



Intellectual
Quadrant

The Church and the Peoples of the Land

*By The Rt. Rev. Mark L. MacDonald,
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THE ESSAY THAT follows is only slightly dated. The approach it proposes and the ideas it expresses are still, from my point of view, quite relevant. In fact, they are a part of a number of processes that are gathering in intensity, rather than winding down. With some joy, it is important to note that the growing intensity of these things is the increasing conflict between colonialism and a new way of living for all peoples.

For the churches that are a part of the Western cultural framework, the ideas here are inescapable, though some may wish to avoid or ignore them. Though the church has asked the nations to honour both their treaties with The Peoples of the Land and Seas, in specific, and Aboriginal Rights, in general, they have not applied these insights to their own governance and action. I bring up this example, in part as a continuation of the focus of the paper but, more broadly, to underline the deep problems that Western cultural forms have in escaping the systemic and pervasive nature of their on-going colonialism. Even those institutions that proclaim their liberation from these living and wounding relics are controlled by their embedded and corrosive logic.

Happily a response is emerging that celebrates the spiritual independence and authority of the power of the Spirit in the People of the Land. Motivated by traditional and Biblical spirituality, more and more Indigenous Peoples are living out their spiritual authority in ways that are prophetic, both for themselves and the rest of Creation. These

things are very hopeful even and, perhaps, especially so as they happen against a backdrop of an economic, social, and environmental collapse.

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In its break from the immediate jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome, The Church of England cited its authority and freedom, in Christ and within the limits set by Scripture, to act as a people, a nation, to oversee its own pastoral needs. As the Anglican Communion developed through colonial expansion, this principle of national autonomy has been rigorously observed and, throughout the modern era, it has never been seriously questioned.

Today, however, a serious question of consistency must be raised. The Indigenous peoples of the Anglican Communion, the Peoples of the Land, must now ask about the relevancy of this principle to their life and well being. More than a concern for fairness, it challenges the soul of the Communion, for it raises fundamental questions about the nature of the Gospel itself.

For a number of pressing reasons, the boundaries of Indigenous authority are a central issue. The nature of Episcopal oversight and jurisdiction is one area of special concern. However, there is an urgency here that goes way beyond administrative detail. The nature of the Gospel and the horizon of the Promise of Christ are at question. Is the Good News really for all people and all Nations?

The Peoples of the Land and the Modern age of Mission

Four hundred years ago, the Church of England's "modern" mission began with the commissioning of the Jamestown Colony in North America. It may be noted that this was also one of the first steps in the development of the Anglican Communion. One of the distinguishing

elements of "modern" mission is its criticism of the intense militarism and overt coercion of the medieval crusades. However these missions, themselves, were partners with a global-wide colonial expansion. At times enthusiastically supportive, at other times critical, of the new kind of violence and evil associated with colonialism, the church and its mission were shaped by it. Though the church may not always have endorsed the vicious aspects of colonial power towards the Indigenous nations, its large and loud silence regarding this misery is a continuing source of shame.

Despite the delusions created by the inherent racism in colonialism, the churches of the colonial powers have often implicitly recognized the authority of the Peoples of the Land, the Indigenous nations. This is especially seen in the churches' advocacy of and for the treaties – treaties that recognize the authority, sovereignty, and right to self-determination of the Peoples of the Land. The church played a critical role in the making of treaties between the colonial powers and the Indigenous nations. Often a signatory party to the treaties, to this day the church has consistently, if not uniformly, advocated for their integrity and consistently described their observance by the colonial nation states as a fundamental element of justice. The church's often rugged insistence on the validity and importance of the treaties looks somewhat curious, as there has been an almost universal failure to recognize their implications for its own relationship with the Peoples of the Land.

Though the church has many reasons for self-examination in its relationship with The Peoples of the Land, we must sound a positive note here. Though it is now clear that many, inside and outside the church, wished to exploit the Gospel as a weapon of colonial power, the joyful and divine reality is that the message is greater than the intent of the messenger. Despite human intent of sinfulness, it is the success of God's action in the Gospel among the Peoples of the Land that now brings us to a full recognition of the authority of the Indigenous Nations. Though the church's presentation of the Gospel was crafted to subdue, oppress and, at times, eliminate the Peoples of the Land, the Gospel actually has become a call for liberation. Even when used as an instrument to bury life, the Gospel brings resurrection.

