:

- <https://www.onondaganation.org/culture/wampum/two-row-wampum-belt-guswenta/o>

History of Strawberry Thanksgiving:

- <https://www.oneidaindiannation.com/celebration-of-the-strawberry/>

Jonathan Maracle and Broken walls:

- <https://brokenwalls.com/>
- learn about Mohawk Christian musician and worship leader [Jonathan Maracle](#) and the incredible reconciling work he has done in his own life, and his decades-long ministry to all nations.

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Adrian Jacobs: Well, one of the things that I wanted to say about the Mennonite community is that there's been a long relationship already established with the Mennonite community. No relationship is perfect, but there are some very good examples that have led to Six Nations appreciating the Mennonite community, especially about their willingness to have dirt under their fingernails. Not pie in the sky, but grounded and connected to the earth kinds of faith. Skylar Williams called Mennonites "our faithful allies." And I've told Mennonite Central Committee Ontario, that you're the only Christian community that has respect in the traditional community at Six Nations. And I told them way back then, "Don't you blow it!" [laughs]

Undercurrents Introduction

Welcome to UNDERCURRENTS, my name is Ken Ogasawara. I'm part of the Communications team at Mennonite Central Committee in Ontario. This podcast is just one way of telling all the amazing stories coming out of our community of program participants, staff, partners and others. Undercurrents is brought to you in part by Kindred Credit Union. Kindred's purpose is cooperative banking that connects values and faith with finances, inspiring peaceful, just, and prosperous communities. Kindred is committed to learning, building partnerships, and mobilizing their resources to make tangible progress towards reconciliation. This episode is about Spiritual Covenant.

Introduction Adrian

Adrian: My name is Adrian Jacobs. My clan name is Ganosano. I am Turtle Clan of the Cayuga Nation of the Six Nations Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

Voiceover (Ken Ogasawara): I am recording this conversation with Adrian, and editing this podcast, on the traditional territories of the Attawandaron, Anishnaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples. The Haudenosaunee, also known as Six Nations, are Adrian's people, and this is his people's land.

I'm sitting with Adrian in a reproduction of a longhouse at Six Nations Polytechnic, a unique post-secondary education centre focusing on revitalizing and nurturing Haudenosaunee culture, language and community.

Adrian: I grew up at the Six Nations Reserve, the largest reserve in Canada. My father was a faith keeper of the traditional religion, and my mother was Anglican. And I lived in a household where two different spiritual pathways that people held to.. My parents did not agree on that spiritual pathway, but it never led to any kind of rancorous conflict or anything. They loved each other and cared for each other. I grew up in the traditional Longhouse going to the ceremonies with my father for most of my 20 years in the beginning of my life. And so that's the context in which I come from.

Adrian: At 20 years of age, I came to Christian faith, and without them really guiding me to do that, I decided that the things that I had been given as an Indigenous person were part of my whole life and I needed to pass away from that and move on to something that was new. And so for the first part of my Christian life, I had made a separation of myself from an environment like this and from the ceremonies and the language and a dancing and etc. But I was never really happy with that and began to really think it through as a follower of Christ, should I be really rejecting my own people and our way of thinking?

"Is it really necessary for me to leave all of that and does it mean that I change myself from my culture, from my language, from my connection to the land, in order to follow Christ?"

I found a bunch of people that were doing the same thing, rethinking their Christian faith and saying, "Creator made us who we are. And it's not something that necessarily Jesus is asking us to give up or put away, but we can follow him as we have been created and made here in this world."

So that's the journey that has really brought me full circle back to understanding the place of my identity as a Haudenosaunee person, but also reconciling that with my followership of Christ in Christian faith as well.

VO: As Adrian starting weaving his traditional culture with the teachings of Jesus, the theme of justice rose to the top for him. Land justice in particular.

Adrian: And so when the conflict exploded in Caledonia in 2006, I was immediately involved with pastors praying for resolution, and also with our people standing up to protect the land.

Clip from "Six Miles Deep":

Clyde Powless, Six Nations Spokesperson: "We are not protestors - we are Haudenosaunee. This is our land, we know it."

VO: The "conflict that exploded" that Adrian is referring to, was blockade against a proposed development of a suburb in Caledonia, next to the Six Nations reserve.

Reporter: "What are your wants right now? What would be a satisfactory outcome for your people?"

Janie Jamieson, Six Nations Spokesperson: "To have the land and title re-instated. And for the government - for Canada to prove once and for all - either they have have the title or not?"

