

A VISION FOR RECONCILIATION

“The United Church of Canada is committed to working to create a new relationship with Aboriginal peoples that starts in confession for past wrongs and, it is the church’s hope, ends in the shared joy of walking together in a healed and renewed creation.” (from The United Church of Canada Brief to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, November 1993)

INTRODUCTION

Earlier this year, the Canadian government concluded agreements with the Anglican and Presbyterian Churches, which deal with issues of liability and funding, related to claims of sexual and physical abuse arising from the residential school system. These agreements deal with other matters as well which will have a long standing impact on the relationship between these churches and the federal government and between these churches and aboriginal peoples.

There are clear signals that the government would like to enter into a similar agreement with The United Church of Canada. The Residential Schools Steering Committee is seeking guidance from the General Council Executive as to whether or not it is wise for our church to begin formal negotiations with the federal government and, if so, what principles and conditions should guide such negotiations.

We bring this report to the General Council and it’s Executive conscious of the fact that for the past six years most of the focus in both the legal system and in negotiations with the federal government has been on sexual and physical abuse within the residential schools system. Survivors of the system both within and outside the church keep reminding us that as serious as the incidences of sexual and physical abuse there is a much broader issue which relates to the destruction of culture, language and spirituality in aboriginal communities as a result of the process of colonization of which the residential schools system was a part. This report signals to the General Council and it’s Executive our conviction that as a church we must increasingly focus our attention on issues of language, culture, spirituality, and assimilation.

THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE

While The United Church of Canada is much smaller and has far fewer material assets than the federal government, we do possess a strong sense of the biblical tradition and the call of God experienced by our church, which are the true strengths that we bring to any table. We must remain mindful of this in order not to enter into an uncritical agreement with the government based upon institutional factors and not upon the ethical demands of our faith.

When Micah asks what gifts are to be brought when God is worshipped, he rejects those gifts that represent wealth or prestige in this world—“thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil.” Rather he proclaims that what God requires of us is: **“to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”** This challenges us to come to any negotiation table with a primary concern not for the symbols of wealth but rather with a commitment that whatever we do will be for the sake of justice for those who suffered in the residential schools system.

It also means that we take seriously the opportunity to walk humbly not only with our God but also with the First Nations of this land. In the Hebrew language the word for ethics is tied to the image of walking. Through this heritage, we are brought into touch with the invitation from the

aboriginal members of our church expressed in the response to the 1986 Apology delivered by Edith Memnook on behalf of the All Native Circle Conference in 1988. "We only ask of you to respect our Sacred Fire, The Creation, and to live in peaceful coexistence with us. We recognize the hurts and feelings will continue amongst our people, but through partnership and **walking hand in hand**, the Indian spirit will eventually heal."

We are also challenged to come to any table with the belief that our church's identity is to be found not in cautious attempts at institutional preservation but, rather, in the faith which we proclaim. The writer of the Book of Hebrews reminds us that this faith "**is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of things we cannot see.**" This definition of faith pushes us to ensure that everything we do, including negotiations with government related to past wrongs, not be based on the illusion of security in this world but, rather, on our hopes for right relationships with the aboriginal peoples of this land, with the government and with our God.

We are reminded in Hebrews that in our journey we are surrounded by a "large cloud of witnesses." In First Nations cultures, the presence of ancestors is a living reality. For both aboriginal and non-aboriginal members of our church, the burdens and gifts which we have inherited from the cloud of witnesses which surround us are present realities which challenge us as significantly as those things which we do in our own time. The future of relationships between aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities is dependent upon our taking responsibility for our history and on doing those things which foster a new relationship based upon justice, respect, and right relations.

BACKGROUND on Indian Residential Schools

(from "Justice and Reconciliation", The Legacy of Indian Residential Schools and the Journey Toward Reconciliation, 2001 The United Church of Canada)

Residential schools were first established in the mid-to-late nineteenth century (9). The government was responsible for education and funding; the churches were to operate the schools on behalf of the government.

Four churches were involved in the operation of the schools: Roman Catholic orders, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Methodist. (At church union in 1925, the Methodist and most of the Presbyterian schools became part of the mission work of The United Church of Canada.) It is estimated that 100,000 children attended the schools, about 20 per cent of the potential status Indian students. These schools were predominantly in western Canada. They tended to be in regions where mission activity and churches had been started among Aboriginal peoples, but there was no specific correlation between a particular denominational school and any given Aboriginal community. Children from one community, or even one family, may have attended several different schools, even affiliated with different denominations and often at great distances from their homes.