The Word made Flesh

Throughout the New Testament, beginning with Jesus' own pre-resurrection ministry and mission, we observe that the proclamation of the Good News is the Spirit's vehicle for the work of incarnating (making flesh) in community the Word of God. We may further note that the Spirit shows great respect for the cultural-linguistic geography of those who are evangelized. As the Word becomes flesh, the Rule or Reign of God is established. The Rule of God recognizes a vital and sacred bond of earth, language, culture and people. Anastasios Vannoulatos comments that Mission is the "incarnation of the Logos of God into the language and customs of a country" and the "growth of an Indigenous Church which will sanctify and endorse the people's personality."

By redirecting the traffic from Temple to Village and home, Jesus shaped the mission of the church (Luke 10:1-24). From this point on, those sent are not only to bring the Good News, they are also to recognize the "sacred geography" of the places and people they visit. As the mission of Jesus begins to expand, the Spirit itself shows great respect for the authority that comes from that special and sacred relationship of land, language, people and culture. For example, in that great undoing of the Tower of Babel, the Spirit's new Pentecost respects the linguistic and cultural identity of the many nations gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-21). When the Gospel pushes the church beyond its expected boundaries into the Gentile nations, the Spirit lovingly and carefully transforms the distinctions between peoples but does not obliterate them (Acts 15:1-21; Galatians 2:1-10; Ephesians 2:11-22).

The Church and the Indigenous Nations

Though implicitly acknowledging the authority of the Peoples of the Land, the church has almost completely denied the Indigenous nations the formal possibility of recognizing catholicity in their churches. The Peoples of the Land have been assumed into someone else's local, in the name of loyalty to the Universal. The Peoples of the Land clearly have

all the elements of nationhood that the United Nations and the World Court require — common culture and heritage; common language; stable geographic location over time; internal laws of behaviour accepted by the community; boundaries recognized by other nations and formal agreements or treaties with other nations (See Mander, 1991, Chapters 11 and 12). For the most part, the authority of this and the freedom it implies is unacknowledged in the administrative life of the church. Even where nationhood has been acknowledged, the present system of church jurisdiction endorses the ongoing boundaries of colonialism, as they exist in the modern nation state.

Wherever the God-given boundaries of the Peoples of the Land (Acts 17:22-28) are crossed by the often hostile political border of modern nation states, the authority, freedom, and sacred reality of the Peoples cultural geography is dissected. In our time, we have seen a dangerous extension of nation states' power through trans-national business and finance. This new form of colonialism further threatens the existence of the Peoples of the Land. The church's complicity with such forces is a serious matter.

The hour has come

At Lambeth 1998, much concern was expressed for the plight of "the South" relative to the power and wealth of "the North." In this discussion, those who are often the "poorest of the poor" — the marginalized Peoples of the Land — were completely invisible. Often residing in "the North," they were not on the Lambeth agenda. Nevertheless, the Peoples of the Land are still victims of colonial-style genocide, from both "Northern" and "Southern" nation states.

As we enter a new century and millennium, it should be noted that, according to a United Nations estimate, the People of the Land are the stewards of one-fourth of the world's remaining usable land. Threatened now, we can only imagine the threat to the Peoples when they are the one remaining obstacle to the globe-destroying appetites of the nation states and their partnership with the culture of consumerism.

The church can do something. It can acknowledge what God has made. It can finally and fully recognize the implications of the treaties it has so long fought others to honour. It can acknowledge the existence and authority of the Peoples of the Land. ■



For reflection and discussion

- 1) In what ways is colonialism inherently racist?
- 2) How does the present system of church jurisdiction endorse the ongoing boundaries of colonialism as they exist in the modern nation state?
- 3) How is the church complicit in the “new form of colonialism” characterized by imposition of political borders on “the God given boundaries of the Peoples of the Land.”
- 4) Why do Western cultural forms find it difficult to escape the systemic and pervasive nature of their on-going colonialism?
- 5) Discuss how the churches’ “large and loud silence” regarding the misery suffered by the Peoples of the Land is a continuing source of shame.
- 6) How are the Peoples of the Land “still victims of colonial-style genocide, from both “Northern” and “Southern” nation states?”
- 7) What can the churches do to protect the Peoples of the Land when they are “the one remaining obstacle to the globe-destroying appetites of the nation states and its partnership with the culture of consumerism?”

