

SEVEN QUESTIONS FOR REGGIE NEEPOSH

LIFE LESSONS FROM THE CHIEF OF THE OIJÉ-BOUGOUMOU CREE NATION

REGGIE DAVID NEEPOSH IS A HUSBAND, FATHER, GRANDFATHER, CHIEF OF THE OIJÉ-BOUGOUMOU CREE NATION IN NORTHERN QUEBEC FOR ONE TERM DURING 2011 TO 2015, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER FOR OIJÉ-BOUGOUMOU ENTERPRISES INC. SINCE FALL 2016, AND PRESENTLY THE SENIOR LEAD PASTOR OF THE OIJÉ-BOUGOUMOU CREE PENTECOSTAL CHURCH (JISHEMUNDO MIJWAP).

Jordan Hageman

The Oujé-Bougoumou people have overcome incredible obstacles to be recognized as their own unique Indigenous community. Reggie has been part of a team that has built an award-winning community including: the United Nations “We the Peoples” Award; Habitat II: Best Practices Award; Expo 2000; Canada Mortgage and Housing Award; and Global Citizen Award.

Q The fight and history of the Oujé-Bougoumou to have its own community is so rich. How was this award-winning community built?

In the territory of Oujé-Bougoumou there was a trading post at Chibougamau Lake. The only occupation our grandparents and parents had was transporting goods from north of Montreal (a place called Lake Oskélanéo) to this trading post via canoe all the way to Rupert House, now Waskaganish, Que. My grandfather was one of these transporters and was known as a “pathfinder”—he knew the rivers and the land and would take these trips from early spring to fall—no GPS nor maps needed. He’d come home in the late fall, after making the delivery to Hudson

Bay, we would then go back to the hunting grounds via canoe and spend the whole winter there until spring.

Oujé-Bougoumou means “place where people gather.” Because of this trading post located on Chibougamau Lake caused our families to live close together, and that was our community. But starting in the 1950s, as the mining companies moved in, they kept asking our community to relocate. Over the years we were asked to relocate more than seven times. Our people are nomads, following the livelihood of the land in its seasons, so this posed quite a problem for us. However, we knew it was our territory and they couldn’t kick us out.

The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement came into place in 1975, officially recognizing Cree and Inuit claim to the land because of the Hydroelectric Project with both Quebec and Canada. During this time the government wanted us to associate with the Cree Nation of Mistissini and registered all of our band numbers with them. However, my grandparents decided not to move

to Mistissini but live in Chibougamau and within our territory. From there we elected a spokesman, the late Joseph Shecapio-Blacksmith, to advocate on behalf of our community. At the time we were living in shacks with no running water. Since my brother, Abel Bosum, was working with the Cree Regional Authority (CRA), he and the CRA also came alongside us and supported our people in having our own community. In the early 1980s we started the process of having local meetings in Chibougamau to discuss the future of having our own community.

In the late 1980s, after negotiations, we reached a settlement with both Canada and Quebec to establish a permanent community and were awarded \$77 million. Some people cried, hardly believing this was finally happening. I had previously been hired as band manager in the New Year of January 1990 and now also became treasurer. I remember having a special meeting where I sat down with the Council and they asked what we should do with the money. I prayed in my heart and mind and asked God to give me wisdom about how to spend this money. I said to them, "Let's invest some of the money and not spend all of it." To be honest with you, we ended up spending only half the money to build the community; the rest is still invested for future development. I have worked closely with an advisor, Paul Wertman, who has been a tremendous help to our local leadership and community members. I am personally grateful for his service, and it was a blessing working with him.



All photos courtesy Reggie Neeposh.

Pastor Reg with John Ramirez and Chinese Pastor Paul and friends.

We still had to fight for another 20 years or so to be officially recognized as a separate Indigenous group. Despite the settlement and establishment of a permanent community, we only had observer status with no real input as a unique indigenous voice within the Cree government.

However, our Cree leadership at the regional level began to recognize us as such.

