

Perspective Digest

Volume 6 | Number 2

Article 10

4-1-2001

Operation Indian Hug

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Recommended Citation

Schwisow, Edwin A. (2001) "Operation Indian Hug," *Perspective Digest*. Vol. 6 : No. 2 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol6/iss2/10>

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OPERATION INDIAN HUG

**After decades of failure, the white man wised up,
and look what's happening!**

The shudder of the Cessna as it plows through the Arctic-cold cumulus does nothing to stifle the talkative pilot, as he shouts over the drumbeat of the engine.

“So you’re an Adventist minister. We’ve seen a lot of you guys lately.”

He pauses to adjust the controls as a low-pressure trough buffets the plane. Below, a vast body of ink-blue Alaskan water heralds further turbulence to come.

“It seems that every time I fly out a missionary or minister from another church, one of you guys comes in to take his place. Things must be going real good for your church up here.”

It is. As never before, native

Americans are being touched by the wonders of a compassionate, loving, soon-returning Saviour. During the past 12 years their membership in the Northwest has increased more than 1,000 percent! Had the rest of the church kept pace, we would have nearly one million members in the North Pacific Union rather than the 83,000 on record!

How did it all happen?

In 1989 union leaders, working with the Canadian Union and the North American Division, faced up to the Berlin-like wall that decades of prejudice against the “white-man’s

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When a church member falls off the wagon, something wonderful happens. Members gather around the fallen warrior and encourage him to be strong. They pray with him, care for him, and make him feel welcome, accepted, and, especially important, respected!

religion” had erected between Native Americans and the white man. Within their territory were five million Native Americans—1.3 million in the Pacific Northwest and 3.7 million in western Canada. Out of much study and prayer came Native Ministries Northwest. Monte Church, an Adventist minister of Mohawk descent, was elected to head it.

Shortly after, Adventist Eskimos of Alaska organized a small-boat flotilla to carry “Operation Bearhug” to Siberia. Little did they realize how taking this step of faith into the sea would impact their own souls! During the early 1990s, Monte Church became one of the earliest and most prolific American evangelists to speak to native Asian people, who by blood and culture are closely tied to the native peoples of Alaska and Canada.

Church’s experience in Russia confirmed what he had always believed in his heart—that a highly culture-sensitive approach is required for the gospel to reach the millions of Native Americans with convicting power.

Says Church: “These are people who for generations have been warned against the white man and his ways. Today’s native Americans are survivors who are determined not to repeat the past.”

Church knew that within the native American value system all insights are expressed through stories. So he recast traditional evangelistic topics into this mode. Adventist Christianity, he determined, must be presented as the answer to the deepest yearnings of the native American soul.

During the past 12 years, growth of the work among native Americans has propelled the church into a new role: training spiritual mentors, leaders, and pastors. Today, instead of three, there are 32. While a few have taken theological studies, most training has been in a practical rather than academic setting. The results speak for themselves.

One example is Don Harris, a former rodeo hero and Baptist/Pentecostal preacher, who joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church a few

years back (see page 20). Now a prolific evangelist, he advertises his meetings with the slogan, "Good Ol' Country Preaching." Under a photo of Harris and his horse is the subtitle, "Sharing the Gospel Cowboy-Style." Harris's schedule is full into the year 2002.

Change does not come easy for Native Americans, who have often found comfort in a bottle of alcohol. Like a turncoat companion, however, the bottle quickly changes from friend to fiend, from comforter to confiner, from joy-bringer to jailer. Reclaiming natives who have a history of addiction takes a great deal of love and patience.

Says Church: "When a church member falls off the wagon, something wonderful happens. Members

gather around the fallen warrior and encourage him to be strong. They pray with him, care for him, and make him feel welcome, accepted, and, especially important, respected!

"With this kind of treatment, the member is soon back in church, sober and grateful for the mercies of Jesus Christ and His church. Our native members feel a strong calling to heal the hurting and bind the wounds of the fallen. If we were to exhibit the same compassion in our non-Native churches, closing ranks around the fallen rather than shunning them, wouldn't the Lord be glorified?"

Have the past few years been simply a passing solar flare on the radar screen of Native work? "No," says Church. "The best days are still ahead!" □



Church going about his Father's business