The Rt. Rev. Mark L. MacDonald assumed office as the Anglican Church of Canada’s first National Indigenous Bishop, in 2007. Among his published works are “Native American Youth Ministries,” co-authored with Dr. Carol Hampton, in *Resource Book for Ministries with Youth and Young Adults*, the Episcopal Church Center, New York, NY, 1995, and “It’s in the Font: Sacramental connections between faith and environment,” *Soundings*, July 6, 1994, Vol. 16, No. 5.

Study Guide

The Box, the Book and the Preacher “Beyond Survival”

Key Address by Mark MacDonald

This is a suggested outline for using the DVD The Box, the Book, and the Preacher with a group.

Time: 60-120 minutes to show the full DVD and have discussion time; longer if including the opening discussion. For shorter gatherings (30–60 minutes), use only one section.

Opening Discussion (optional)

Time: 10 minutes

Discuss one or more of the following in small groups of three to four:

- On a chalkboard, flip chart, handout or PowerPoint, provide the group with an image of a church containing a Bible and a stick figure preacher. (Use a simple line drawing.) This represents the church as “box, book and preacher.”
- Our struggle as a church seems to centre on one or more of these three items. We struggle to get out of the box to really engage the community, or we can’t afford to keep the box heated/maintained, or we find it hard to attract or pay the right kind of preacher. As far as the book (the Bible) is concerned, many don’t read it or know much about it and are afraid to admit that.
- What is it like at your church?
- What are the boxes we need to get out of as a church?

1. Play the first section of the DVD

Length of section: 20 minutes

Time for group discussion: 10-40 minutes in small groups with plenary report back if needed.

Discuss one or more of the following questions:

- 1) When Jesus sent his disciples out he told them, “Eat what is placed before you” (Luke 10:8). In what ways do we, or does our church, refuse to “eat” or engage in the cultures of those who seem different (e.g., younger generations, different cultural groups, people of a different faith, people with no claimed faith)?
- 2) “If God is in the little circles of our lives, God will be in the big circles of our lives,” says Mark MacDonald in the DVD. Can the church support people in their desire to have God present in the small circles of their lives (e.g., couples, immediate family, extended family, friends, committees)?
- 3) Mark MacDonald says that Jesus “redirects the traffic” from getting into the temple to going out to the community. This suggests that we might focus less on trying to get people into the box and more on going out into the community with the message that “God has come near. Turn around and believe the good news!”
- 4) What are the circles of community outside your church (e.g., groups, communities, marginalized peoples) that God loves and is concerned about right now? How can you become involved with those communities as a way of engaging God’s mission in the world? How can the church support you and others in that work?
- 5) Mark MacDonald suggests that our pattern of evangelism is shaped by a first impulse to reject the culture that is different from ours, but that actually God may be active in every culture before “the church” arrives. Where do we see the good in the culture of younger generations, new Canadians, Buddhism, the Muslim faith, New Age spirituality? What critiques would we accept from those communities? What critiques would we respectfully offer?

II. Play the second section of the DVD

Length of section: 17 minutes

Time for group discussion: 10-40 minutes in small groups with plenary report back if needed.

Discuss one or more of the following questions:

- 1) Share a story of when you, or someone you know, has experienced the real power of the gospel, of Christ, to touch and shape your life.
- 2) Where has the gospel “jumped the bog” in your community (e.g., in music, art, movies, plays, community groups, the lives of people).
- 3) Ezekiel 37:3 asks the question of a dispirited people of God, “Can these bones live?” If that were asked of the church, what would you respond?

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Dance the Reconciliation Dance

By Harold Roscher

IT WASN'T UNTIL I was thirty-five that I experienced my own, personal moment of truth and reconciliation. It was then that the government of Canada formally told me I was an Indian.

Though Native Canadian by birth, I was adopted by an immigrant family from the Netherlands. I saw myself, and was treated by friends and family, as a dark-haired little Dutch boy. Even today, I speak better Dutch than Cree.

