

# UnSettling Our Faith: Planting Seeds for a Decolonized Discipleship

Jason Miller-Villegas | May 16, 2026

## Speaker Introduction

- Works with Cory at TENx10 youth ministry resourcing
  - Joined team before Cory
  - Cory's observation: "Every time he said something, I was astonished"
- Background journey: Colorado Springs → North Carolina
  - Born into faithful churchgoing family
  - Third wave charismatic/full gospel movement (Pentecostal, speaking in tongues, prophecy, dancing)
  - Baptist church culture shock after move
  - Found "methicostal" (charismatic Methodist) congregation in woods
  - One of only two known charismatic Methodist congregations in North Carolina
- Ministry experience
  - United Methodist pastor 10-15 years
  - Rural church pastor focus across four congregations
  - Two divinity degrees through rural ministry fellowship
  - Asset-based community development work
  - Bridging religious/public sector language and culture gaps
- Topic development: "Unsettling Our Faith: Planting Seeds for Decolonized Christianity"
  - Relatively new to Jason (last 10 years at age 38)
  - Central question: "What do you do with something so bad the damage can never be undone?"
  - Two approaches: lean in honestly or pretend it doesn't exist

## Land Acknowledgment & Historical Context

- Original peoples of Detroit area
  - Anishinaabe, Ojibwe, Odawa, Potawatomi peoples
  - Wyandotte people (Treaty of Detroit)
  - 13 tribes total in Michigan state
  - Acknowledgment: "Everywhere is somewhere, and somewhere always has a story"
- Settler colonialism mechanics (1492-present)
  - Columbus name in Spanish: "Colon" → colonization etymology
  - British empire extension for wealth/resource extraction
  - 400+ treaties between Native nations and U.S. government - all broken

- Pattern: “Trust us, we’re only coming this far” → gradual expansion
- Promises broken: fishing rights, sacred mountains (gold discoveries)
- Christianity-colonization interconnection
  - Bible arrived “in one hand, sword in the other”
  - Doctrine of Discovery (1400s papal bull)
    - Christian nations had right/responsibility to subdue non-Christians
    - Conquest as God mandate, not just permission
  - Constantine’s vision (early 300s): “In this name, conquer”
  - Dominion mandate misuse from Genesis stewardship command

## Interactive Elements & Mindfulness

- Breathing/movement exercises
  - Deep breathing with hand gestures
  - Exhaling with sound
  - Elbow tapping (crossing center line helps metabolize information)
  - “Something about crossing center line helps metabolize information” - cognitive scientist insight
- Table discussion questions
  - “What was something good in your upbringing?”
  - “What was something missing?” (not “what was bad”)
  - Intentional framing: colonization leaves out voices/stories
- Call-and-response reading
  - “We are not here to finish the work tonight”
  - “Instead we might see: a seed is not a finished tree alive, it needs a good ecology”
- Mindfulness moments throughout
  - Silence for processing
  - “Questions are greater than answers in this conversation”
  - One sharing rule: speak once until several others have shared

## Core Framework: Three Main Ideas

- Colonized faith sustained by distorted stories
  - Cowboy/Indian movies as normative narrative
  - Jason’s personal example: participated in cowboy/Indian birthday parties
  - “How do you tell a fish that it’s wet?” - hard to see distorted stories we swim in
  - Jason’s grandfather: 100% indigenous (Chichimeca people subdued by Spanish)
  - Lost culture through military service (WWII, Korean War)
  - Washington Redskins fandom - only place he saw himself reflected
- Healthy faith requires different ecology
  - Companion planting metaphor
    - Marigolds/basil produce lemonene, repel pests
    - Some plants add nitrogen, others take it out
    - Spiritual community works similarly
  - Three Sisters Garden example
    - Corn provides structure for beans
    - Beans add nitrogen to soil

- Squash leaves keep predators away
    - Each produces more working together
  - Robin Wall Kimmerer reference: “Braiding Sweetgrass” botanist/indigenous approach
- What we protect and water grows
  - Road rage example: thoughts get watered by perspective
  - Need broad, diverse ecology to learn
  - “Sometimes we don’t know what we don’t know”

