

STRATEGY FOR EVANGELIZING NATIVE AMERICANS

IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

12/1/04

PROFILE OF THE NATIVE AMERICANS

General Background

The men and women who greeted Columbus and other earlier explorers who came to this continent are known now as Native Americans. These original residents, apparently descendants of people who earlier crossed the land bridge connecting present-day Siberia and Alaska, were following their food sources. Eras of time and several migrations of different groups of people brought as many as 1,200 different tribes to the continents of North and South America.

Each migration included people with new language patterns. Presently, there are at least 250 languages or dialects in North America alone.

The environment played a major role in determining a primary means of subsistence and the development of life and culture. Groups living where game was plentiful became hunters; groups living near water became fishermen; others gathered food and lived off the land.

Methods or styles of communal living were just as diverse. In some communities, tight political systems maintained rigid control over the people. Other groups had very loose structures, perhaps extending only to their own family or clan (a large extended family). When we speak of Native Americans, we are speaking of an extremely diverse people. Perhaps the major unifying factors are a deep soul-to-soil kinship and a common struggle relating to American culture and society.

Until 1887, the primary focus of the U.S. Government in relation to Native Americans was on the policy of removal. In theory, they were being protected by resettlement on places called reservations where they would be isolated from the rest of society. In reality, this became a method for removing them from land that others wanted for their own ranching and agricultural purposes.

In 1887, Congress passed the Dawes Act. This became essentially an attempt to do away with the Indian "problem" by "mainstreaming" the native peoples into the rest of society. It was actually "forced" assimilation. Forcing the people to cut tribal ties and leave communities and customs was very hard on them and many suffered emotionally and psychologically. Each head of a household was given 160 acres of land on which to learn farming and eventually support himself and his family. Shrewd land speculators bought (stole) this land cheaply. The Indians lost 86 million acres of land this way, and 90,000 were left homeless.

In 1934 Congress passed the Wheeler-Howard Act which reverted to the reservation option giving the Indian limited control over the land and the development of a Native American life-style. This act moved the Native Americans back again toward a separation status. Today, some tribes have sued the federal government to acquire sovereign and independent status based on former treaty rights.

World War II took a number of Native Americans off the reservations and many of these gained a much broader world view. President Eisenhower's relocation program in the 50s opened opportunities for life in urban settings for those who wanted to leave the reservation and thus began a dramatic process of change in culture and lifestyle.

Today, the U.S. government has a policy of “self-determination,” so each tribe can decide its direction. Throughout this struggle Native Americans have neither fully assimilated nor died out, and though different from the original culture have managed to maintain an identity.

Indian society emphasizes the extended family where the elderly are revered and group identity is valued more than individuality. Possessions are shared by all and work is for the purpose of meeting needs.

In each decade there is a 40% growth in the Native American population. Over five million Indians live equally divided between the United States and Canada. In the United States there are 530 tribes and 800 reservations in both countries. More than half of the population resides in urban areas. The urban Indian is different from the reservation Indians or the marginally assimilated. Unlike other groups who cluster together in communities, Native Americans are usually scattered throughout the city, most commonly in the poorer areas. Years of broken promises and having their lives controlled by others, has nurtured a hopeless and helpless attitude which has fostered serious social problems among American Indians.

Half of all Native Americans in the U.S. live in the four states of Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma and California, with the highest percentage in Alaska (15%). The Navajos represent the largest tribe with 150,000 living on the Navajo and Trust Lands in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. Over 600 cities in the United States have at least 400 Indian people living in them. Approximately 40,000 Indians still speak only their native tongue while a half million are bilingual. The median age for Native Americans is 20.

Sadly, the social ills of the Native American population have expressed themselves in poignant statistics indicating that there is triple the rate of deaths from all accidents including motor-vehicles compared to the population as a whole, double the rate of homicides, pneumonia, diabetes, and suicide, and seven times the rate of alcoholism and tuberculosis. It is well worth noting that “reservation” Indians, “marginal” Indians and “urban” Indians hold somewhat different world views and contrasting attitudes and lifestyles.

Religious Heritage

Native Americans are generally very religious people who participate in many types of ceremonies and rituals. Their interest in spiritual and supernatural matters accounts for the many cults and sects, denominations, and organization which operate missions outreach among them. The Native American Church (peyote religion) and the American Indian Movement emphasize tradition and culture that occasionally conflict with the beliefs of Christianity. Also, occult and demonic oppression have a great influence on Native American peoples.

Culturally, the medicine man, peyote meetings, native religious beliefs, some powwows, debates over sacred burial grounds, and the “sweat lodge” may hinder the progress of the gospel. Extreme distances between the people make it increasingly difficult to effectively evangelize and cultivate discipleship.

For the first time in 400 years, Native Americans have the opportunity to truly have a voice in determining their own destiny. There is a renewal of interest in rediscovering “roots.” This renewal, combined with a continued interest in traditional religious beliefs and practices, has stimulated a resurgence of interest in spiritual heritage. On the other hand, the rush to gambling enterprises for economic development has opened up this vice both for its moral corruption and for its skewed financial power in the community.

The Nazarene Church first opened up a mission in 1929 in Wakefield, Rhode Island with Rev. Chester Smith. A decade later, Rev J.W. Short helped established three missions in Oklahoma. Shortly thereafter, the first Navajo mission was begun in Gallup, New Mexico. In 1944, the General Board of the Church of the Nazarene authorized the formation of the North American Indian District, now called the Southwest Native American District with 39 established churches. Fourteen other churches are located on regular districts, including five of these on the Southwest Oklahoma District.

