

Statement on UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the Framework for Reconciliation

March 31, 2016

On June 2, 2015, The United Church of Canada, along with the other church parties to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, welcomed the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). These calls include the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation. Call to Action #48 specifically calls on the churches to do this work, and to report by March 31, 2016.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has previously said of the Declaration, "It provides a momentous opportunity for States and Indigenous Peoples to strengthen their relationships, promote reconciliation and ensure that the past is not repeated." The TRC Commissioners have offered the churches that same "momentous opportunity," giving us a concrete way to transform a relationship of colonization and exclusion into one of mutuality, equity, and respect.

Today, The United Church of Canada expresses publicly our commitment to honouring Call to Action #48, adopting and complying with the principles, norms, and standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation.

Today is also an important moment in the life of the United Church, as the Aboriginal Ministries Council, accompanied by the non-Indigenous (settler) church, begins a process of consultation to determine its vision and future structure.

The United Church has been on a journey towards reconciliation for more than 30 years. In 1986 the settler church responded to the long-standing call of Indigenous Peoples to apologize for its role in colonization and the destruction of their cultures and spiritual practices. This Apology was acknowledged by the Indigenous church two years later, with the expressed hope that the church would live out the Apology in "action and sincerity."

We have adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a commitment to honouring that expectation of Indigenous Peoples in the United Church.

We understand the principles, norms, and standards of the Declaration to be reflected in:

- The right to self-determination
- The right to cultural and spiritual identity
- The right to participate in decision-making
- The right to lands and resources
- The right to free, prior, and informed consent
- The right to be free from discrimination

Indigenous Peoples are self-determining and engaged in the church's decision-making processes. One key structure for this is the Aboriginal Ministries Council and its constituent parts. But we also understand that our practices "for many years resulted in the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples from visioning, leadership and decision-making." (*The Manual*, 2013, p.4)

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The United Church recognizes Indigenous Peoples' right to their own cultural and spiritual practices, and acknowledges how as an institution it continues to be enriched by Indigenous wisdom and ways of knowing. But it would be misleading to say that these principles are fully understood and lived out in the church, or that Indigenous Peoples in the church are free from discrimination.

The United Church has a tradition of advocating for Indigenous justice on issues such as land and treaty rights; clean water; murdered and missing Indigenous women; and equitable funding for social welfare, education, and health care. Yet the church still struggles to understand how important the resolution of these issues will be in achieving true reconciliation.

These gaps between intention and results demonstrate that there is still much for us to do as we seek to make the Apology tangible and real. Adopting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation sets us a new standard for that journey. It requires us to review all aspects of our life as a church, from how we worship and build community to our human resources and finance policies to how we practise advocacy. It requires us to revisit our identity as a church, and how that identity does or does not foster relationships of mutuality, equality and respect, both within and beyond the walls of the church.

To that end, the United Church has created a task group on implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Comprising representatives from the Indigenous church, the Conference structure, and committees of General Council, the task group will develop a process to:

- Engage the church in learning more about the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the meaning of its “principles, norms, and standards”
- Assess the church's current alignment with the Declaration in all areas of its institutional life
- Provide mechanisms for addressing non-alignment
- Provide a mechanism with which to assess its progress
- Establish a mode of accountability

We acknowledge that this work will be neither quick nor easy. The settler church is only beginning to absorb the shock of its complicity in creating the inequities facing Indigenous Peoples. The Indigenous church is also facing the challenge of decolonization. The 1986 Apology shifted us as a denomination; it impacted our identity in ways that we couldn't understand at the time. Adopting the UN Declaration as the framework for reconciliation brings us to a similar moment now.

Yet we know, not just in our hearts and minds, but where our faith resides, that this is the path we are meant to be on together. “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself...and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” (2 Corinthians 5:18–19)

We are not sure what lies ahead as we complete this turn towards justice and deepen our commitment to a new identity, a new relationship, and a new way of being, both in the church and in the world.

A new relationship is waiting, and we turn our faces towards it.

