

Sisters and Brothers, greetings

My best Facebook joke of 2013 went like this. "I practice self-deprecation – but I'm not very good at it".

In honour of that I will skip the self-deprecatory introduction I was going to make. I am sure that the God who gives me breath to speak will make the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart something that edifies this assembly.

For those of you who don't know me, I am Peter, Christian Peacemaker Teams, fulltime member of the Aboriginal Justice Team. My perspective on the last year and my hopes for what is to come are all seen through the lens of what you might call 'indigenous-settler relations'.

For me, 2013 began with the climax of the Idle No More movement. Following grassroots organising throughout 2012 to respond to the government's removal of environmental protection from waterways, in winter protest and demonstration, Idle No More burst onto the national stage.

In fact, the international stage. Messages of support and solidarity came from around the world. One picture we hosted on the Aboriginal Justice Team Facebook page of CPTers from the Netherlands holding up signs in support got tens of thousands of 'likes'.

My perspective was an international one too, as I was back in the UK for the first weeks of the year and unable to experience the joy of sub-zero round dances, rallies in the snow, road and rail blockades and hunger strikes. Or was it a sacred fast? Or a liquid diet? Depends which media sources are interpreting the news to you.

Unlike folks here in Canada, I was indeed dependant on media to understand what was happening. I couldn't just attend a round dance or teach-in. Reading the coverage of the various manifestations of Idle No More, I noticed a lot of the same old patterns I have read in newspaper archives back to the 1970s. Racist & vitriolic ideas crop up with depressing regularity to misinterpret and dismiss indigenous voices. Let us not forget that this was an environment where one columnist was able to suggest that Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike was terrorism – sufficient proof for me that this word has lost all useful meaning.

Politics, politics, politics, right? What does this have to do with church? Where does the average Canadian come into this? Where, for that matter, does the exceptional Englishman come into this? I hope you won't consider it presumptuous if I say that we are all treaty people. I am here because of my passport. Whatever your immigration status, if you are here; you are in some kind of relationship to this land – and therefore, to the people of this land, mediated by treaty or lack thereof.

And that's way beyond politics, it is relationship. For lack of a better term, it's a matter of Spirit. And that's why the government of Canada will never get it right; because it is operating under the wrong spirit, a spirit of colonisation, not cooperation. The government of Canada is simply not equipped to operate on the spiritual level, and I don't think that it should be trying to.

It's a relationship that is best and most clearly understood as familial. And like all family relationships it can be awkward, inconvenient, tiring and transformative. And like family relationships it persists

whether we want it to or not. Just because parents don't appreciate the person their child falls in love with does not mean that they stop being parents and child.

Not that indigenous people and the Crown are in a parent-child relationship. If that myth survives, it needs to be quashed. I hope sometime in the past year you have heard term 'nation to nation relationship'. It describes a way of living together on the land in mutual respect, sharing but not dominating. Kind of like a marriage. Kind of like a covenant. And we Christians have a history full of covenant. We know about making them. We know about breaking them. We know about repentance and restoration.

In the current issue of CPT's newsletter Signs of the Times, I have an article on the centre page which addresses the church's specific place within these covenants. I encourage you to read it. If you didn't get one last week in your mailbox – I have more.

You see, the 'nation-to-nation' ideal is not working at the highest levels. The Crown that signed the treaties in our name as an equal to the existing indigenous governments no longer recognises those governments as equals, but as subject peoples, wards of the state.

So this October, with financial support from this congregation, I went to London with a delegation of elders, chiefs and veterans from First Nations in Saskatchewan. As well as Mennonite Church Canada, the Anglican Church of Canada was ably represented by the National Indigenous Bishop Mark McDonald and Mohawk elder and churchwoman Leona Moses.

We were there to mark the anniversary of the Royal Proclamation of 1763. This was the first international recognition of indigenous land rights in Turtle Island (North America).

One thing I have learned from indigenous peoples is the skill of politely but firmly assuming the most positive interpretation of history and holding that interpretation open as an invitation.

For example, the Royal Proclamation. Even though a purpose of the document was to set a framework for the assimilation of indigenous territories into the Empire, the fact is that it laid the foundation for treaty making instead of outright theft. Therefore, we are invited to live out that early promise of mutual treaty relationship. It is an invitation.

The government is not accepting the invitation. It is unable to accept indigenous governments as having equal sovereignty. It can only treat indigenous peoples as wards. I don't blame the current elected officials for this; it is implicit in the structure they inherited. Rectifying this will take the efforts of communities with greater vision than the next election cycle.

But the nation-to-nation relationship is not primarily a relationship between two governments. It is between two peoples. And this is the invitation. Will the peoples of this landmass relate to each other as peers, sharing gifts and teachings and enjoying this land together?

As a peace activist I find this awkward to admit, but it must be said. In London, the Crown in the person of Prince Charles failed to meet the chiefs. The church in the person of the Archbishop of Canterbury failed to meet the elders. But the military met with the veterans. There was a sense of common purpose and solidarity between soldiers that modelled respect and mutuality.

And that's where I see hope for the future. Not at the top, but at the grassroots; when different groups share a common cause, such as Acadian, Anglophone and Mi'kmaq communities coming together to resist fracking in New Brunswick this summer. When people come together to protect the land they love, they build true relationships.

My social strategy for 2013 was simple. "Go to things people invite you to, invite people to things you are going to". That's how CPT works, building partnerships to transform violence and oppression. CPT looks for those invitations, and when we get them, we invite others to join us on a delegation or project, to share the work, the story, the community.

I have learned the power of the invitation. That's what is on the table now; gracious invitation, which does not forget the past, does not disregard present need and suffering, but which offers space to one and all to participate in the movement toward liberation and justice.

Sound like any God you know?

Jesus invites us to partner with him in the redemption of creation. He has done the work; he is doing the work, but for some reason it is not complete until we take our place within it.

And we reach out to others to invite them into the work. And we make space in our community just as God made space in that ragtag rebel nation called Israel for us to participate.

I think about the relationships this congregation has sought and fostered over its history. Relationships with refugees and persecuted sisters and brothers around the world. We are living out that history in our new building project and the idea of using the new space for mission purposes; to house vulnerable people or a family facing deportation.

I think about the FossilFreeMenno campaign, which I will be inviting you into in the New Year, asking Mennonite Church Canada to divest from fossil fuel companies that are afflicting indigenous peoples at home and abroad.

I think about naming the indigenous people of the territory where we worship; naming it in our welcome, in our bulletin.

They are small and large things. They are the invitations before us right here, right now. They are where hope begins.