



# INDIGENOUS VOICES OF FAITH

## BILL ADSIT

Interview by Andrew P.W. Bennett  
November 2022

**CARDUS**  
PERSPECTIVES



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Head Office: 185 Young Street, Hamilton, ON L8N 1V9

[info@cardus.ca](mailto:info@cardus.ca)

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## Introduction

Indigenous Voices of Faith is a series of interviews conducted by Cardus in the fall of 2022, in which we asked twelve Indigenous people in Canada to tell us about their religious faith and experiences. Since 47 percent of Indigenous people in Canada identify as Christians, Christian voices are the primary but not sole focus of this interview series. The purpose of this project is to affirm and to shed light on the religious freedom of Indigenous peoples to hold the beliefs and engage in the practices that they choose and to contextualize their faith within their own cultures.

The following remarks were delivered by Bill Adsit at the National Prayer Breakfast in Ottawa on May 31, 2022. Although this is not an interview like the others, we are including this edited transcript in the series as a valuable contribution on the same topic.

## Transcript

I have been asked to speak on 2 Corinthians 1:3–4, and it says, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”

I have struggled with this passage and have had many conflicting feelings as I prepared this talk about my life. When I think about the horrors of the residential schools and injustices against my brothers and sisters, so many did not survive, and many have lived all their lives with the memories, and it has destroyed their whole life. I sometimes feel guilty when talking about the compassion of God in my life.

I know many residential school survivors are asking, Is God really the Father of compassion and comfort in all our troubles? And can we really comfort those in any trouble? God’s compassion only becomes real if we experience it, and not just read it.

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Today this world needs compassion. We have the war in the Ukraine, in Israel, and trouble in Taiwan and Korea, the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, climate change. Canada, too, has had its troubles. In the last year, as a First Nations person I struggled with and was very upset at the discovery of the unmarked graves in Kamloops last spring and the continued discovery of more. All Canadians were traumatized and shocked by this. We too face COVID, and now economic recovery from COVID and political unrest.

Many of us are dealing with job losses, financial stress, broken relationships, and health issues. And just last week my son-in-law was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and had his operation last Friday. We are not promised a life without troubles. Like the book of Job says, “Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.”

I too had major life struggles and want to tell you my unique story of how our compassionate God led me and my family. I never really planned my life, it just unfolded according to his plan.

I was born in Telegraph Creek in the Northwest Corner of BC, into the Tahltan Nation. Both my parents were Tahltan, and both were alcoholics. My father was extremely violent, and they divorced when I was five years old. My mother took my two sisters and moved to Wrangell, Alaska, and my dad took my one-year-old brother and me and dropped us off at the residential school in Whitehorse, Yukon. I never saw my mother again until I was thirty-two years old.

I can still vividly remember that day at the Whitehorse residential school, because I saw my father talking to the administrator and understood from their conversation



that we were being left. As he turned to walk away, I grabbed on to his leg and he just peeled me off and walked away. I only seen him a couple of times over the next ten years. I was one of very few at the school who was there for ten years without going home during holidays. I lived year-round at the school. Without going into the details about the residential school, all I will say is I experienced all the abuses you hear about in the news.

When they closed the school, I was fifteen and completely alone, no family contact, no contact with my nation, no education, no job, and really no prospects. After thinking back about this time, I determined I also had to deal with issues of parental alcoholism, extreme violence, divorce, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, physical and emotional neglect and abandonment—nine out of ten adverse childhood experiences. What chance of success did I have in life at this point? I would say zero percent. Only 3 percent of the population have eight-plus adverse childhood experiences, and only 10 percent are successful. Little did I know at that time that God was the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, and he also said, “I will be a Father to the fatherless and will give the lonely a family.”

I was only on my own for one day before the RCMP picked me up, and in a very short time ended up in court and was made a ward of the government and put into a foster home of Earl and Carol Gaetz (an excellent Christian foster home). They even arranged a summer job for me. So, I had food, shelter, and clothing a few days after leaving the residential school!

I was there about a year, and her husband died, and she moved to Rimbey, Alberta. I was moved to a couple of other foster homes, and one summer holidays I ended up working in Cassiar, BC, and to this day I don't know how she found me there and asked if I wanted to move to Rimbey to finish my high school.

My first day in Rimbey High School, the principal called me into his office and said I had three strikes against me coming to this school. First, you are the only Indian in this school. Second, you are older than everyone else in your grade. And third, your name Belfry will not work, from now on you are Bill Adsit. And I have been Bill Adsit ever since. It was there that my troubled past began to haunt me, and I became angry, violent, and starting drinking. I had friends at the beginning but slowly lost them. I knew I was in trouble, so I quit school in grade 12 and joined the air force.

It was during my time at Namao Air Base that I started going to Rimbey on the weekends, and four of us were hanging around, and I eventually started dating Val, now my wife of fifty-six years. The interesting fact about our relationship was that she did not know anything about my residential school experience, and I knew a



little about her just getting out of reform school. What a pair, the most likely not to succeed! My anger, heavy drinking, and rebelliousness did not fit well with my marriage or with the military, and I was forced to resign, and it was a quick one. Military man in the morning, and civilian in the afternoon!

I got a job in Edmonton, and my personal problems became worse. It seems I was always in court about drinking and driving, and other offences. I saw an ad in the *Edmonton Journal* and applied to Transport Canada as a flight service specialist, passed the exam and interviews, and was off to Ottawa for the ten-month course. I passed, and transferred to the Yukon and then Uranium City, Saskatchewan. Even though I was still drinking, I did well.

