



INDIGENOUS VOICES OF FAITH

MARILYN CROWCHILD

Interview by Andrew P.W. Bennett
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CARDUS
PERSPECTIVES



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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 Marilyn Crowchild in Calgary on November 4, 2022.

Interview Transcript

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Marilyn, thank you so very much for participating in this project. It's wonderful to meet you. And just to kick off our interview, tell me a little bit about yourself, your Indigenous background, what you do, your family, that sort of thing.

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Well, I work full time out in the Tsuut'ina Nation, and then I have prayer meetings out there once a week. My family and my background is Blackfoot First Nation. God just called me at a very young age and to my faith walk.

I also thought this would be very fitting to give you a little bit of my background.



FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. So here in a photo is King Charles when he was Prince of Wales, holding a pipe along with an Indigenous elder. What was the occasion, Marilyn?

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Yes, this was my grandpa, and it was a ceremony in 1977 marking the one-hundredth anniversary of the signing of the peace treaty with Treaty 7 peoples.¹ Canada is a peaceful country, and we signed the peace treaties back then to enable peace, to bring peace.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. So you have deep roots in that First Nation then with your grandfather. Was he chief at that time?

MARILYN CROWCHILD: No, no, he wasn't a chief. He just sat in there.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Tell me a little bit, Marilyn, about your Christian faith, what church you're part of. Tell me a little bit about its role in your life.

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Well, when you contacted me, I immediately prayed about it. I mean, anything that is brought up or anything where there is an agenda, I always bring God into it and I pray about it and I ask God what does he want me to share? What does he want me to speak on? Because ultimately, first, he's my King, he's my Lord, he's my leader. So whatever he calls me to do, I just faithfully go forward and do that. So what he has put on my heart was to share Psalm 86. And I believe that's just like a prayer starter for the First Nations. And what God puts on my heart is to encourage others. We come to God and we trust in him. We believe in him. He's our Yeshua. He's Jehovah. He's the God who provides. He's the God who anchors, who makes a way.

¹ Treaty 7 was the last of the various Numbered Treaties reached between the Dominion government and the Plains First Nations. It was signed by the Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, Stoney-Nakoda, and Tsuut'ina.

He's God. He's the Creator. Like it says in the book of Genesis, he created the heavens and the earth. He's our Creator, and so we must first believe and come to him, he that ultimately exists, and be diligent. That's the one thing he puts on our heart. And what he wants me to talk about is to be diligent, to be diligent in seeking the Lord. He's the rewarder of those who earnestly seek him, as it says in Hebrews 11:6. But let's go back to Psalms 86:8–17. I'll just state that, but I won't read through it, but that's the beginning of the prayer he wants to say to all First Nations. That's a prayer covering for them to come to God, to come and believe in him.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful.

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Yeah. Hebrews 11:6, we must first believe that he is God and that he exists. So we have to be diligent in seeking the Lord and need to be consistent in prayer also. We can't just say one prayer and then just expect it to be done. We need to be faithful and pray daily. Daily. He says pray all the time when we're at work, when we're cooking, when we're cleaning the house, whatever it is, we need to be faithful in prayer. And it could be just in practical ways. We just come to God and we say, "God, I need you." Or we say just those simple words, "God, help." It's just simple like that. He says that when we seek him, we shall find him, and he's going to hear our prayers. As he was with Moses, he's going to be with us also. As when he was with Abraham, the father of nations, he's going to be with us also, because he has been there since the beginning of time.

He has plans for our life, and he's going to be there through all of our lives, through all our days, until he calls us home. So right now it's just simple, simple. See, God, he's not looking for somebody who's perfect. He's not looking for everybody who's got all their ducks in a row. He's not waiting to get your accounting on the line to see if you have all your numbers in order. God knows all that. And he's just looking for somebody to say yes, just a simple yes. Trust in him and say yes, and he's going to work everything out. Right? In Matthew 6:33 he says, "All these things shall be added unto you." When we seek him, he's going to add all these things on to us. He's going to prepare the path, he's going to permit our footsteps to establish our paths, to make every crooked path straight, to order our footsteps.