I was elected Chief in 2011. That year, I had the honour and privilege of signing on behalf of my community, the official 9th Cree Nation community, under the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, recognized by both the provincial and federal governments. Since our recognition as the Oujé-Bougoumou Cree Nation, we now have all the benefits of a Cree Nation.

Q Your childhood is framed with great challenges and hardships.

My mother had 13 children (nine boys, four girls); only 11 of us survived. I was raised by my grandparents since birth, and I was the third child my late mother birthed. It's a cultural tradition that when a couple has too many children, they want someone to raise the child for them. So I was traditionally adopted by my grandparents. My grandmother told me a story that she wanted to name me David after her late father, but my grandfather wanted to name me after him so I could carry on his name. But they finally agreed that they would name me Reggie David after my grandfather and my great-grandfather. My last name, Neeposh, is Neeboosh in Cree and it means "one who stands up" or "stands up against."

As early as I can remember (perhaps four years of age), my older brothers (Abel and James) would leave our village and be taken away to an Indian residential school for approximately 10 months out of the year. No explanation was ever given to me by my grandparents about why my brothers had to leave our village. I was five years old when I was sent to the residential school, and I remember crying the whole way there. Since we were under the federal government, all Indigenous children at the age of five had to be sent to an Indian residential school; otherwise, our parents—or in my case, my grandparents—would not receive any federal funds.

During my nine years at the Indian residential school, I was molested at a very young age—raped twice and abused verbally, physically and mentally by counsellors the priest had hired. When I came home, I would tell my grandparents something was wrong at the school. My grandmother would cry and say how hurt that made her. One time I told my grandfather they were teaching us that we came from monkeys. I told him I failed that class because I didn't



Signing the official recognition of Oujé-Bougoumou Cree Nation. At far right is Chief Neeposh; former Grand Chief, Dr. Matthew Coon Come; Honourable Premier Jean Charest of Quebec; Ashley Iseroff; Deputy-Grand Chief and Negotiator, Dr. Abel Bosum; and Tina Petawabano, Director of Quebec Relations.

believe it. My grandfather was upset about what we were being taught. I was fortunate to come home during the Christmas and Easter holidays—many kids stayed the full 10 months. Whenever I came home, I never wanted to go back because of the abuse.

I remember a morning in January 1976. I was to go back, and my grandparents knew I didn't want to leave. I never thought my grandfather would say words that would change the course of my life and future, but that morning he said, "Neetchshamagun, today you're not going to back to school; you're going to the bush to learn the Cree way of life. I will teach you how to hunt, fish and trap, and also our Cree language." My spirit within me was revived and lifted, and I had a big smile on my face.

Even though I dropped out at Grade 9, I still continued my education via correspondence courses, which I paid out of my own pocket. I would do my homework in the bush and mail my tests for the next two years. Finally, after completing my Grade 12 course and test, I anxiously waited for my final test results. These came back saying I had passed, so I received my Grade 12 certificate. I strongly believe that whatever you set your mind on, you can do.

I also came to understand why parents kept having children. They knew that when their child turned five years old, they would be taken away and sent to residential school. As long as they had another child to care for and love, that was something to hold on to. When the children came back, they were messed up and abused, and many had lost their language (speaking our native language was banned), so communication to re-establish relationship was difficult. I am grateful that I always spoke Cree with my grandparents whenever I went home.

Q How is it, especially since residential schools were in partnership with some church denominations, that you were able to step into the Christian faith?

When I was young (about four or five years old), I would attend my Aunt Sarah's Pentecostal church since she was the first one in our family who accepted the gospel. I remember the hymns (e.g., "The Sweet By and By," "At the Cross," and "Jesus Paid It All"). These hymns really resonated in my spirit, and I knew there was something special about them. I remember I would lie on the bench or under it and fall asleep to the hymns. I would wake up and see people crying, lifting up their hands and thanking the Lord and crying out to Jesus. That was when I was first exposed to the gospel, and it was special. It was through my late Aunt Sarah that the seeds of faith were planted in our family. Our people finally accepted the gospel in 1976, and there was a big revival in our community. About 70 to 80 per cent of the community came to faith in Christ.