The Indian Act in 1880 set out the framework for what followed: self-government for Aboriginal peoples was non-existent. Instead, they would come under the control of the federal government for education, social services, and funding. As they lost control over their own societies, many Aboriginal people began to see more benefit in the type of education the Europeans had brought with them, rather than in the traditional form of education that First Nations peoples had provided to their children for centuries. Many Aboriginal communities favoured day schools in their communities. However, the federal government chose to adopt the system of residential schools and recruited churches to operate the schools on far less money than was needed. Churches for their part hoped to draw on the willingness of church missionaries to work for low wages.

Many Indian residential schools used practices that were common in boarding and residential schools of the day: uniforms, manual labour by the students, separation of siblings from one another, and so on. However, for Aboriginal children, these practices had a devastating impact on their culture and their family life. Worse, in schools that were not properly funded, children were often hungry. All schools were strict, but many were known for the harsh physical treatment children received, including beatings and punishment in front of other children. In the worst cases, children were the victims of sexual predators.

There are indeed graduates of residential schools who speak positively of their residential school experience. Some acknowledge that their leadership skills were cultivated in the schools, enabling them to return to their communities and lay the groundwork for the Aboriginal peoples' demand for self-government that began in the first decade of the 20th century.

For their part, many of the teachers who were church workers went to teach in the schools for reasons that were similar to those of teachers who went to China or to the Caribbean—to offer education to those who would not have access to education in any other way. They went because they felt God had called them to help. (A report from the Indian Residential School workers' conference held in March, 2000 is available to congregations. See Overview in Resources, page 83.)

Indian residential schools were but one part of the Department of Indian Affairs education system. There were many day schools, plus some seasonal and hospital schools for Indian children. However, the systemic character of residential schools had effects that were devastating for First Nations people and peoples:

The most terrible result of my residential school experience was they took away my ability to hold my children. They took that away from me, the ability to hold my children. (Inez Deiter in From Our Mothers' Arms) (10)

The long-term repercussions of being a part of the residential school experience crippled many former students from becoming the responsible parents they might have been had they continued to be nurtured by their own families and communities.

(9) Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *People to People, Nation to Nation* cites the 1849 opening of a school in Alderville, Ontario, as the first residential school. There is some evidence that schools may have been established at earlier times.

(10) Constance Deiter *From Our Mothers' Arms: The Intergenerational Impact of Residential Schools in Saskatchewan*. (Etobicoke, ON: United Church Publishing House) 1999.

CURRENT ISSUES OF RELATIONSHIP AND THE CHALLENGE OF RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS

The United Church of Canada and Aboriginal Peoples

Since contact and the arrival of European settlers centuries ago, the relationship between the Church and Aboriginal peoples has been complex, contradictory, unequal and significant. The experience of Indian Residential Schools has left feelings of hurt, anger and shame in First Nations people. For the church it has evoked shock and embarrassment; and a need to make amends.

It would be a mistake to see Indian Residential schools as isolated from the rest of the impact and treatment of Aboriginal peoples; or to see this as only an historical event. By any standard, our contemporary treatment of this land's First Citizens is atrocious. The living standard, death rate, marginalization and discrimination in this country are indefensible. Almost 35 years ago, the church declared that it was wrong for us to be working in such institutions. But much of the attitude and rationale, which created them, is still in evidence today.

We must continue to struggle with why we would no longer be involved in Indian Residential Schools. This means that we will attempt to stand with and along side our aboriginal sisters and brothers as we both work through the healing required from the legacy of both the schools and the impact of a damaging colonial relationship. It is not and will not be easy. However, in both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal societies there are people of good will who believe it is important and worthwhile to do.

Conscious of the mandate of the 37th General Council to combat the ideology of racism it will be important that we discern the racism implicit in the colonization of aboriginal peoples and the racism which lies at the root of resistance to participation in de-colonization in general and with regard to the residential schools experience in particular.

For the Church, a key struggle is to learn how to receive the gifts that the original citizens of this land have willingly shared with us. We need to honour and respond to those cultural and spiritual gifts, which they have attempted to share with us and we have resisted to our loss.

After initial responses to legal claims on criminal abuse and towards correcting past wrongs, there is an increasing need to create a healing journey and seek longer-term practical justice. This means we must learn, often with some pain how we can acknowledge, appreciate and walk with our aboriginal brothers and sisters as we share in the struggle of healing, justice, right relations, and reconciliation.

There is increasing evidence that with respect to the legacy of Residential Schools we are opening a new chapter with First Nations peoples. They like us are anxious to set out on the journey to a better life. By working together at community and at a national level, we have much in common that we have to give and receive from one another.

