

The United Church of Canada
Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada
March 28, 2014 – Edmonton, Alberta

Background

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is mandated to hear from former students of residential schools as well as from those who worked in the schools and the institutions that ran them in its efforts to put the full story of the residential school system and legacy on the public record. The United Church of Canada, which ran 14 schools, chose to make a statement of accountability and commitment to the Commission at the TRC's seventh and final National Event in Edmonton, March 27-30, 2014. The theme of the event was Wisdom.

The United Church statement was presented in three parts: former Moderator Bill Phipps offered the background and content of our 1998 Apology to former students, their families and communities; current Moderator Gary Paterson spoke of what the church has begun to learn by listening to Aboriginal voices and wisdom, and made commitments going forward; and Maggie McLeod reflected on the necessity of facing difficult truths in order to heal and about the challenges still facing the church and its Aboriginal members in striving for right relations.

On the advice of the Committee on Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools, supported by the Aboriginal Ministries Council, Maggie was asked to speak last so that the Aboriginal voice and perspective would have the prominence of "the last word." ANCC Leading Elder Lorna Standingready and Aboriginal Ministries Council Chair Ray Jones, both former students of residential school, sat behind the presenters as witnesses and supporters.

Text of the United Church statement

The Very Reverend Bill Phipps:

Good afternoon. I offer special greetings to the Commission and to former students and their families. We are honoured to be in your presence.

My name is Bill Phipps, retired United Church minister living in Calgary. I was Moderator from 1997 to 2000. With me are the Right Rev. Gary Paterson, current Moderator, and the Rev. Maggie McLeod, Executive Minister, Aboriginal Ministries Circle of The United Church of Canada. I would ask that United Church people in the room stand in solidarity for just a moment, please.

We are honoured to appear before you, and we thank the Commissioners for the outstanding contribution each of you has made over the life of the TRC. We are honoured as well to be welcomed to Treaty 6 Plains Cree traditional territory. Many Indian Residential Schools were operated in the area of Treaties 6, 7, and 8, including three run by the United Church or its predecessor.

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Since the first United Church Apology to First Nations Peoples in 1986, in which we declared “*We tried to make you be like us and in so doing we helped destroy the vision that made you what you were,*” we have been on a painful, humbling, and intense journey of learning that we were wrong. The Indian Residential School System was part of a wide, deep, and destructive project designed not only to assimilate but to annihilate rich and ancient cultures of spirit, economy, governance, and love of our Earthly Home. From broken treaties to spiritual ignorance to economic slavery, we participated in a shameful strategy to destroy many nations—the peoples of this land.

When courageous survivors of residential schools first stepped out of the dark shadows of their lives to tell the truth of their experiences and to initiate lawsuits, our church was shocked and bewildered. We turned away from truth. We reacted with strenuous denial, fear, even anger. Our good name and the good intentions of our ancestors were being attacked. We battled the federal government as to who was primarily responsible, and feared that the lawsuits would bankrupt our church. There was defensive and legalistic opposition to taking responsibility. We were at a huge moral crossroads and the internal conflict was intense.

In the face of heated resistance, we found the moral ground to offer a second Apology, which I delivered in 1998:

“As Moderator of The United Church of Canada, I wish to speak the words that many people have wanted to hear for a very long time. On behalf of The United Church of Canada, I apologize for the pain and suffering that our church’s involvement in the Indian Residential School system has caused. We are aware of some of the damage that this cruel and ill-conceived system of assimilation has perpetrated on Canada’s First Nations peoples. For this we are truly and most humbly sorry.

“To those individuals who were physically, sexually, and mentally abused as students of the Indian Residential Schools in which The United Church of Canada was involved, I offer you our most sincere apology. You did nothing wrong. You were and are the victims of evil acts that cannot under any circumstances be justified or excused.

“We know that many within our church will still not understand why each of us must bear the scar, the blame for this horrendous period in Canadian history. But the truth is, we are the bearers of many blessings from our ancestors, and therefore, we must also bear their burdens.”