Reporter: "It's all over a piece of land in southwestern Ontario, land given to the Iroquois in the 18th century as a British thank you for helping them fight the Americans. Over the decades, Canadian government sold it off - Six Nations claim rightfully, it's still theirs."

VO: The dispute over this land, called the Haldimand Tract named after the British governor who granted the Six Nations with this land, deserves its own episode, and in fact, it has been documented in countless films, books and lectures. One historian who

has done more work on this than almost anyone is Phil Monture - a Mohawk from Six Nations and former Director of the Land Claims Research Office at the Six Nations of the Grand River AS WELL AS a member of the Planning Team for the National Land Claims Research Summit AND Ontario's representative on the Land Rights Issues for the National Joint Task Force on Claims Policy Reform. In other words, he knows his stuff. Here is Phil summarizing the crux of the problem of land claims for Six Nations at a talk at the University of Waterloo:

Phil Monture: The king (George III) did order that the land be transferred to us as part of a promise that he made to us as being allies to him during the American Revolution. Here, we are faced with a problem: this is all in the hands of third parties, innocent third parties.

VO: *The Haldimand Tract is approximately 950,000 acres. Today, Six Nations retains only 5% of that. Over 95% of that land is owned by those third parties that Phil mentions. That's every business, homeowner, church and resident living in the heavily populated and prosperous area within six miles of the Grand River.*

Phil Monture: They bought in good faith, they did everything required as an individual. We have no intention of dispossessing anyone. How are we going to work this out with Canada?

VO: *This was the history that Canadians didn't know, but Six Nations knew only too well. And with the Canadian governments over the decades showing no intention of honouring their own treaties through the courts - in fact, making it illegal for First Nations to advance legal claims against Canada - Six Nations were taking matters into their own hands by blocking developer's access to the land.*

Adrian was in the middle of this action when a unique chance came up to teach this history to a particular group of people.

Adrian: During one of our pastors prayer meetings, a representative of Mennonite Central Committee Ontario came and talked about an opportunity for somebody to educate their 26 Mennonite churches that were in the Grand River Tract. So when I read that job description, I said, "That's me. I think I could do that job."

MCC & Six Nations Relationship

VO: *Adrian applied for the job and got it. At this point, MCC had a good relationship with Six Nations, having worked on some food sovereignty projects in the past. Because of this, MCC leadership recognized the importance of meaningful consultation with Six*

Nations on the sensitive nature of this initiative - of educating their Mennonite constituents on the history of the Six Nations land on which their churches stand. MCC went through the proper channels to be on the agenda to present this initiative at the next meeting of the traditional government at Six Nations.

Adrian: And so on a certain day in 2007, Arli Klassen was the director of Ontario, Rick Cober Bauman, who was programme director and Lindsay Mollins Koene, who was the Aboriginal Neighbours Programme, they introduced me to my own traditional government. They showed respect to the government, the traditional government of Six Nations and introduced me to that, opening the door for me to do the work with their affirmation. I was honoured by it.

Adrian: And so after that introduction, I had a lunch with Rick Hill who is a knowledge keeper. Rick Hill is somebody of just a little bit older generation than me, not much older, but a little bit older. And back in the day, this is what he told me, that the traditional community was always struggling against the colonial system, both in America and in Canada. And there was a time in which Rick's generation and people then were asked by the traditional chiefs to get educated, to go to the universities, to get their degrees so that they could help them dealing with the colonial system. So Rick went and is very highly educated, but highly educated in the traditional knowledge as well.

Adrian: And so because of that engagement with education and with the traditional knowledge, he was a liaison and very innovative in his approaches, willing to say, "how can we live this relationship out now in our work?"

VO: *It was over lunch with Rick that an idea came about that planted a seed in Adrian - and it started with Rick asking Adrian a simple question.*

Adrian: He said, "Do the churches pay taxes?" And I knew he was referring to property taxes. And I said, "No." He says, "Great. Wouldn't it be great if the churches, if we had a spiritual covenant with the churches where they could acknowledge Six Nation jurisdiction over their lands, their church lands, they could pay a token lease payment, which was the original idea of leasing the land when we first got it in 1784, and they could continue their spiritual work and if they ever decommissioned, the land could revert back to Six Nations." So it was like those words were burned into my heart at that time. And I began that conversation in 2007 with the Mennonite constituency. And so that's where this all began, and that conversation has continued to blossom from that place.