## Decolonizing Christianity: Story as Medicine

- “Story is strong medicine” - central principle
- Story in crisis vs. story as healing medium
  - Inherited Christianity read through empire lens vs. first-century Palestinian Jewish perspective
  - “Onward Christian Soldiers marching as to war” built on Constantine’s vision
- Questions for indigenous perspective
  - What stories might indigenous people want to tell about their God experience?
  - What if Christianity formed by most disempowered vs. most powerful?
- Indigenous wisdom contributions
  - Deep earth connection vs. consumption model
  - Mystical/communal faith vs. individual focus
  - “Connecting to beyond things immediate/physical, inherently within us, tie us together”
  - Ancestral connection (Jesus with Moses/Elijah at Transfiguration)
  - Land as neighbor/sibling, not property
  - Chief Joseph: “You can no sooner own land than own sky, air, or clouds”
  - Everything has spirit - trees, animals, rocks as family members

## Spoken Word: “How Shall They Hear?”

- Based on Romans 10 passage about preaching
- Key excerpts from Jason’s performance
  - “Why would they want to serve a kingdom if their whole context is a king who’s dumb?”
  - “If the gospel has been colonized and weaponized and televised and sanitized, how shall they hear the good news?”
  - “How shall they find one who weeps with them and walks with them, not above them?”
  - “They want preachers who pray with protest... whose sermons aren’t sedatives but summons to the streets”
  - “Preach like Jesus who spat into dirt and made mud medicine... who flipped over tables and then came and ate at an open table”
  - “Where is the preacher who will find a kid and teach her about the kingdom?”
  - “Young people won’t follow a gospel that won’t follow them into trauma, TikToks, detention centers, climate dread”
- Audience engagement: table discussions on what resonated

## Hidden Stories & Modern Imperial Christianity

- Hidden stories create injustice
  - Many didn't recognize genocide/removal as evil until adulthood
  - Intentionally hidden to maintain single narrative
  - Education system battleground - Department of Education destruction
  - Public school funding diverted to charter schools
- Current examples of imperial Christianity
  - Civil religion false gospel
  - "Make world safe for democracy" while destabilizing others
  - 60+ U.S. military interventions in Latin America
  - "Harvest of Empire" documentary on Latin American destabilization
- Corporate colonization examples
  - Monsanto corn in Mexico
    - 500 years of same corn strains
    - Hybrid seeds killed traditional varieties
    - Farmers bankrupted, land bought by Monsanto
  - AI data centers consuming/wasting water resources
  - Amazon consumption disconnected from forest clear-cutting
- Palestine/Gaza reference
  - Many countries recognize ongoing genocide
  - U.S. exported bombs killed children (400+ girls in first week school bombing)
  - Civil religion enables turning blind eye

## Reconciliation vs. Conciliation Framework

- Reconciliation limitations
  - "Re-" prefix assumes prior healthy relationship existed
  - Never happened with indigenous peoples from Columbus onward
  - Brutal murders started immediately (Columbus firsthand accounts available)
- Conciliation approach
  - New covenant concept from Jesus: "Love one another"
  - Starting fresh relationships without assumption of past connection
  - Sitting at people's feet: "I want to start being in good relationship with you"
  - Learning posture: "I don't know what that looks like, but I want to learn from you"
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission examples
  - South Africa model
  - Greensboro, North Carolina (only U.S. example)
  - Talking about colonial Christianity horrors and reconnecting

## Restorative Solidarity Model

- Traditional charity problems
  - Soup kitchen example: wealthy always on serving side
  - Inherent power dynamic when "you have something for them"
  - Not reciprocal relationship
  - Shaped by settler colonial ideas

- Restorative solidarity principles
  - Robin Wall Kimmerer: reciprocity in nature
  - “I have something for you, you have something for me”
  - Nothing wasted in indigenous worldviews
  - Walking alongside vs. coming with predetermined solutions
- Practical application
  - Rich in money may be poor in: relationships, understanding, friends, character, generosity
  - Street-experienced may be rich in: knowledge, lived experience, strength, survival skills
  - Community-designed programs vs. imposed charity
  - Sweat equity models
  - People from community knowing individual needs/circumstances
- “Healing Haunted Histories” framework
  - Elaine Enns and Chad Myers authors
  - Going into spaces with humility
  - “Thinking less of ourselves” vs. self-focused shame
  - “I’m going to think about you more than me”
  - “How might I come alongside you?”