Our burdens include dishonouring the depths of the struggles of First Nations peoples and the richness of your gifts. We seek God’s forgiveness and healing grace as we take steps toward building respectful, compassionate and loving relationships with First Nations peoples.

We are in the midst of a long and painful journey as we reflect on the cries that we did not or would not hear, and how we have behaved as a church. As we travel this difficult road of repentance, reconciliation, and healing, we commit ourselves to work toward ensuring that we will never again use our power as a church to hurt others with attitudes of racial and spiritual superiority.

“We pray that you will hear the sincerity of our words today and that you will witness the living out of our apology in our actions in the future.”

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The Right Reverend Gary Paterson:

As Moderator of the United Church of Canada, I am honoured and grateful to have the opportunity to speak to the Commission and through it, to survivors and their families.

Let me repeat those closing words of the Apology offered in 1998, because they continue to ring true: *“We pray that you will hear the sincerity of our words today and that you will witness the living out of our apology in our actions in the future.”*

We still have much to learn, including how to listen with our hearts; and, in addition, what concrete actions need to accompany these words.

We are grateful to our Aboriginal brothers and sisters in the church who have been willing to hang in with us, with patience, honesty and love. You have taught us to face the reality of what we have done, and you have helped us identify steps toward reconciliation.

Thank you to all former students and their family members for the courage and strength you have demonstrated in the telling of your stories; my heart, our hearts, have been broken open by what we heard... the loneliness, humiliation, confusion, deprivation, violation, and abuse. It has not been easy to hear—which gives me a glimmer of what it must cost you to speak. Your determination to find healing; your willingness to open up such traumatic memories and, in vulnerability and pain, share your stories, here, and in other listening circles—it is astounding and deeply moving.

We in the United Church have had to confront our own complicity in actions taken... and not taken, which led to unimaginable damage to so many, and then, as fallout, to families and communities. We have had to accept responsibility for the terrible harm we have done through the Indian Residential School system. Generations of pain and loss!

We have been on a difficult journey of listening, opening ourselves to your truth.

We have learned that “good intentions” are never enough, especially when wrapped in the misguided zeal of cultural and spiritual superiority.

Thus, we have learned that we were wrong to reject, discredit, and yes, even outlaw traditional Indigenous spiritual practice and ceremony; in amazing circles of grace, as we have begun to listen to the wisdom of the Elders, we have found our own faith enriched and deepened. And we are grateful.

At the General Council in 2012 at which I was elected Moderator of the United Church, we adopted a revised crest which incorporates the four sacred colours and the words “All My Relations” in the Mohawk language—Akwe Nia’Tetewa:neren—not only a way to recognize and correct the historic wrong of ignoring the presence of Aboriginal congregations and voices when our church was formed in 1925, but also a way to go forward, to learn and embrace insights from Indigenous spirituality.

In the past 15 years, the United Church has had to examine and change the way we see ourselves as a “justice-seeking” church, the way we look at our history and theology; and we are discerning our own need for healing. We recognize with deep regret how easy it is to do harm; to deny what is happening; to side-step responsibility. Repentance is a journey of discovering who

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has been hurt by our actions, and how they have been hurt; of making amends, and changing our attitudes and behaviours.

And so, we commit ourselves to continue the spiritual practices of listening and learning, healing and reparation, until relationships are in balance...respectful, just, and healthy.

We commit to denouncing the racism that continues in the church and in Canadian society, to naming the destructive attitudes and policies that arise from that sin, and to working for equity and justice.

We commit to ensuring the full involvement of Aboriginal people in all decisions that affect them.

We commit to supporting the long, hard, step-by-step process of recovering language and culture.

We commit to fully participating with others in working to implement the TRC's recommendations in its Final Report.

We pray that our actions will match our words, and together we will continue the journey towards a richer, deeper embodiment of all my relations.