Bringing the covenant to churches

Adrian: Well, I took the conversation to the Mennonite community beginning with Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church, and described what Rick was talking about, and there was immediate resonance with it and made a lot of sense, and there was excitement. And some people, one person actually rose up and said, "What if a thousand of us homeowners, not just churches but homeowners, would have a spiritual covenant with Six Nations and paid a token lease payment?" So there was this enthusiasm, there was resonance with the idea and it was hopeful.

The idea of spiritual covenant was the language of Rick Hill. So it comes from the traditional community. It's not something that was dreamed up by myself or because I was trying to make it a Christian document. It was the words that he said. That comes from an understanding of the Haudenosaunee traditional value system encoded in Wampum belts. When we first encountered the Dutch in 1613, we established a two row Wampum and we described how our relationship would be.

VO: A wampum belt is a wide belt made of beads strung together and was often used by Haudenosaunee to document treaties and other diplomatic documents. The Two Row Wampum is a treaty with the Dutch that has two lines of purple beads running parallel to each other, representing the canoe (representing the Haudenosaunee) and the ship (which was the colonial Dutch people) and how they would live separately, but equally on the land, not interfering with or trying to steer the other's vessel.

Adrian: It was never ever about the sale of land. It was all about respect for the land and responsibility to the land and then how we would treat each other as peoples.

Adrian: We utilise the phrase, "as long as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, as long as the river flows downriver, as long as the grass grows, this is how long this agreement is in place." That's covenant language. And so that was what was necessary to convey to people to let them know that this is not a contract that can be broken. It's not something that is lightly given and you just walk away from it. But it's a commitment that you are going to keep not only to your generation, but to the generations that come.

VO: I asked Adrian if there was any pushback, or criticism of this idea.

Adrian: I never received pushback directly because whenever I talked to people about it, they were all excited. The pushback that I heard of, only by secondhand, was from lawyers in the churches and sometimes there were politicians, councilmen, et cetera, who were in the churches. And immediately because of the kind of public nature of media and the bent of the stories that were being told about Indigenous occupiers of the land, protesters, etc, there was a negative bias towards our people protecting the land.

So we had to do a lot to try to reverse that perception by talking about being land defenders, that we never surrendered this land in the first place. So it was actually Canada occupying the territories that are ours.

Long journey at Stirling

Pam Albrecht: My name is Pam Albrecht. I am a member here at Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church, and I'm part of the Spiritual Covenant working group.

VO: Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church, as Adrian mentioned earlier, is the first church that Adrian visited in his new role with MCC, educating the 26 Mennonite churches on the Haldimand Tract about the history of the land, the treaties, and the ways in which the federal government misappropriated the land promised to the Six Nations. Pam wasn't at Stirling back in that first round of sharing with Adrian, but as the conversation has progressed - and stalled - at different times over the years, the seed that Adrian planted was slowly but surely sprouting.

Pam: A commitment to, and a desire to move forward with reconciliation was something that felt universal for those who participated anyway in the process.

Pam: I think that was also, there was real common ground in wanting to ensure that the way we do that is a way that won't cause more harm. We want to be intentional and careful, recognizing that if we commit to something, it's going to be really important to follow through on that commitment because not doing that could cause more harm.

VO: But like any church discernment process, there were questions and different perspectives on other parts of the conversation.

Pam: Some of the things maybe where we differed or things that just need further exploration, I think some feel that it's really important to understand "what are we trying to repair and does our response actually address that? Is it the right response for the harm that was done?", if that makes sense. As a group, we understand that there's been significant harm done, theft of land, theft of culture, theft of language sovereignty. I think some people at Stirling are probably ready to say, "Hey, there's been just broad injustice done here, so let's do something to address that," and others are wanting to understand a little better. I think like, "Okay, but what happened - if we're talking token lease payment, reparation payment, are we trying to address those larger issues or are we trying to address more specifically what happened on block two?"

VO: The Haldimand Tract was divided into six blocks. Waterloo County, where Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church sits, is in block two. Part of what Pam is describing is essentially, "OK, here on Block 2, Like Phil Monture said, technically we bought this land

fair and square. It's the Canadian government that was selling land that wasn't theirs, so shouldn't the government be the one making token lease payments, not us? ". Adrian has a great response to this:

Adrian: And my encouragement all the time to the churches was, you claim to be the conscience of the government. Oh, here's your chance to lead the way. Here's your chance to move forward with doing the right thing, and maybe the government will catch a drift that that's possible, and maybe they should be doing that as well.