Despite my adopted context, there was no doubt I had a different heritage, a different story than many of my loved ones. In October 1995, news came that would change my life: I was now considered an Indian, placed on the government's official registry as having Cree descent. Suddenly I had two stories for myself: one that was obvious, and one that required unearthing. I was a Dutch boy raised in the Christian Reformed Church, but I was also a Cree man with a rich Native Canadian heritage. So began my own journey of reconciliation.

I am not journeying alone. On June 11, 2008, a similar, but corporate journey began for all Canadians:

“On behalf of the government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you ... to apologize to aboriginal peoples for Canada's role in the Indian residential schools system ... You have been working on

recovering from this experience for a long time, and in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey.”

Prime Minister Stephen Harper stood in the House of Commons and apologized for the government’s policy of assimilation¹ towards First Nations, Inuit and Métis people in Canada. It was an historic moment of reconciliation, long awaited and much deserved by the Native Canadian community.

I am proud of the courage and humility displayed by our Prime Minister. And I’m even more grateful for the grace with which our Aboriginal leaders accepted the apology, urging Canadians in turn to embrace the honour we bring to each other when are defined by love, not by difference.

No doubt many Canadians were previously unaware of the assimilation policies of the past, or at least unaware of the extent of its damage. In some ways, this corporate apology represented a vindication for me, after arguing with family, friends and church communities about government policies that have held our people captive. Even more satisfying will be the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission,² set to travel across Canada hearing the many stories of hurt and pain caused by the residential schools.

I hope that Canadians will listen intently to the stories this Commission will uncover.³ It is in listening that the burdens of survivors and their loved ones will be released, and the healing will begin. I also hope we listen for the positive stories of nuns and priests nurturing young children to become all they were created to be. Our actions as

churchgoers and as citizens can extend hands of help and of hope to the damaged.

It has been ten years since I discovered I was Cree, and my own reconciliation process continues with each new thing I learn about my culture and ceremonial life. In the same way, the apology from the government is the starting point on our broader journey of reconciliation. It reminds me of the Snake Dance (known also as a “unity dance”), where we dance in a single line, then separate into two single lines (signifying the shedding of skin), then come together again in a single line as a new creation, ready to reflect the Creator’s glory.

In our ritual and ceremonial lives we as Aboriginal peoples dance as a reminder of our covenant relationship to the creator. So I invite you to dance the reconciliation dance with my people right across Canada in friendship and peace as a reflection of our covenant relationship with Christ. When we share each others’ burdens and joys, the Creator’s glory shines brighter for all to see. ■

1. See CBC news story at <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/06/11/pm-state-ment.html>

2. See the web site of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at <http://www.trc-cvr.ca/>

3. For more information on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and on general Indian and Northern Affairs, click to www.rememberingthechildren.ca and <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ai/index-eng.asp>



For reflection and discussion

- 1) Can you dance with a partner you do not know?
- 2) Who should be the partner that leads?
- 3) Does changing the dance require a shared knowledge to move gracefully?
- 4) How does the color of skin influence picking your Dance partner?

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

An Introduction

By Karihwakeron Tim Thompson

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the General Assembly on September 13, 2007 after more than two decades of development and deliberation. For Indigenous peoples around the world, this was an historic occasion. The preamble and forty-six articles provide an internationally recognized minimum standard for relationships between nation states and Indigenous peoples.

The Declaration, in many ways, is an extension of other United Nations instruments which have sought to strengthen human rights. In fact the preamble of the Declaration references that Indigenous peoples, like all peoples of the world, have the right to self-determination which is reaffirmed in the Charter of the United Nations, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action.¹

1. UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html>

Harold Roscher is a man of Cree decent who, through adoption, grew up as a dark haired little Dutch boy. He now serves as Chaplain and Director of the Edmonton Native Healing Centre, a ministry sponsored by the Christian Reformed Church in North America. His journey is reconciling his people with the Creator through our ceremonial and traditional teachings in the name of Jesus.