## Composting & Transformation Process

- Composting metaphor for faith transformation
  - Breaking things down to constituent parts to feed something new
  - Forest example: fallen tree becomes most alive thing
  - Lichens, mushrooms, rabbit warrens, new shoots growing
  - Isaiah reference: “Shoot will come up out of stump of Jesse”
- Personal assets composting
  - Even “old-fashioned” or seemingly irrelevant ideas can be composted
  - Nothing completely worthless in transformation process
- ADHD acknowledgment
  - Jason’s diagnosis explanation for presentation structure
  - Originally planned as beginning, evolved through multiple parts

## Backlash & Resistance Patterns

- Historical examples
  - White pastors marching with Dr. King - their churches died
  - “Empire within us strikes back” (Star Wars reference)
  - United Methodist baptismal vows: “Resisting evil, injustice, oppression in whatever forms they present themselves”
- Colonized imagination effects
  - Over-identification with colonizing system
  - Threats to system feel like personal threats
  - Allergic reactions in individuals and societies
- Early 20th century examples
  - U.S. thought it was immune to racism
  - Great Migration from South

- Northern cities (Detroit, Chicago) had allergic reactions when non-white people arrived
- Predictable tools of empire
  - Not very creative in backlash methods
  - Connect with indigenous friends/colleagues who've experienced similar
  - Learn from those who've navigated resistance before

## White Fragility & Engagement Strategies

- Audience question on engaging defensive responses
  - Privilege discussions trigger immediate defensiveness
  - Reparations/land return conversations cause anxiety mistaken for conviction
- Jason's response strategies
  - Apophatic vs. cataphatic approach (seminary terms)
  - Talking about the thing without directly talking about the thing
  - Storytelling as brain's natural communication method
  - Jesus's parable approach
  - Finding stories where person can see themselves connected
- Shame dynamics
  - Empire/white supremacy deals in shame ("you are worthless")
  - Rebellion against system creates "now I'm worthless" feeling
  - Brené Brown reference: shame grows in darkness, loses power in light
  - Bringing shame into community light reduces its power
- Increasing stimulus-response time
  - Viktor Frankl "Man's Search for Meaning" reference
  - Concentration camp insight: only power over perspective and response
  - Creating space between "good/bad" thinking and actual response
  - Allows consideration of hidden narratives and other stories

## Practical Seed-Planting Actions

- **Individual actions for decolonizing faith**
  - Learn true history of local indigenous peoples
  - Read books from indigenous/marginalized perspectives
  - Practice sacred listening with young people and marginalized communities
  - Question inherited narratives about "progress" and "development"
  - Examine personal consumption patterns and their impacts
- **Community actions**
  - Design programs with community input, not imposed charity
  - Create reciprocal relationships across difference
  - Share power in decision-making processes
  - Tell hidden stories in educational settings
  - Support indigenous-led initiatives and organizations
- **Spiritual practices**
  - Read Bible through liberation lens vs. empire lens
  - Practice land connection and gratitude
  - Engage ancestral wisdom traditions
  - Develop mystical/communal faith practices

- Regular mindfulness and body awareness
- **Resistance preparation**
  - Connect with allies who've faced similar backlash
  - Develop support networks for difficult conversations
  - Practice increasing response time to defensive triggers
  - Learn from historical examples of faithful resistance

## Resources & Curriculum Access

- **Jason's "Unsettling Our Faith" curriculum**
  - Partnership with Be A Disciple app/online platform
  - Youth-focused resource nearly published
  - Group-based studies only (cannot be done individually)
  - Free testing opportunity available through Cory
  - Most budget went to paying stipends for story contributors
  - Film editing and content editing included
- **Essential reading list**
  - "Braiding Sweetgrass" - Robin Wall Kimmerer
    - Botanist writing from decolonial/indigenous approach
    - Plant biology and indigenous wisdom integration
  - "Healing Haunted Histories" - Elaine Enns & Chad Myers
    - Restorative solidarity framework
    - "Most brilliant people I've ever met" - Jason
    - Good chapter toward end on restorative solidarity
  - "My Grandmother's Hands" - Resmaa Menakem
    - Racialized trauma healing from somatic perspective
    - Sections for white bodies, Black bodies, law enforcement
    - Body-based trauma healing approach
  - "Reconstructing the Gospel" - Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove
    - Finding freedom from slave-holding religion
    - Addresses over-identification with colonizing systems
  - "A People's History of the United States" - Howard Zinn
    - History from underside perspective
  - "An Indigenous People's History of the United States" - Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz
    - Native perspective on colonization history
- **Jason's published books**
  - "When Methods Die: Writing on the Wall for a Fading Church" (Wipf & Stock, \$25)
    - Death and resurrection in institutional church
    - Available in Kindle (\$10) and physical copies
  - "Wisdom of Our Elders" chapter contribution (\$25)
    - "Seeing Jesus as Person of Color Instead of White Person"
    - Multi-faith wisdom collection