VO: *There's also a way in which the Church has decidedly not been an innocent third party.*

Church accountability

Pam: Christian theology was used to justify what was happening during colonisation, right? I'm thinking about the doctrine of discovery. I'm thinking about ideas that Christians are superior to non-Christians, and so I think we need to do some reckoning around that. It may not have been us as individuals who did that, and we as individuals, I hope, don't believe that anymore, but at the same time, we're living with that legacy, right? And so I think it is, it's important for churches to address that because we have, and our theology has been used to perpetuate and to really justify a lot of these harms.

Pam: I've been part of the group of settlers, white people who have kind of woken up to a lot of this stuff, post Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I've had to do a lot of learning and unlearning since that time. It feels to me like this relationship between settlers and indigenous people here in this part of the world in Canada, it's foundational.

Pam: I think we tried to grapple with, or something that I, I'll speak for myself, is this grappling with this idea of my ancestors coming here looking for religious freedom and an opportunity to not have to be conscripted into armies and that kind of thing, and so there was a real benefit to my ancestors to having access to this land.

Listening to Stories

Adrian: So in trying to tell the Caledonia story, every time I've told that story, people say, "I didn't know that. I didn't realize that. I didn't know how extensive that was. How ubiquitous was the oppression or how many times this has happened, or how many land claims there are." So if you go to sixnations.ca, there are 29 land claims there, and there is a summary in a couple of their booklets that tell you exactly why this piece of land should still be in Six Nations hands.

Well, that's the story that doesn't get told. Now there's more to it than the small paragraph that is there, but it's the story that helps people begin to look at it from a different perspective.

(music break)

Describing First Strawberry Thanksgiving/Communion events

VO: Adrian saw the spiritual covenant as a way for the church to embrace this new perspective and to take real action.

Adrian: I was hoping that churches would just take that document that I had and then sign it, we're a part of it. And so I was hopeful for movement and acknowledgement, and I thought there should be a ceremonial way to acknowledge that, to bring people together, to talk about their commitment and then to demonstrate it. Because I was looking for justice, tangible justice. I was looking for something that said, "We're not just going to repent. We're not just going to be sorry. We're going to do something and here it is."

VO: To that end, Adrian, MCC and others organized an event back in 2007, a ceremony, that would bring churches and Six Nations together, to share in this vision of Spiritual Covenant together, to acknowledge the goals of token lease payments by churches to Six Nations, and if a church should ever close, that the property would revert to First Nations.

Adrian: And so I imagined that first event just to be an introduction, and I said the people that are going to come, it was mostly the Mennonite community at that time. I said they're going to come to us. They're not going to come to the church, they're going to come to us. So I set things up in a way that was inviting to our own community, familiar to us, and then invited the Mennonite community into that.

VO: Adrian came up with a brilliant way of combining a ceremony authentic to both Six Nations and to the Mennonite church, which is not known for having a lot of ceremony in its church life.

Adrian: I included communion from the standpoint of that's a joining together of Christians in recognition of the place of Christ, but also with thanksgiving, with the strawberry, we also had this idea that we would recognise all the provisions that the Creator has given to us and give thanks for it.

VO: Strawberry thanksgiving is an annual ceremony celebrated by the Haudenosaunee and many other First Peoples. It recognizes and gives thanks to Creator for the wild strawberry - the first fruit to ripen in the year.

Adrian: So for me, thanksgiving, communion, all of that just kind of fits together. And I was hoping that there would be a comfortable place for both our traditional community and the church to come together to pursue land justice together.

VO: Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church attended that first Strawberry Thanksgiving and Communion ceremony in 2007 and another in 2008. But it has been a long journey since then, with no churches officially signing on to the Spiritual Covenant. Pam Albrecht shares that at Stirling, it has taken multiple rounds of discussions and discernment over the years. MCC Ontario has also gone through similar cycles of energy and stagnation. But in recent years, there have been breakthroughs: Homewood, Hope Street, and Charleswood Mennonite Churches in Manitoba where Adrian also worked, have committed to annual token lease payments to Indigneous Organizations. And in 2024, seventeen years after the conversation started, Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church also committed to ongoing token lease payments to Six Nations, as did MCC Ontario.

[music break]

Token lease payments

Pam: Where we're at now, we, we've committed in our 2024 budget to allocating having a line for land justice with the understanding that's what we call it in our budget.