My beloved mom died in a car accident when I was 15, and I blamed God and got very angry with Him. All through my teenage years I carried this anger, hurt and grief regarding the loss of my mom, but my grandmother kept praying for me. When I came home, she would cry and tell me to give my life back to the Lord, that He had better plans for me.

When I was 19, my friends and I were asked to go to a youth camp meeting three and a half hours away. We had never heard of a youth camp meeting before, but my grandmother's brother (the late Albert) invited us, and all we thought was "girls." We went and three of us met our spouses there. I rededicated my life to God when I was 20.

It was my grandmother's prayers that really brought me back. My wife and I have been married for over 35 years now. God has been faithful and good to us.

Q Have you ever been shamed for your faith or accused of being colonized?

My grandfather went through a lot of abuse when he became a Christian, even by his son. He was told that he gave away his traditional culture and way of living. However, our people always believed in JISHEMUNDO, which in the Cree language is the same word as *Yahweh Elohim* in Hebrew, meaning God Almighty. We've always recognized that there is a higher being. Out West they call it the Great Spirit. My grandparents knew there was always a greater presence and they always believed in him. They told me a story of many years ago (before Columbus came) of a dream that was passed on to our people of someone coming on shore, dressed in black and carrying a bag. In that bag was something that would help the Aboriginal people. My grandfather shared the dream with me at the hospital prior to his passing away. In one of my Bible studies at the seminary, I took a course in Christian culture where I learned that the Jesuits were the ones who came on shore in Montreal. When I told my grandfather what I learned about the Jesuits after he told me his dream, he said, "I believe it was the dream of the gospel that was passed on from generation to generation." When he told me that dream, I knew that in the bag was a Bible. I showed him an image from the movie *Black Robe* (about Jesuit missionaries) and asked if he thought this is what the man in the dream looked like, and he said "Yes."

So, even before the gospel was ever brought to our Cree Nation up north, there was already a message from 500 or 600 years ago. When our people accepted the gospel, they really grabbed hold of the Bible.

Q I find that my culture (currently one of self-justification, self-promotion, self-preservation, and even self-identification) and faith (selflessness) are constantly at war. Are there parts of your culture that you need to move away from to stay true to your identity found in Christ?

That's a good question. Both my grandparents on my father's side and my mother's side were carriers of some sort of a spiritual gift like a shaman. My grandfather on my father's



Pastor Reg (left) with his brother, Grand Chief Dr. Abel Bosum.

side, David, was pretty strong—you didn't mess around with him. He had a wrong way of doing spiritual things, whether through animals or what have you. My grandfather on my mother's side, Reggie, had what we call a good spirit. He respected the land and asked the animal spirits what kinds of animals were in our territory that we could live off. That's something I learned as a young person, and I knew what was right and what was wrong. I was more exposed to the good spirit with my grandfather, Reggie, who raised me. I heard stories that some of these shamans could turn into an animal, like a wolf, which was a very bad omen.

This younger generation is still seeking. I think one of the problems with the church is that we're not relevant or real to them. They need something authentic that will attract them; when they don't see that in the church or community or the person, they aren't interested.

Native spirituality was banned in our community by our previous Chief and Council from 2007 to 2011. Many people from all over were very critical, saying we had been colonized—we are like the white people. I had to explain to them that when we built our community, it was built on the faith of God. We're not worshipping the white men. We know who God is in our language.

When I was Chief from 2011 to 2015, I rescinded the resolutions and explained to the people that we cannot infringe on people's rights according to the constitution, and that there was a better way to explain to the younger generation. We could demonstrate to them that Jesus was real in our lives by loving them.