The United Church of Canada and the Canadian government

The Canadian government has responsibility for laws, institutions and services for all Canadians. The United Church is a voluntary and charitable body. Government and church are dramatically different. Governments tax and spend; churches receive free will offerings. All of the churches annual expenditures are less than 1% of that of the Government of Canada.

Resolving the legacy of Indian Residential Schools from the government's point of view, at least initially, seemed to be mostly about litigation management. Government officials have been concerned to meet legal obligations. The United Church has been concerned to view litigation within the context of the larger issues of cultural assimilation and injustice. These concerns have broadened our conversation with the federal government.

As the resolution process has evolved, the United Church has tried to keep four things in mind.

- First, we must, on an urgent basis, cooperate with the Federal Government to resolve all outstanding Indian Residential School criminal abuse cases.
- Second, where at all possible we need to resolve such cases outside the courts,
- Third, when courts cases are unavoidable, then we should be present both as defendant but also to support the plaintiffs and their families.
- Fourth, we should continue to witness to our belief as to the importance for justice, right relations, reconciliation and healing.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the Canadian government has concluded agreements with the Anglican and Presbyterian Churches around a Resolution Framework addressing issues of liability and funding related to claims of sexual and physical abuse by survivors of the residential school system. The government is eager to enter into a similar agreement with the United Church

of Canada. While actively participating in the resolution of claims against the United Church, we have been reluctant to enter into a formal agreement with the government for a number of reasons. These include concerns about some of the terms of the government's Dispute Resolution process (specifically the requirement that claimants sign a comprehensive release) as well as about its scope (limited to sexual and physical abuse claims). In addition, the United Church has guarded its own independence of action and prophetic role in taking responsibility for its part in the harm done in the residential school system.

Although not in formal negotiations, the United Church has had several conversations with government officials about our role in the resolution process and our concerns related to a formal agreement. Recently we have been informed that the government has agreed to change the timing and scope of the release required in the Dispute Resolution process in response to expressed concerns of Aboriginal groups as well as the United Church. In our view, this is a significant and positive change with respect to addressing the interests of the survivors of Indian residential schools.

The Residential Schools Steering Committee does not feel at this time that it is prepared to make a recommendation to the General Council Executive that we enter into formal negotiations with the federal government about a Resolution Framework agreement. Most important among the reasons is the need to do more extensive consultation both inside and outside the church.

However, the Steering Committee is seeking guidance from the Executive with respect to the principles that should guide our involvement in the whole resolution process, including any conversations with government. Such principles could frame and define not only our commitment to fully participate in the resolution of claims arising from the legacy of residential schools (whether we have a formal agreement with government or not), but also our conviction that we must increasingly focus on the larger issues of language, culture, spirituality and assimilation in pursuing our fundamental interest of justice, healing and right relations with First Nations peoples.

EXPLORATORY DIALOGUES: 1998 – 1999

The Government of Canada, with the support and participation of the Anglican, Presbyterian, United, and Roman Catholic Church/Organizations, initiated a series of eight exploratory dialogues that were held across Canada from September 1998 to May 1999. These dialogues brought together survivors of residential schools, Aboriginal healers and leaders, counsel and senior officials within government and church organizations. Extensive and wide-ranging discussions took place over a two-day period at each dialogue on issues ranging from the residential school experience and its impacts to detailed discussions around the design of dispute resolution models. The guiding principles were developed and given expression by the participants at the Wrap-up dialogue held in June 1999.

The Steering Committee believes that the principles developed through the Exploratory Dialogue process can inform the United Church understanding and response to the legacy of Residential Schools. A complete text of the stated principles can be found in "Reconciliation And Healing: Alternative Resolution Strategies For Dealing With Residential Schools Claims" published under the authority of the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Ottawa. 2000.

Guiding Principles For Working Together To Build Restoration And Reconciliation

- 1. Building Relationships through Mutual Respect and Understanding** – respect enhances our ability to see, hear and value others.
- 2. Self-design** – those expected to use an alternative process, the survivors and the institutions affected, must be equally and mutually involved in designing it.

- 3. Inclusivity** – increasing the extent of participation in designing the process will improve the potential to create innovative, community-appropriate and enduring processes.
- 4. Equal and Equitable Opportunity** – representatives of the survivor groups must be supported so they can participate on an equal footing. Special care must be given to elders and to survivors with special needs.
- 5. Community Participation** – communities should be involved wherever possible.
- 6. Health and Safety** – the health and safety of persons making disclosures of abuse must be protected at all times. Disclosure must not be made without crisis support immediately available and protocols in place.
- 7. Fair Process** – any process to resolve claims must demonstrate transparency, fairness, integrity and rigour.
- 8. Holistic and Spiritual** – within alternative processes, the broad impacts of the schools should be recognized to the extent possible.
- 9. Flexibility** – each process must be shaped to fit the specific needs of participants and affected communities.
- 10. All Decisions Consensus Based** – consensus is crucial in designing and introducing a restoration and reconciliation process.
- 11. Honour The Process** – honoring the process involves responsibility to the process, to each other, and to the principles.
- 12. Voluntary** – participation in alternatives to litigation should be on an entirely voluntary basis. The goal is to develop a range of choices – a wider framework of alternatives from which informed choices can be made to enter a process, or to leave it.
- 13. Free To Choose** – the right to make claims through the courts must be respected and maintained in any alternative processes.