Pam: We had done a little bit of looking into what's an appropriate amount, and I think other communities that are having these kinds of discernments have looked at anything from 1% of an operating budget to 1% of their property value, so for us, 1% of our operating budget is about \$4,000, then also offered the opportunity and extended the invitation to individuals in the congregation to make additional donations directly to the spiritual covenant fund at Six Nations polytechnics, so that if people wanted to increase their own commitment, they could do that, but we had this one collective yes, that we as a congregation said, "Yes, we are doing this together."

[music break]

Connection to Land and People

Adrian: One of the things that I really have found to be true for myself, because I've known the long haul of injustice. I know all the details, I know many stories. I know many documents. I've read many books. I'm familiar with many circumstances and

situations, not just at Six Nations, but all around the world. I've been in touch with Indigenous people from around the world. We all face the same kinds of things. It is about land displacement. It's about disempowerment. It's about cultural loss and language loss. It's common, right around the world. So it can be overwhelming. And some people ask me, "What is it that actually helps you to survive in that, because it's so infuriating, the history?" And I always come back to the land and I always come back to our people and to our teachings and our language and all that that means, and how I understand that as a follower of Christ and because there is an intact community here at Six Nations, we're in the middle of a restoration of our ways of being. That is the place that gives strength to me, and I'm encouraged and renewed by it every time I'm engaged with it. So that's the thing that helps me move forward in the light of a very difficult reality.

Adrian: Yeah, I think that the beginning place for anybody to make fundamental changes is for them to listen to stories, as close to the source as possible. That was the effect of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Survivors got up and publicly told their stories, and people heard it directly from them. And they wept and their hearts were broken. And it made them receptive to what can we do about this, because obviously this is not right? So part of the journey has to be story.

VO: *Adrian has told his own story, and the story of Six Nations for many, many years and surely at times he must have wondered if the stories were sinking in, if the seeds he was sowing were falling on fertile soil.*

Adrian: Well, I am an educator. Somebody told me one time that it takes you hearing something 11 times before you remember it, and then somebody else added to that and said, "It takes 25 times to hear the same thing for it to become your thought." So I realize that it takes repetition. You need to read it, you need to hear it, you need to watch it, you need to talk with somebody, you need to have a discussion about it.

Adrian: there's always been like the initial excitement, and then people get nervous about doing something that may be affecting the system as is. And it's like the injustice is systemic. The solution must be systemic too.

VO: *In June of 2024, Adrian, together with Scott Morton-Ninomiya and Laurie Warkentin from MCC Ontario led the organizing of another Strawberry Thanksgiving and Communion - 15 years after the first one. It was held on the grounds of the Six Nations Polytechnic, where I spoke with Adrian. Over 150 people attended - a mix of Six Nations community members, and members of over 11 different Christian denominations in addition to a number of non-profit organizations. It was, in many ways, a rekindling of that original spark from 2006.*

Adrian: It's what Rick talked about, Six Nations and the churches meeting together in a place of unity, a place of pursuit of justice, tangible action being taken and celebration.

I hope we dance next time.

Conclusion

VO: I am so grateful to Adrian Jacobs for sharing his story with us, and for his gentle, prophetic, and persistent voice in inviting the Church into relationship and covenant. Thanks to Pam Albrecht, Josie Winterfeld, and the many others at Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church for nurturing this seed of covenant over the years, and to Homewood, Hope, and Charleswood Mennonite Churches in Manitoba for your steps in entering covenant with First Nations there. Thanks to my colleagues Scott Morton-Ninomiya and Laurie Warkentin for taking up Adrian's call and supporting both the Spiritual Covenant and the Strawberry Thanksgiving and Communion celebration. Mark your calendars for June 14 2025 and join us for the next one! Between now and then, use the resources in the show notes to start the conversation within your church and community.

This episode was produced with editing support from Christen Kong. Theme song is by Brian MacMillan; A huge thank you to Jonathan Maracle for use of the closing song you heard before the credits called "Holy is Yahweh". Check out brokenwalls.com to learn more about Jonathan's powerful story and ministry. Undercurrents artwork by Jesse Bergen. Huge thanks to Kindred Credit Union for their ongoing support of Undercurrents. And of course, thank you for listening and sharing. If you have any comments or reflections about this episode, please share them with me at podcast@mcco.ca - I really value your feedback. My name is Ken Ogasawara, have a great rest of your day.