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The Aboriginal Peoples of Canada and the Anglican Church

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The Saskatchewan prairies and woodlands are home to over 100,000 aboriginal people. The home farm where I grew up was littered with bleaching buffalo skulls and buffalo skeletons, last remnants of the enormous herds that once grazed the prairies, numbering in the millions. For the people of the prairies, the buffalo were the staff of life.

Nineteen years of my ministry were spent among the Cree of the north, as a parish priest, as a traveling missionary, as a bishop. Even then the days were fast disappearing when white clergy would have pastoral charge of native parishes. But I had the privilege of many years of first hand encounters with the Cree. They are people of the land, people of prayer, people who live close to the Great Spirit. They are a generous, sharing people.

That was in the 1970s and 80s. Little did I know at the time what was about to unfold between the First Nations and the Canadian churches.

I was proud of the Anglican Church. The Church had committed the First Nation languages to writing, translated the scriptures, built schools and hospitals. The Church was on the front lines. In 1852, Henry Budd, a Cree Indian, was ordained to the priesthood. He led the mission to his own people. Whole tribes were baptized at one time.

But there was another face to history. By the middle of the 1990s there would be over 7000 lawsuits filed against the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the United Church, and the Presbyterian Church.

Before Confederation and up through the first half of the twentieth century, the policy of the Government of Canada towards the First Nations was assimilation. It was thought that the quickest route to 'civilizing' and 'converting' the indigenous population was

to forcibly remove indigenous children from their homes and communities and place them in residential schools. There was considerable variation in how the schools operated, but in many cases the children were forbidden to speak their mother tongues, their cultures were condemned as barbaric and their spirituality as heathen. By the end of the nineteenth century, a relationship had developed between the government and the churches, with the government establishing policy and providing most of the funds, and the churches operating the schools on behalf of the government.

Between 1820 and 1969, the Anglican Church administered 26 Indian Residential Schools. By 1969, after taking a hard look at its relationship with Aboriginal peoples, the Church withdrew from the residential schools project and committed itself to building more just relationships with its indigenous members, as well as advocating on behalf of the indigenous population at large.

No brief overview can begin to express the complex history of the residential schools and their legacy. Most of the people involved in the schools were well motivated by the standards of their day, even though they were participants in an abusive system. Some, according to the recollections of former students, were saintly even in that oppressive system. Some few were predators who abused the children physically or sexually. Most of the former students of the schools recall their experiences with pain and anger. Some few recall their experiences fondly. Many Aboriginal persons view with contempt the church which tried to eradicate their culture. Others retain a powerful Christian faith (often combined with Aboriginal tradition) and work within the church on behalf of justice for all native people.

The past 30 years have seen improvements in the status of indigenous Anglicans within the church. An Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples oversees indigenous ministries and justice work. A healing fund supports programs in indigenous communities. In 1993 our Primate, Archbishop Michael Peers, made a formal apology (see Appendix A below) on behalf of the whole church for the harm done by the residential schools system. In 1994 a group of indigenous Anglicans articulated their vision of a new Covenant, a vision of unity, community and self-determination within the church.

However, the plight of indigenous people within Canadian society as a whole continues to be a national disgrace. There are high

rates of violence, crime, incarceration, unemployment and suicide. The legacy of residential schools is often cited as a significant contributor to these problems.

The Government of Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada have taken a long time to respond, but in November of 2002, a historic agreement was made with the Government in which the Anglican Church of Canada agreed to pay \$25 million as its share in a settlement to address all validated claims against the Church and the Government of Canada (see Appendix B below). While it is hard to believe that money will heal, the overwhelming “yes” from the Church when given an opportunity to contribute is a healing act. The Anglican Church joins hands in praying with our aboriginal brothers and sisters that God may take our response as a token of our commitment to reconciliation and healing, and that a better future may await us all.

Appendix A: The Apology

A Message from Archbishop Michael Peers at the Aug 7, 1993 First Nations Convocation meeting at Minaki Lodge in Kenora, Ontario

My Brothers and Sisters,

Together here with you I have listened as you have told your stories of the residential schools. I have heard the voices that have spoken of pain and hurt experienced in the schools, and of the scars which endure to this day. I have felt shame and humiliation as I have heard of suffering inflicted by my people, and as I think of the part our church played in that suffering.

