

## **Safe Church: Theological reflection**

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Safe Church is the work of making certain those in our church world are treated with respect and Christian kindness. Proper procedures and behaviour begin to embody appropriate respect. However, this respect and care extends beyond rules and procedures as far as Indigenous North American people are concerned since it must also be spiritual care. Here are two examples of the spiritual care and respect as understood by Indigenous peoples.

We were walking to our resting place after a long Potlatch feast and gathering in the Big House on Haida Gwaii, the islands off the northwest coast of Canada. It was dark at 03:00am. As we walked, one of my colleagues stumbled over a rough place in the road. The next morning, he came to me and handed me a twenty-dollar bill. I asked him what this was for. He said that he was compensating me for disturbing me when he stumbled. He went on to explain that the Haida First Nations people always give a gift as an amend when they disturb the life of another being. Any disruption was a violation of the life of another and a gift rebalanced the respect appropriate to that relationship.

Among the Lakota First Nation on the prairies, the family of a woman begins to protect her as soon as a pregnancy is known. No one will speak of any disturbing topic around her. She is protected from viewing any traumatic or disturbing scene. All of this is done because the child is already present and must be protected from any danger or disturbance. The character of the not yet born child is already treated with respect and kindness by shielding the pregnant mother of the child from all spiritual disturbance as well as physical harm.

These Indigenous North American practices are based on an highly evolved understanding of the power of spiritual forces. For the Haida, disturbing the existence of another person must be corrected. Lakota people understand the long-term consequences of spiritual disturbance on a child yet to be born. Physical behaviour has spiritual consequences.

The rules, procedures, and behaviour of Safe Church training is only the beginning of the care Christians provide for each other and for those to whom we minister. Learning appropriate standards and boundaries help church people understand how to behave respectfully. Learning and practicing appropriate procedures give a community experience is how to respond to a variety of possible situations that the community may encounter. These practices are the very foundation of Christian actions of respect and care. Physical behaviour has spiritual consequences.

Behind all Safe Church training must be a sound theology of respect and caring. Indigenous North Americans have cultural rules and practices coming from our ancient traditions, our Old Testament. These customs remind everyone that Christian caring and respect can be finely nuanced and highly sensitive. Indigenous cultures know that physical behavior has spiritual consequences.

“A new commandment: love one another; as I have loved you, so you are to love one another. If there is this love among you, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.” John 13:34-15.