

A Tribute to Richard Twiss: Challenging Us to Justice and Reconciliation

On Saturday, Feb. 9, surrounded by family and friends, Richard Twiss (*Taoyate Obnajin* – He Stands with his People) passed away after suffering a major heart attack three days earlier while he was in Washington, D.C. to attend the National Prayer Breakfast. Richard was the president and founder of Wiconi Ministries based in Vancouver, Washington. He was 58 years old and is survived by his wife Katherine and his sons Andrew, Philip, Ian and Daniel.

I wish I could have been there with him, and his family, during those last few days and hours. But unfortunately I was 2,000 miles away at my home on the Navajo Reservation. I have had the privilege of knowing and working with Richard for the past 10 years. Most recently he and I served together on the Board of Directors for the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA).

I first met Richard in 2002 in Hilo, Hawaii, at the third meeting of the World Christian Gathering on Indigenous Peoples (WCGIP), a group of which he was a founding member. I was a new pastor of a small church called the Christian Indian Center which was serving the Native American community in Denver, Colorado. Richard had recently published his first book, *One Church, Many Tribes* and was quickly becoming a national, even global advocate for indigenous peoples, in the complex and often controversial dialog of contextualizing Christian worship for Native American cultures.

Richard allowed himself to become a lightning rod so that boarding school survivors and assimilated Native American Christians could have the freedom to put on their regalia,

pick up their drums, and ask the question “What does it mean to be Native American and follow Jesus?” Richard’s unique ministry gave many Native people the opportunity to experience that Jesus is not just the “white man’s God” but that he came for all people from every language and every culture.

One of the challenges of being Native American and living in the U.S. is the intense marginalization that our communities feel. It has been my experience, as a Navajo living on our reservation that, by and large, there are two primary groups of non-native people who reach out to Native communities. Those who come to give us charity and those who come to take our picture. It is only a very small group that actually comes to build relationships.

But relationships are what are so desperately needed. When I was first called to pastor that small church in Denver, God gave me a deep desire to understand his heart for racial reconciliation. This desire was so strong that I started a small group Bible study to survey both the Old and New Testaments so we could see and understand God’s call for racial reconciliation. Here is the definition we came up with:

“In obedience to God, racial reconciliation is a commitment to building cross cultural relationships of forgiveness, repentance, love and hope that result in ‘walking in beauty’ with our fellow man and God.”

My friend Richard Twiss embodied that definition. Over the past 10 years I sat with Richard in many conversations across a large variety of contexts. And it never ceased to amaze me how many people, both Native and non-native, not only knew Richard, but also felt a close personal connection and bond with him. And it wasn’t because Richard glossed over issues or avoided controversial topics. No. He had a unique gift to relate with people, but also to challenge them to view and experience the world through a new and different lens.

I have seen Richard introduce himself in a number of different ways, "Dr. Richard Twiss," "a common man," "smarty pants Indian," "Taoyate Obnajin (He Stands with his People)," and just plain "Richard Twiss." Richard was willing to do whatever it took to relate with people, to sit with them, and to join their conversations. And for every conversation he entered, he brought with him an awareness of Native peoples; our cultures, our needs, our contributions and our worldviews.

Especially in evangelical circles, Richard Twiss was a bridge builder: investing in relationships with people like Peter Wagner and Chuck Pierce; networking with organizations such as the Christian Community Development Association, Sojourners, InterVarsity and Campus Crusade; sitting with theologians from countless seminaries and denominations; and introducing everyone to his Native American community.

John M. Perkins, CCDA founder and author of *Let Justice Roll Down*, said, "Richard Twiss was a trusted board member and had a strong voice that clearly communicated the plight of Native Americans and the need for justice. Sometimes he would make people uncomfortable, but we needed to hear what he had to say. As Christians and as Americans, we have tried all these years to fix the Native American 'problem,' but there was still great pain and a lack of reconciliation. So I said, 'Why don't we listen carefully to what Richard is saying. Maybe together we can find reconciliation that will lead to justice.' Richard always seemed like God's prophet. I listened to him like I would listen to a Jeremiah. That's why I didn't want to stone him too quickly. There was a deepness in his love for God and for Native Americans. We will miss him greatly."

Richard's passing was extremely sudden and incredibly heartbreaking. I am sure I am not the only one who wishes they could have had just one more conversation with him. But there is still so much work left to be done. God used Richard to start many conversations, but they cannot end with his

passing. Reconciliation is not an event. It is not a task to check off of a list. Reconciliation has a clear starting point, but no definitive ending. For reconciliation begins with a conversation and ends with a relationship restored.

So please join me in honoring the incredible work of our friend and our brother, Richard Twiss, by continuing the many conversations which he started, and restoring the relationships which have been broken within our country and the church.

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