Indigenous peoples have been seeking international remedies to help resolve conflicts with nation states since 1923 when Chief Deskahe from the Haudenosaunee Council at Grand River Territory/Six Nations sought the intervention of the League of Nations² in a conflict between the government of Canada and the Haudenosaunee. The League of Nations did not make room for Indigenous peoples, but Chief Deskahe's efforts helped inspire subsequent generations of Indigenous peoples around the world to seek international recognition of their human rights.³

In addition to the right to self-determination, the Declaration recognizes that Indigenous peoples have the right to a nationality, to traditional lands, Indigenous languages and cultures, and the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation. Canada was one of only four nation

states to oppose the Declaration claiming, among other things, that the wording of the document is vague, that it provides Indigenous peoples with veto power over nation state initiatives, and restores Indigenous claims to lands which have already been ceded through treaties.⁴

The government's opposition the Declaration was somewhat surprising since Canada had been a central participant in its development. Although a resolution was passed by the Canadian Parliament on April 8, 2008, to endorse the Declaration, the government of Canada has so far refused to take any steps to reverse their position on the matter. An open letter dated May 1, 2008, signed by over 100 legal scholars and other experts questioned the government of Canada's rationale for failing to support the Declaration.⁵

Domestic remedies have not been very effective in addressing Indigenous issues. In Canada, there are land disputes which have not been resolved for over 200 years despite the fact that the highest law in the land recognizes Aboriginal and Treaty rights.⁶ Indigenous peoples continually rank at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder in areas such as health, income, and education. Rates of Indigenous mortality, imprisonment and child custody are cause for great concern.

Numerous Supreme Court of Canada decisions have recognized that the honour of the Crown is always at stake in dealings with Indigenous peoples.⁷ However there are few mechanisms available to hold the government accountable for its conduct. It has been well documented, for example, that funding for Indigenous schools on

2. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/league_nations_01.shtml

3. See Woo, G. *Canada's Forgotten Founders: The Modern Significance of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Application for Membership in the League of Nations* http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/elj/lgd/2003_1/woo/woo.rtf. From the Abstract: "In the 1920s the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, also known as the Iroquois Six Nations from Grand River Ontario, applied for membership in the League of Nations. They maintained that they were independent allies, not subjects, of Britain." From the Conclusion: "If the Six Nations had been allowed to present their case at the League of Nations or in the newly formed international court, perhaps the whole history of the twentieth century would have been different. Perhaps politics would have been defined according to relational rather than territorial criteria. Perhaps the boundaries of territorial resources would have been decided through rational grassroots legal consultation, formed on the basis of agreements reached among all those affected instead of on the basis of colonial precedent backed by the use of brute force. We might have developed institutions designed to assist consensus formation. We might have found the means to address social problems before they degenerate to the point that they elicit responses founded on anger and blind rage. Perhaps the need to define the crime of genocide would never have arisen. We can only wonder as we head into the 21st century with new, and similarly undefined challenges before us. We can only wonder, though surely, if we want to decolonise the future we must first decolonise our understanding of the past."

4. Canada's Position on the United Nations Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ap/ia/pubs/ddr/ddr-eng.asp>

5. http://www.amnesty.ca/index_resources/open_letters/un_ip_declaration_experts_letter.pdf

6. <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/const/9.html#anchorsc> (7, 35.1): The existing Aboriginal and treaty rights of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed.

7. See for example *Haida Nation v. British Columbia (Minister of Forests)*, [2004] 3 S.C.R. 511, 2004 SCC 73.

reserve is significantly less than funding provided for provincial schools serving the mainstream population. This is a key reason why Indigenous education achievement rates continue to be lower than mainstream. Yet few avenues exist domestically to create a change in behaviour.⁸ The Declaration provides hope for Indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world that states can be held accountable to an internationally accepted standard of conduct.

The Declaration provides a sound basis to improve the relationship between Indigenous peoples and governments in Canada. To ensure that adherence to the Declaration is enforceable, the government of Canada

