

Principles in the Search for Right Relationships

These principles were identified by the United Church's Steering Committee on Residential Schools in its report to General Council 38 (Wolfville, NS) in 2003. They were adopted by the General Council Executive in October 2003. This is excerpted from the General Council 38 Record of Proceedings and so reflects language usage from that time.

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