We must put our trust in him daily, building that relationship, and say, "God, what do you have for me to do today? What do you want for me to do today?" Because we're all part of a servanthood. We serve. We serve each other. We serve one another, love one another, our brethren, and seek God. The only way it's going to work is if we build a relationship with God and then we go forward from there.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And this is true for all people, including First Nations people?

MARILYN CROWCHILD: To seek the Lord? Well, if they want to come to know the Lord, it would be up to them. But what God has put on my heart when I started my ministry and started walking with God was that I needed to surrender everything to him. And I have. I surrendered and I trusted him, and there was a spiritual battle between my spirit and the flesh. But once God had brought me through that and I came to God, and he worked things out for me. What he put on my heart at that

time was, “I’m calling you into the First Nations. Come and love the First Nations, come and love your people.” And so when I pray for my people and I go out there to Tsuut’ina and I minister to other people whom he put on my heart, he said, “Love them just as Christ has loved the church. Forgive one another just as Christ has forgiven us, and he’ll forgive us of our sins.” And he said he’s going to break every chain. He’s the God who delivers; he’s the God who anchors. He sustains, and he’s just there for us.

What he put on my heart at that time was, “I’m calling you into the First Nations. Come and love the First Nations, come and love your people.”

FR. DCN. ANDREW: So tell me about how that walk began. Were you raised in the church, or did you come to that later in life? Tell me a little bit about your own personal history as a Christian.

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Well, my family, they were Catholic. They’re still Catholic. So we were brought up in a Catholic way. And at the same time, in the traditional way. We had sweat lodges, we prayed with the sweet grass, and we grew up with the cultures and the different things, and we learned our language in

the school. But just coming into my teens, it just wasn’t enough. I just felt like there was a piece missing in my life, and I didn’t quite know what it was. And I met a guy and he told me, he said, “Tell me about your God.” And so I told him, and he said, “Well, let me tell you about my God. I’ll tell you about my Creator.” And when he told me about his Creator, it just inspired me, because he said, “My Creator answers my prayers.”

And I said, “Oh, okay.” So, I listened to him as he spoke, and then he said, “My Creator is Jesus, and I’m Christian.” And so that kind of just sat with me for a while, but I pondered about it as the days went on. One day somebody in my family got sick, and I came and I went to go smudge with the sweet grass. And my prayers weren’t answered. I didn’t see any results. They were still sick. And so I came back to them and smudged the second time, and still nothing. I didn’t see any results. And so I remembered what that guy told me. He said, “My Creator, my God, answers my prayers.” So I thought, well, I’ll try this. So I came, and I was standing at my window and I looked and I said, “God, if you’re real, please answer my prayers.” It wasn’t a prayer for myself, it was a prayer for the sick.

And I prayed, and I offered my prayer and my faith, and I said, “God, please heal them.” And they were healed. And that’s when I saw the results, and that’s when I came to God and I said, “He’s the God who answers my prayers, and I’m going to stick with him.”

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And how old were you at that time?

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Probably fifteen or sixteen.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wow.

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Yeah.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: So tell me a bit about the Christian community you're part of now. Tell me a little bit about your church.

MARILYN CROWCHILD: My church? Well, see, the church is not just a building. I mean, on the contrary, it's the body of Christ. It's the church. We need to build one another up. I mean, churches are good and fellowship is good, and I agree with that. But at the same time, it's out there. It's the sick, it's the lame, it's the mute, it's the needy who need the people of the body of Christ to go out there and minister to others and to do outreach work. And that's the kind of thing that God had put on my heart: to reach those who are suffering, reach those who need prayers, because not all of them have vehicles. Not all of them have money or bus passes to make it to their church. So he sends the people out there to go and minister to them, to bring the church to them.



So, that's the thing God has put on my heart. And I think that goes back to the time when Jesus said, "Which of you if you having a son or an ox who fell in the well on a Sunday, on the Sabbath day, wouldn't you go down and rescue him and bring him up?" Yeah. So, that's the kind of thing that sticks with me. And so that's why I go out there. I minister to the people, and I'm so thankful, because God has just put a grace on it that

when I go out there to minister to people, they listen. He's put this on my heart. He says, "I'll put the word in your mouth. I'll fill you up. And you go out there and minister to them, and you don't worry about if they're going to accept it or not. I'm going to work that out for them."