8. See National Chief Phil Fontaine “Speaking Notes For Council of the Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) Summit on Aboriginal Education Strengthening Aboriginal Success Moving Toward Learn Canada 2020 February 23, 2009” <http://www.afn.ca/article.asp?id=4418>: “This crisis is compounding at an accelerated pace because of the federal government’s chronic underfunding of First Nation education. This chronic underfunding is due to an outdated federal funding formula that was capped at 2% increases per year since 1996. This cap does not keep pace with inflation or population growth, which is at 6.2% in First Nations communities. This cap has left our communities with an accumulated deficit of \$1.7 billion from 1996 to 2005. The projected deficit in 2010 will be \$304 million alone. And yet our students have to contend with unhealthy and unsafe schools, overcrowding, extreme mold proliferation, high carbon dioxide levels, sewage fumes in schools, unheated classrooms, frozen pipes and other health hazards. These challenges do not include the fact that First Nations schools receive ZERO dollars for libraries, technology, sports and recreation, languages, employee benefits and School Information Management Systems. Our crisis is further complicated by imaginary jurisdictional confusion perpetuated by the federal government that causes a paralysis of action. Indian Affairs Officials have stated that when the federal government devolved First Nations schools, they did not devolve school systems; all they devolved was local administration with a very narrow scope of authority and funding for each school. As a result, First Nations students and schools are caught in this jurisdictional wrangling between provincial education systems, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and First Nation systems – all the while we see drop-out rates increasing and quality of services decreasing. The ones who suffer the damage are First Nation youth.”

must take steps to fully adopt the Declaration in legislation. This would not be the first time international principles were incorporated into law in Canada. The key principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights eventually found their way into Canadian law through the Bill of Rights⁹ and later in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.¹⁰ Canada can demonstrate leadership in the world by bringing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into full force and effect domestically. Ideally the provincial and territorial governments would then do the same thing.

Any fears that the Declaration is inconsistent with the Constitution Act could be addressed through a reference to the Supreme Court of Canada. All existing federal policies and programs affecting Indigenous peoples will need to be reviewed to ensure compliance with the Declaration. Nobody said it would be easy, but noting the example of the apartheid regime in South Africa, it is possible to dismantle a state apparatus built on colonial control and work together to create something new, vibrant and brimming with potential. ■

9. <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/c-12.3/text.html>

10. <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/const/9.html#anchorsc> (7)



For reflection and discussion

- 1) Why is it that domestic remedies have not been very effective in addressing Indigenous issues in Canada?
- 2) Why do First Nation, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada continually rank at the bottom of the ladder in socio-economic attainment in areas such as health, income, and education? Why are the rates of Indigenous mortality, imprisonment, and suicide and child custody so high?
- 3) The Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that the honour of the Crown is always at stake in dealings with Indigenous peoples. What does this mean?
- 4) Funding for Indigenous schools on reserve is significantly less than funding provided for provincial schools serving the mainstream population. Is this discrimination? Is this racism?

Karihwakeron Tim Thompson is from the bear clan of the Mohawk Nation at Wahta Mohawk Territory. He is a consultant and educator who has worked with the Chiefs of Ontario, Assembly of First Nations and Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres. He was President of the founding board of the Enaahgtig Healing Lodge and Learning Centre and served as President of FNTI, a leading Indigenous post-secondary institute.¹¹ Karihwakeron was a founding member of the Aboriginal Issues Committee for the Canadian Race Relations Foundation and a member of the Haudenosaunee Education Committee.

11. <http://www.fnti.net>

Speaking Truths; Hearing Truths; Becoming Reconciled

Challenges of the Truth
and Reconciliation Commission

By Marlene Brant Castellano

CANADA'S TRUTH AND Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has a mandate to receive statements from individuals and communities about the experience and effects of residential schooling. This part of TRC activities is about truth-telling — creating a supportive environment in which people who have suffered injury can reveal themselves and receive assurance that their pain, their anger and their hopes have been heard, and that they are respected. Restoring dignity is an essential part of enabling people to heal from past hurts and reconcile themselves to the memories and scars that stay with them throughout their lives.

As we anticipate the start-up of TRC hearings the questions arise: Who will hear the truths being spoken? Who will listen with compassion and voice the commitment that never again will Canadians tolerate assaults on First Nation, Inuit and Métis families and children; that never again will Canada attempt to erase the memories, languages and cultural ties among Aboriginal peoples.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, in the Apology delivered in June 2008,¹ acknowledged past errors and promised safety from their repetition.

However, action by citizens to own a degree of responsibility for the past and to create more respectful relationships in the future is necessary to translate the Apology from a speech to a lived reality. Truth-hearing and action at a thousand sites across Canada are required to achieve reconciliation, the second and more challenging part of the TRC mandate.

