

# The Bishop who binds where the Church was undone

Barbara Andrews knows how much hurt the Church in Canada caused the indigenous people. She is one of them. She talked to Sarah Meyrick

BISHOP Barbara Andrews is taking a sabbatical break from her duties as Bishop of the Territory of the People, part of the Anglican Church of Canada.

While her episcopal ministry normally entails being on the road for two weeks out of every four, travelling around the vast rural area that she serves (33 worshipping communities spread over 166,500 square kilometres — larger than England and Wales combined), she is currently spending three months in Chicago. For now, she is a student at the Catholic Theological Union, working on a project concerned with the reconciliation of indigenous people in the central interior of British Columbia.

“How can we have a truly indigenous Church within the Anglican Church of Canada?” she asks. “It’s a piece of work that still needs doing. It’s about hearing the voice of the grass-roots, not a theology that’s top-down, and feeding that into the conversation in Canada.”

It is a task that she is uniquely placed to undertake, at least in part because her father was a Cree Indian trapper from northern Alberta, conferring full-status heritage upon her.

THE Territory of the People, previously known as the Anglican Parishes of the Central Interior (APCI), was formed in 2002 after the dissolution of the diocese of Cariboo as a result of the legal claims made after the uncovering of abuse in residential schools.

The collapse of the diocese gave Anglicans in the area the chance to reinvent themselves. They are now, technically, an unincorporated division of the Provincial Synod of British Columbia and Yukon, under



First Nation status: Bishop Barbara Andrews, in St Paul’s Cathedral, Kamloops, British Columbia

the direct episcopal supervision of the Bishop Suffragan to the Metropolitan of the Province of BC and Yukon. This means that titles to the land and property belonging to the former diocese are now held in trust for the parishes and wider communities.

Their Assembly is deliberately weighted to ensure that First Nations people have the largest vote, and set the direction of the Church. Becoming a Territory in 2015 gave APCI the autonomy of a diocese without any of its former structures, thereby putting distance between the Church that remained and its unhappy past.

THE scandal of the residential schools is no academic matter for Bishop Andrews. First Nations people had no choice about sending their children to residential schools: parents were imprisoned if they refused. “My father and my brothers went to residential school,” she says. “I’m an intergenerational survivor of residential schools. We saw the loss of our language and culture, and experienced feelings of being inferior. [We were told that] our traditions and ways of life were pagan and savage. One of my brothers was sexually abused. And the education was substandard, too.”

The experience of her family has affected her deeply, but this has helped her to play a crucial part in reconciliation. “That’s all been part of the healing process. We’ve come to a place now where we can tell the story with deep appreciation and understanding.”

She herself grew up as a Roman Catholic in northern Alberta, because her mother was of British parentage. “I went to a Catholic school, but I had an awareness of native spirituality and traditions as well.”

Her family have now all moved back to traditional native spirituality. “When my mother died, two years ago, there was a full aboriginal service and pipe ceremony for her. But my family have been supportive [of her ministry]. They’ve said: ‘If you are going to be a leader in the Christian Church, be a good one.’”

“I understand their anger and their pain, and why their relationship with the Church is such. They try to understand what my position is, and I try to walk carefully. I participate in all their ceremonies, no differently, but I don’t lead them, because I am a leader in another tradition. I have no difficulty in moving back and forth.”

BARBARA ANDREWS was elected bishop in 2009. She has always had a passion for social justice. The first four years of her ordained ministry were spent working with First



**‘Some parishes are so isolated that they still pray for the King rather than the Queen’**

Nations people and alcoholics in a street project in inner-city Winnipeg. It was, she says, demanding and difficult work that gave her a real understanding of the challenges of urban living for indigenous people cut off from the Reserves; but, she says: “It was the making of me.”

Although she started her working life as a hairdresser, she traces her call to ordained ministry back to her childhood. “When I was about 12 years old, I had a deep desire to be a missionary in Red China. I became an Anglican on my marriage, in my early twenties. But when I told my mother I was seeking ordination, she wasn’t surprised.

“I would say the call came in the late 1980s or early 1990s, when I was working as the parish administrator of a large parish church: St George’s, Winnipeg. Two senior women came to me and said, ‘You should consider ordination.’ They were pretty persuasive. I said I would do the discernment process, and I began to explore the call. I would say it was more an unfolding than being hit over the head.”

SHE was ordained deacon in 1997, and priest in 1998. After her time in the street project, she became the director of Sorrento Centre Retreat and Conference Centre in British Columbia, where she spent eight years. From that post, she was elected bishop, to her great surprise. “I’d never thought of myself in episcopal ministry,” she says. “I’m a little country girl; I had no illusions of becoming a bishop. But, over the course of 24 hours, 15 people from the Central Interior phoned me and

asked to nominate me. It scared the heck out of me.”

In response, she contacted Archbishop David Crawley, and asked his advice. “He said, ‘I’ll be there in three hours.’ And when he arrived, he said, ‘In the end, you have to be able to imagine yourself in that position. What skills do you think you bring to this?’”

She was elected on the second ballot. There followed an unfortunate delay before her consecration, because of uncertainty about the status of the former diocese. “There were lots of questions over my consecration, and people asked: was it because I was First Nations? That was very hard. But it was procedural, not personal. It was not because of any objections in the House of Bishops, but [a matter of] seeking clarification of the non-diocesan status of APCI. We are an anomaly.”

EIGHT years on, she says that life in her Territory can be exhausting. There are only 14 priests in full-time ministry, five deacons, and a handful of retired clergy serving the entire area. Aside from the cities of Kamloops (population 90,000), where Bishop Andrews lives, and Prince George (population 73,000), the Territory is very rural. There are churches of ten to 12 people, up to congregations of 50 or 60. (She adds, in passing, that some of her parishes are so isolated that “they still pray for the King rather than the Queen.”) She has 18 hours a week of administrative support for the entire diocese.

“It’s very much front-line ministry,” she says. Parishes are largely run by the laity, and the clergy spend a great deal of time on the road, commonly spending half the week in one parish and the other half in another. “We’re longing for younger people,” she says, and would be delighted if any Church of England clergy were interested in ministry in the Territory.

Meanwhile, she will continue to champion the cause of a First Nations understanding of scripture. “When the European missionaries came here, they did a good job of teaching the theology and practices of the Church as it was 100 years ago, and it was, by and large, a colonial model. We haven’t done such a good job of helping First Nations people continue to grow. We need to re-engage people where they are today, to allow that voice from the indigenous perspective to be affirmed and raised up.”

“My stance is to try to get to the heart of the gospel as opposed to the cultural understanding and practices of the Church. I work hard at trying to get underneath to the message of the gospel, and reframe it for them.”