So I believe, and I trust in God what I share as an evangelist, in speaking to others. God pours into them, and God is going to work that out, that because after you share it it's between God and them now. Now it's between them. Yeah. We just provide.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And so is there in Tsuut'ina First Nation a congregation that you're a part of, or do you lead worship there on Sundays? What does that look like?

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Well, right now I just go anywhere God calls me. See, he's my high chief, he's my high priest. I answer to him. If he calls me to go to Siksika, or he tells me to go to Morley, or he tells me to go to Bocket and Eden Valley, or anywhere he tells me to go, I go. That's my high rank, so I answer to him, and go where he calls me to go. There is the St. Barnabas Church out in the Tsuut'ina Nation, and we get together there for prayers. When they have prayers in the community or funerals and things like that where they need us to get together, when they invite me, I go out there and I help them out. So anywhere they want me to go and help out, I'm there.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. Tell me how you integrate First Nations culture with your Christian faith. Do you follow a particular Christian tradition like Pentecostal or evangelical? What does that look like to you?

MARILYN CROWCHILD: I mean, I just go and do what God calls me to do. I can't really label it. I mean, I didn't even know I was an evangelist until somebody came and told me. They said that we see you as an evangelist. All I knew is I just wanted to go out there and share the word. I was just hungry to reach the people and hungry for prayer and spending time with God and seeing this plan that he's going to unveil and go forth for the days to come. It says in Jeremiah 29:11, "For he knows the plans he has for us, declares the Lord, plans to prosper us and not to harm us, plans to give us a hope and a future." So, I just answer him and how he calls me while going forward with First Nation tradition. I mean, I don't get too involved in those kind of things, but I respect and I continue to preach the gospel to my aunties, to my uncles, and my family.

I thank Jesus because he has given me a grace to open up those homes and those doors to allow me to go into people's homes. And they've accepted and listen and heard the gospel. What Yeshua speaks is a direct connection from God through us, through the vessel. When he pours in us and he fills our cup, it's for us to go out there and fill up others. We're not to be selfish. God didn't call us to be selfish. If he puts a calling on our life, it's to go out there and do what God has called us to do.

I pray for truth and reconciliation. I pray that there is a coexistence. We have been coexistent since the beginning of time. Jesus loves us all.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: And you said a little bit about this earlier on, Marilyn, but what would you say is the calling of First Nations people when they hear the gospel preached? What are they being called to do in terms of having that relationship with Christ?

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Well, it depends what reserve you go to. I mean, each reserve and each culture is different, but if you go in there with respect and you go in there showing a respect to one another, respect to the elders, because everybody has a different opinion. But I believe when God has ordained somebody, like when he ordained Moses and he ordained Abraham and others, he just makes a way for that. He makes a way for them and for his children to be

those bridge makers, and God's looking for somebody to stand in the gap, to work with him to reach the people. And that's what we should do. He does the work on the inside of us first and then on the outside for our family, our friends, and then the world. John 3:17, he didn't send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world, to save them because he loved them.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: There's so much conversation now in the country broadly about reconciliation, forgiveness between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. Given your ministry, what role do you see your ministry having in that process of reconciliation?

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Just again, trusting in God. Continue to preach the gospel, bring out the Word of God. I have a friend who comes to bring me Bibles. I honestly don't know where she gets them, but one day I'll come home from work and I'll have a big box of Bibles sitting on my porch. And I'm thankful for that, because when I travel, I bring out the Word. And even though some of the Bibles may be gently used, I accept them because the Word is the Word, just like currency is currency. Doesn't matter how old a dime is, you can still go spend it anywhere. Right?

The Word is the Word. So that's what I do and continue to go forward. I pray for truth and reconciliation. I pray that there is a coexistence. We have been coexistent since the beginning of time. Jesus loves us all. It doesn't matter what country they come from, where they live. Jesus has called us to work together, and he's going to knit us together to work with one another, to build up the body of Christ. That's the main goal, is building up the body of Christ for the nation so that she is without blemish.

FR. DCN. ANDREW: Wonderful. Thank you very much. I appreciate your time and for your witness and all of your service. God bless you.

MARILYN CROWCHILD: Thank you.

Photos taken by Rev. Dr. Andrew P. W. Bennett.