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We were only in Uranium City a week, and my heavy drinking continued. One day I was followed home by the RCMP and asked if I was Belfry Adsit, and I said yes, and they said there was a warrant out for my arrest because of my violent acts. I was flown to Edmonton and put into the holding jail. First time in my life I had time to think and face the consequences of my rebellious life! I was extremely afraid, as I could face time in jail, lose my wife and marriage, my family, my job. Because I had no time for Christianity, this is also the first time I thought of what was taught about God in the residential school. They said that if you want to change your life you can always pray and ask God for help and compassion. Their message was correct, but their methods were harsh. Out of fear and

all hope, like the prodigal son, “I came to my senses.” I prayed for God’s help and forgiveness. Instantly I realized things changed and I had reached a turning point in my life.

What changed? I felt a sense of relief, knew I was forgiven, and had a complete attitude change, but it has been a long, slow process to heal! The rebelliousness stopped, the heavy drinking slowed to a trickle, and I began to mend my marriage and look after finances, and all the responsibilities that a sensible, Christ-following man should do. After we got our finances in order, we discussed my possibility of going to university and found out the only university that would accept me was Trinity Western, on probation. So, I quit my job and moved my wife and three daughters there and managed to do well and obtained a business administration diploma.

After I completed two years, Canada Revenue Agency gave me a job in Edmonton. About three years after, I was called into the director’s office and was told that CRA had been audited and I was the only aboriginal auditor they had in Canada, but since I did not have a bachelor’s degree they could not promote. Don Massey, the HR director, had arranged for me to leave for two years and go to the University of Alberta and come back with a BComm with an accounting major. I did that, but it was very difficult as I had not completed grade 12.

Due to God's providence, I spent thirty-seven years with the federal government, working with the military, Transport Canada, CRA as business auditor, and Aboriginal Business Canada as the regional quality assurance manager. He gave me the opportunity to be the president/CEO of the Tahltan Nation Development Corporation for nine years, where I set up twenty-six different companies and changed the face of the nation to one where full employment was now available. And because of the degree, I have had many job opportunities. God's hand in this!

In January 2009, I was the first residential student in the Yukon to go through the hearings for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. After I told my story, the adjudicator said that he was so glad that I was a residential school survivor. I said, "John, I hate that word 'survivor'; it sounds like a victim-mentality word. Who wants to be a 'survivor'?" He said, "Then what do you call yourself?" I said, "I am a residential school conqueror!"

Now, at this stage of my life, I can look back and see where God showed his compassion and kept his promise of being a Father to the fatherless and gave the lonely a family. Why did life turn out to be very rewarding? Why, through the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, am I a conqueror?

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First, Jesus. He forgive me, so I can forgive others. Without forgiveness, you cannot heal. He gave me hope, so I give hope to others. He instantly changed my attitude.

Second, others. No one can get through this life without the help of others. God's compassion is only shown in the world by other people. God uses his people to show compassion. The RCMP, social services, and the foster home of Carol Gaetz. Gordon Matthias, high school principal in Rimbey. Sgt. Cor Heimstra from the military, who made sure I completed some of grade 12. John Burchynsky, who gave me a job even though I was a mess. Dennis McGrae from Transport Canada, who was a great mentor. Don Massey from Canada Revenue Agency, who instigated my BComm at the U of A, at their expense. Steve Bellringer, chairman of the board from BCH, who ensured I got my [Institute of Corporate Directors] diploma. And many friends: Jim and Mona Bacon, Tom Rogers, Rob McPhee, Garry Merkel, and many others. Also, renewed connections and relationships with some of the brothers and sisters. My church family. And the most important person in my life is my wife, Val, who has been my supporter through thick and thin. God in his compassion knew the wife I needed, and he gave me her. We have three wonderful daughters, nine grandkids and eight great-grandkids, plus an extended family. God has been gracious in the lives of our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and has shown his love through the generations. So did God give the lonely a family? Definitely.

Third, yourself. I want to be careful here when I talk about “yourself,” as I don’t want to take all the credit for any success in life. It is only because of the first two reasons, Jesus and others, that I have had opportunities in life. But, without stepping out in faith and doing the hard work that those opportunities required, I would not be here today talking to you. I firmly believe that my compassionate God gave me the gift of resilience. God used others to give me opportunities, but unless I act on those opportunities, nothing happens. So, “yourself” is a major contributor to becoming a conqueror.

Now I am in position to comfort others, because of the comfort that I received. And because of God’s compassion, I can show compassion to others. God has softened my heart and enabled me to love others. You can show compassion through kind thoughts, words, and actions. Listen and learn about their concerns, especially our Indigenous brothers and sisters. Express love and affection. Offer emotional and financial support. Always be kind. Use encouraging words. Uphold others in prayer.

I want to read to you a passage by Charles Swindoll that has been my inspiration for years:

The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness, or skill. It will make or break a company, a church, a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is ten percent what happens to me, and ninety percent how I react to it. And so, it is with you. We are in charge of our attitudes.

My prayer for the rest of my life is that I will mellow out and treat everyone that crosses my path with love and compassion. And my hope is that I demonstrated to all of you that God is a God of compassion. When we turn to him and receive his forgiveness and grace, we in turn are enabled to show compassion.

Thank you all for this opportunity.

*Photo provided by the office of Cathay Wagantall, MP*