I came across a minister who said: "God's business is to judge, the Holy Spirit's business is to convict, Jesus' business is to save the lost, and our business is to love." I love that. It's something the Cree people and other First Nations across the country understand. They have love in their culture. They love people; they love the animals; they love the land. They have compassion. That was something

taught to me when I was young, and that is something I tell the people in my church as pastor. People are not looking for a definition of Christianity but a demonstration of His power and love. And that's what we need to do.

At one powwow in Ottawa, I met late pastor/evangelist Ross Maracle and asked him, "What are you doing here?" He said something I've always kept in my heart: "Reggie, remember that Jesus said *go*. Go into all the world. A lot of these people will not go to a Christian church. We have to go to the streets. That's why I'm here. I don't argue with their beliefs, but I will share my beliefs with them." And that is what I do. I will attend powwows and share the love of God with them. I do participate in the group dances they do, but never in the shaking tent ceremony—there is a fine line that needs to be respected, and I respect these people. They are very loving and caring, more than those who claim to be Christians.

One time I went to a Native men's conference in Toronto, Ont., where they were doing smudging. I explained to a gentleman who was a Mohawk that as Cree we don't do this, but that I respected him. He looked at me and asked if I was a Christian. I said, "Yes, I am." He replied, "That's good to hear. My grandmother is also a Christian and has always told me to respect people."

We have to be careful not to demonize everything. I believe God created each of us in a certain way, and we can worship Him within our culture—we should embrace that. We have used the drum as part of our culture from the beginning. My late grandfather David used to be a powerful shaman and when he got saved, he didn't touch the drum for a long time (about 40 years). But before he passed away, he picked up the drum again. When he was with our Grand Council and our Chiefs, they would ask him to sing. He explained to them that the words he was going to sing were words that would praise God. He said, "This is the only instrument I know. I used to use it in a bad way, but since being born again I rededicated my life and I have rededicated my drum. I will use it to praise Him." That was his testimony. Every culture has their own way of expressing who they are, and they can use that to praise God.

Q What are some key things that have defined your faith?

The verse that has really helped my wife and me is Philippians 1:21—*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is*

gain. That has always been our verse. We did our best to raise our kids in a Christian environment, but when they became teenagers, it was a whole different ball game for them due to peer pressure. I pray that the seed we planted will flourish in their hearts, and my hope is that one day they will turn their lives over to God and live for Him. God has been good to me, and I don't regret my walk with Him even though it wasn't what it should have been at times.

I also want to share about my trip to Israel in the fall of 2019. It had a special impact on my life—spiritually, physically, emotionally and mentally. I went with Dr. Perry Stone, an evangelist whom I greatly respect and have supported from Cleveland, Tennessee. Dr. Perry studies in Israel with the rabbis and shares the Bible like no one else I know. Today when I read the Bible, it comes alive to me because this trip was very inspiring and uplifted my faith.

Q What current challenges are you facing that we as a Fellowship can pray for?

In the year of 2011, our church was divided and eventually split due to internal fighting. When I became the senior lead pastor, my wife and I had a vision to see the church unite together from the split. I met and slowly worked with the previous pastor of the other congregation, and as of today, we are back together. Our congregation now numbers over 100 people. It's a real testimony to God's faithfulness. However, there still needs to be some healing among our people and trust needs to be rebuilt.

Pray for our young people who are bound by alcohol, drugs, suicidal and social issues such as peer pressure, homelessness, rejection and abuse. We are also encountering same-sex issues, which we've never had to deal with in the past. Many youth in our community are living in broken homes because of parents separating or a parent who has passed away. That's a challenge as we have young widows and angry teenagers. Some people feel we have failed as a church, but I know that God never fails. It's our responsibility to reach out and continue praying for our youth, especially our children. In the near future, we want to see and start a good Sunday school program at our church. And pray for the traditionalists too—that they would be open to the gospel.

Learn more about Oujé-Bougoumou Cree Pentecostal Church (Jishemundo Mijwap) by visiting www.ojpc.ca. Jordan Hageman is a freelance writer from Stoney Creek, Ont.