Public events are to be scheduled; newspapers, radio and television networks have signaled readiness to provide coverage; Aboriginal and church leaders have undertaken a tour to raise awareness. But what will move ordinary citizens to listen with their hearts and engage with uncomfortable truths? What will stop them from switching channels to more agreeable diversions?

I believe that faith communities and social justice advocates have an important role to play in helping the Truth and Reconciliation Commission frame the dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples about residential schools. What should such a dialogue include?

First, a lot of attention has been given to the payments being made to an estimated 80,000 Survivors. While \$25,000, an average payout, may repair a house or pay off debts or help a grandchild attend college, Survivors point out that no amount of money can compensate for a stolen childhood. The message needs to be heard that compensation represents a beginning of reconciliation, not the end of the story.

Second, the effects of residential school experience are very present in the lives of children, grandchildren and community members whose relationships, self-confidence and trust in the future have been violently disrupted. Reconciliation is about remembering the past in order to create a different, more hopeful future.

1. Text of the Prime Minister's Apology is available on-line at: <http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=2149>

Third, residential schooling was just one of a series of historic traumas that dispossessed First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples of their lands and livelihood, introduced disease that undermined the health of whole communities, and devalued or outlawed cultural and spiritual practices that gave meaning and order to their lives. Revitalization of Aboriginal cultures and communities is a far-reaching project that deserves public support.

Finally, the prosperity of Canada as a nation derives from the wealth of the land. Aboriginal disadvantage is a result of being pushed to the margins of settler society and denied the benefits of the lands that sustained them from time immemorial. To the extent that gross, life-destroying inequalities are allowed to continue, the enormous wrong of residential schooling is repeated in less visible but equally harmful attitudes and actions.

Are Canadians ready for such a dialogue, considering the place of Aboriginal peoples in this nation and the responsibility of current generations to bring balance to the relationship between peoples? Are Aboriginal peoples ready to reach out again, in ceremonial public occasions, to polish the Silver Covenant Chain of friendship cited in treaties? Those are the hopes that have animated the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

A collection of articles published in 2008 by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation attempts to chart the path *From Truth to Reconciliation, Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools*.² The book is a resource for individuals and groups who wish to educate themselves about residential schools, their inter-generational impacts and efforts in Canada and abroad to restore dignity to affected individuals and communities. For example:

- Garnet Angecone, an Anishinabe from northwestern Ontario recounts his journey from life on the land through residential school

2. Marlene Brant Castellano, Linda Archibald and Mike DeGagne (2008). *From Truth to Reconciliation, Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools*. Ottawa. Aboriginal Healing Foundation. Available on-line and for order at: www.ahf.ca

and sexual abuse, to three years of stressful court hearings following disclosure. Garnet eventually became aware that forgiveness was necessary to his own healing.

- Maggie Hodgson details the path followed by a number of Survivors reclaiming ceremony and spirituality in their own lives and reaching out to bring their relatives and communities as well as non-Aboriginal people into a circle of relationship and respect.
- A Maori lawyer from New Zealand unveils the many defenses that people and whole societies erect against facing uncomfortable truths.
- David MacDonald, who has been a church spokesman on residential schools, issues a call to churches to be “repairers of the breach.” He proposes numerous concrete actions that could be initiated.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is charged with convening seven national events and facilitating additional community activities to promote reconciliation. The historical record and accessible resource collection to be made available for public use will support ongoing education. The prestige and visibility of a national Commission can give momentum to reflection and dialogue. In the final analysis, the response of ordinary citizens will determine whether reconciliation can be achieved. That response must include attending hearings, listening to the stories, talking within the circle of friends and relatives, sponsoring study groups, participating in projects that demonstrate a mutual commitment to relationship, and demanding redress of ongoing inequity. ■



For reflection and discussion

- 1) What was acknowledged and what was promised in the Prime Minister's Apology to Aboriginal people in June 2008? Why was an Apology important to Aboriginal people? To the general population of Canada?
- 2) What am I as an individual, or we as a community, able and willing to do to become informed about the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and to support community engagement?
- 3) Who are the people that I might be able to influence to give thoughtful attention to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

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