SIX PRINCIPLES IN THE SEARCH FOR RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS

As we look over the statements which our church has made in the last several years – including conversation and dialogue with aboriginal people - regarding the legacy of residential schools, six principles emerge which offer us guidance in living out our repentance as well as in any negotiations with the federal government:

1. Anti-racism and Decolonization

The church's response to the legacy of residential schools must be framed by a commitment to challenge the ideology of racism and an acknowledgement of our role in the colonization of aboriginal peoples that manifested this racism.

The 37th General Council challenged the church by declaring “racism is a sin and violates God's desire for humanity.” Within our own structures and courts we are mandated to apply an “anti—racist lens” in our decision making by that same General Council (ROP, 2000, pp 115 –117). With regard to our responses to the history of the residential schools system this means that we must be aware of the context of racism that informed the colonization of aboriginal peoples. We must also be aware of that same context which informs the resistance to decolonization of aboriginal peoples in the present.

2. Holistic Approach

The church's response to the legacy of residential schools must be comprehensive and must address the loss of language, culture and spirituality as well as sexual and physical abuse within the system.

When “The Apology” was issued by former Moderator, the Very Rev. Robert Smith, in Sudbury in 1986 the confession was made that, “we imposed our civilization as a condition for accepting the gospel. We tried to make you like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that

made you what you were.” In speaking more directly to the issue of residential schools the Moderator’s Task Group on Residential Schools stated in September, 1991: “The abuse was clearly more than sexual. It was cultural, physical, spiritual and emotional.” Because the United Church in these and other statements has recognized the comprehensive nature of the legacy of the schools any agreement with government cannot be entered into in relation to part of that legacy—sexual and physical abuse—without also giving clear direction to the addressing of the much broader issues such as loss of language and culture.

3. Full Participation of Aboriginal People

Any agreement between church and government that affects the rights of survivors of residential schools or of aboriginal peoples in general needs to include the participation of aboriginal peoples in the process leading to an agreement.

At a national gathering for leaders in reconciliation and justice held in the fall of 2000 the participants affirmed the message articulated by former Moderator, the Very Rev. Stan McKay calling for tripartite collaboration among the church, the government and the Assembly of First Nations. Furthermore, the participants called for the full involvement of aboriginal peoples within the United Church in any discussions between church and government.

Because the most powerful argument for any agreement between church and government would be that it would further the seeking of justice for survivors and for aboriginal communities it is essential that aboriginal people be fully involved in such processes to ensure that that is, in fact, the primary outcome of any agreement.

4. Whole Community Involvement

With regard to the impacts of residential schools there must be an acknowledgement that these are communal as well as individual and that they are intergenerational.

In a press release issued in June, 2001 Dave Iverson stated, “Individual claimants are not the only people who were affected by this policy of assimilation. Entire communities and generations of family members have borne years of pain and suffering that must be addressed in any agreement we come to with the Government of Canada.

In a consultation with members of the All Native Circle Conference held in January, 2003 we were reminded that we cannot speak about residential schools as an “historic” event. Survivors are living people—in the present.

The children and grandchildren of survivors are also living people who carry with them the burdens of the residential schools system.

5. Healing and Education

Addressing the legacy of residential schools must always include elements of support for healing initiatives within aboriginal communities and a recognition of the need for healing and education within the non-aboriginal community.

In its message to the Church on the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1996 the General Council Executive committed the church to “supporting the healing process which is already underway but: learning more about our church’s role in Indian residential schools; engaging in the healing process ourselves; and making financial contributions to The United Church of Canada’s Healing Fund.”

Any agreement with government should enhance and not compromise the ongoing need to support healing and education both within the church and in Canadian society as a whole.

6. Building Right Relations

In all that we do in relation to our responsibility for the residential schools system the goal of working toward right relations between aboriginal and non aboriginal peoples should be upper most in our thoughts, words and actions.

By so doing we will honour the gift that comes from our Creator, “who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and [who] has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” (2Corinthians 5: 18). We will also be honouring the invitation from the aboriginal members of our church to “walk hand in hand.”