The Reverend Maggie McLeod:

Tansi. I want to acknowledge the people of Treaty 6 Plains Cree traditional territory and thank them for allowing me into their Territory. And, I want to thank the former students of the Indian Residential Schools for sharing their stories. I acknowledge Elder Lorna Standingready of the All Native Circle Conference and Ray Jones, Chair of the Aboriginal Ministries Council.

My father, Wilfred Dieter, was a survivor of the File Hills Residential School. His father and mother, Fred Dieter and Marybelle Cote, attended the Industrial School in Regina. While the legacy of those *institutions* has had a detrimental impact on my family and on the communities that I serve, I must acknowledge the dignified and extraordinary spirit and nature of those same people, as well as all survivors.

As Executive Minister for the Aboriginal Ministry Circle my responsibility is to coordinate programs that focus on healing, leadership, and community development for our 59 communities of faith within the United Church. Before this work I served in Ojibwa communities north of Toronto.

My own call to ministry was fraught with struggle. While the United Church had been a large part of my life, I questioned the Creator: Why I should take this direction? Why would I make a commitment to an institution that was complicit in causing harm to my father, my grandparents, my relatives, and many, many others?

As I wrestled with these questions, the truth was that the United Church was one of the very few places I knew of where I could engage in communal discourse on matters of reclamation of identity, spiritual wholeness, creating just relationships, and building reconciliation.

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The journey of our church in *its* call to the ministry of reconciliation has also been fraught with challenges; some of which were highlighted by Bill and Gary. The church is learning that it is through the acknowledgement of a troubled past and by experiencing the turmoil and distress of this recognition, then and only then, can we be propelled from pain to new life. The church has taken baby steps in understanding that the path to true and authentic reconciliation lies deep within our hearts. It is not a program or initiative that has a beginning and an end.

As we come to realize that the work of healing and rebuilding will take generations, and will need tremendous support and commitment, this will not “sit” well with many in the church. Questions like “When will healing come? Why cannot they get over it?” still linger. There remains much work to be done.

Patterns of colonized thinking remain. We grapple to transform old habits. Recent learnings have shown the church the importance of having Indigenous people at table *before* the path has been determined.

In 1986 the Apology to the First Peoples that was delivered by Moderator Bob Smith stated: “*We [the dominant church] tried to make you [First Nations peoples] be like us.*” We are still unlearning and striving to realize the gift of interculturalism. We are learning that Indigenous ways of doing and being, while different, are a tremendous gift to the whole church and indeed to the whole of society.

Strong Indigenous leadership is emerging and it needs ongoing support and encouragement. This leadership is integral to the revitalization of Aboriginal communities of faith. We are finding our voice and building upon it. Yet we do struggle with confidence and trust at times—trust and confidence in others and within ourselves. On the road to reconciliation, we will have to partake in many courageous conversations to rebuild these essentials.

Truth is paradoxical. It is “both/and,” painful and life-giving; it remains the only path to reconciliation for the church. The apologies of 1986 and 1998 have not been accepted by the Indigenous community of the United Church—they have, however, been acknowledged. So, the Indigenous people wait, not passively, but engaged—seeking to walk together side by side, looking to take the lead from time to time, to show a new way forward.

An ongoing challenge for the church is to embrace Indigenous wisdom. Wisdom teachings are at the roots of Hebrew and Christian sacred texts. They are counterintuitive—they go against the grain. Reconciliation first requires of us to be uncomfortable—and disturbed by the status quo.

The church has all that it needs to be loving enough and faithful enough to continue a painful and determined movement forward. For how long, we may ask? In my view, ultimately, until we have lived out the Creator’s purpose—which is to take an active role in the restoration of dignity to all people, and to the whole earth.

May our witness strengthen our resolve to move from a state of survival to a state of thriving and forgiveness that is shown to us in the former students of the residential school system who inspire our ongoing journey.