The Nazarene Indian Bible College was established in 1948 as an educational agency to help young people develop in their personal Christian experience and prepare them for Christian service, Six year later it was

relocated to Albuquerque, NM and is now affiliated with Nazarene Bible College in Colorado Springs, CO. Sun Valley Schools was founded in 1962, ministering to Native American elementary and secondary students.

The Missional Task of Evangelizing Native Americans

General Suggestions:

Recognize the cultural context of Native American life. Even though it may appear that Native Americans are assimilated, their cultural heritage still holds a great deal of influence. In many ways, the Indian culture, at times, seems to be an antithesis of American culture and surviving in a dualistic world can be very difficult.

Understand that the “reservation,” “marginal” and “urban” Indians have very differing needs. The former will probably best be ministered to in the cultural context while the latter may not wish to identify him/herself as Indian and is seen as an “apple,” red on the outside but white on the inside.

See the great variety of Native American cultures, recognizing that the tribal affiliation and identity is very important even though the Indian may be very racially mixed. With the special government designations, programs, etc., that affiliation may be significant for access to resources not available to the general public.

Affirm many of the positive qualities of the Native American philosophy of life, their respect for the land, for each other, for authority. Their tribal identity has deep parallels with Old Testament Judaism, as does their communal responsibility. While the dominant society is time- and goal-oriented, the Indian places value on harmony and a sense of rhythm in all aspects of life. While the dominant society usually places great value on being outgoing, talkative and aggressive, the Indian is more deferential. Attitudes on sharing rather than exclusive personal possession are held by most Native Americans. All these qualities find meaning and connection within the Christian context and should be appreciated as such.

Admit the harm and brutality that has historically been done to the Native American population, and seek politically advocacy for a fair redressing of their issues. Don't suppress or discard that history but acknowledge it in a spirit of humility and hope.

THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR THE DISTRICT IS TO:

- Determine whether the context needs a church planting strategy in one of two forms: sending a pastor into the community with the intent of planting a church among Native Americans in that community; or developing a ministry within the structure of an existing church already in the community. Many Indians will not want a separate ethnic community.
- Coordinate ministry projects to Native American with the local church pastor and the total ministries of the local church.
- Contact Multicultural Ministries for advice or for the name of a Native American consultant who can give direction.

- Where necessary, contact tribal or community officials to gain permission to start a new church, using where possible a Native American for such contact.
- Invite a Native American to inform the local church or district of Native American ministry opportunities.
- Develop projects for Native American ministries in other parts of the country. Send a “Work and Witness” team to such a location.
- Organize a strategy for the ministry to over two million “First Nations” peoples in Canada for which there is little Nazarene ministry.
- Offer scholarships for leadership/ministry development for Native Americans to attend the Nazarene Indian Bible College or Nazarene Bible College, or whatever level is appropriate.

THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH IS TO:

- Recognize that for many Native Americans, religion permeates their culture. A Christian faith needs to be inculcated that offers the same integrative message that touches the whole of life. Identify those religious compatibilities with native beliefs and practices, expanding on them from a Christian perspective, rather than tossing out all foundations of their native faith. Don’t obligate Indians to abandon culture, family, and tribe to become Christian. Rather, allow those linkages to become points of evangelism, especially in the context where often decisions are made in groups rather than individualistically.
- Note also, that many Indians tend to have a legalistic concept of Christianity and may be frustrated with abstract spiritual concepts. They seek simple answers to spiritual questions. Offer a Christianity that is practical, and possible within their context.
- Acknowledge that Native Americans are generally “suspicious” about the “white man’s religion,” made even more sensitive under the current drumbeat of a resurgent appeal to native practices and ways of life. Don’t unnecessarily create hostility by arguing about historical and cultural practices. Admit their importance, stressing the Biblical aspects of the faith rather than North American versions of it.
- Do research on the presence of Native Americans in your community. Go to their institutions and inquire about their lifestyles, activities and needs. Where there is an active presence of Native Americans, determine which of the three categories they find themselves in: reservation, marginal or urban. The category may determine the nature of the ministry that should be designed.

- Ask the following questions: Is this church on the reservation, a border town, or urban setting? Will it be an extended family situation? What are its tribal ties, etc? Is there a critical mass that might determine a specific ministry context?
- Make friends with Native American neighbors.
- Address specific needs such as food, clothing, medical, etc. Because there are government and non-governmental agencies and resources particularly attuned to Native American needs, a broad knowledge of these resources can be very helpful for referral services. However, don't just send people. Take them. With material assistance, offer also friendship, counsel, community, and most importantly, Jesus.
- Form Native American fellowships that offer structure but do so informally. These fellowships should be lively and free and should take advantage of their love for art and music.
- Develop compassionate ministries in the following target areas: 1) ministries to children and youth; 2) programs to help overcome the problems fostered by acute drug and alcohol abuse and the corresponding dysfunctional lifestyle for both individuals and families; and 3) alternatives provided by churches to alleviate extreme economic problems. Day care, 12 Step programs and financial planning seminars may be particularly useful.
- Provide space in the local church for Native Americans to meet.
- Hold Native American cultural events open to the public.