I am deeply conscious of the sacredness of the stories that you have told and I hold in the highest honour those who have told them. I have heard with admiration the stories of people and communities who have worked at healing, and I am aware of how much healing is needed.

I also know that I am in need of healing, and my own people are in need of healing, and our church is in need of healing. Without that healing, we will continue the same attitudes that have done such damage in the past. I also know that healing takes a long time, both for people and for communities. I also know that it is God who heals,

and that God can begin to heal when we open ourselves, our wounds, our failures and our shame to God. I want to take one step along that path here and now.

I accept and I confess before God and you, our failures in the residential schools. We failed you. We failed ourselves. We failed God.

I am sorry, more than I can say, that we were part of a system which took you and your children from home and family.

I am sorry, more than I can say, that we tried to remake you in our image, taking from you your language and the signs of your identity.

I am sorry, more than I can say, that in our schools so many were abused physically, sexually, culturally and emotionally.

On behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada, I present our apology. I do this at the desire of those in the Church like the National Executive Council, who know some of your stories and have asked me to apologize. I do this in the name of many who do not know these stories. And I do this even though there are those in the church who cannot accept the fact that these things were done in our name.

(Convocation members bless Archbishop Michael Peers)

As soon as I am home, I shall tell all the bishops what I have said, and ask them to co-operate with me and with the National Executive Council in helping this healing at the local level. Some bishops have already begun this work. I know how often you have heard words which have been empty because they have not been accompanied by actions. I pledge to you my best efforts, and the efforts of our church at the national level, to walk with you along the path of God's healing. The work of the Residential Schools Working Group, the video, the commitment and the effort of the Special Assistants to the Primate for this work, the grants available for healing conferences, are some signs of that pledge, and we shall work for others.

This is Friday, the day of Jesus' suffering and death. It is the anniversary of the first atomic bomb at Hiroshima, one of the most terrible injuries ever inflicted by one people on another. But even atomic bombs and Good Friday are not the last word. God raised Jesus from the dead as a sign that life and wholeness are the everlasting and unquenchable purpose of God.

Thank you for listening to me.

+ Michael
Archbishop and Primate

Response to the Primate, delivered by Vi Smith on behalf of the elders and participants of the First Nations Convocation:

On behalf of this gathering, we acknowledge and accept the apology that the Primate has offered on behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada. It was offered from his heart with sincerity, sensitivity, compassion and humility. We receive it in the same manner. We offer praise and thanks to our Creator for his courage. We know it wasn't easy. Let us keep him in our hearts and prayers, that God will continue to give him the strength and courage to continue with his tasks.

Appendix B: The Agreement

Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada Website: News Release from the Government of Canada and the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, Toronto, Mar. 11, 2003. ¹

Historic agreement between Anglican church and government of Canada seeks settlements with abuse victims.

Ralph Goodale, Minister responsible for Indian Residential Schools Resolution, and leaders of the Anglican Church from across Canada today ratified an agreement that details the payment of compensation to victims with valid claims of sexual and physical abuse at Anglican-run residential schools. The signing follows approval of the agreement-in-principle by all thirty dioceses of the Anglican Church of Canada.

Under the agreement, the Government of Canada will pay 70% of the compensation and the Anglican Church of Canada will pay 30%, to a maximum of \$25M. At the same time, the two parties will work together to turn the current tide of litigation toward settlements with victims, and towards healing and reconciliation.

“Together, the Government of Canada and the Anglican Church have built a platform for a strong, productive relationship with a commitment to the victims of abuse to try to bring an end to the personal suffering,” said Minister Goodale. “We have resolved our issues and defined our roles and responsibilities in making sure that these individuals receive 100% of the compensation they are owed.”

Archbishop Michael Peers, Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, expressed gratitude to all involved in the negotiating process. “The negotiators for the church and government have helped us find a way forward, both in response to the individual cases in which persons were abused, and in our common concern for a new future together as aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians.”

Archbishop Peers expressed gratitude to the dioceses and their leaders for their timely and generous response. “To commit such significant amounts of money to this agreement is costly for our dioceses. Without that response, we would not be able to move forward in a mission that includes a renewed relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians, both in the church and in the country as a whole.”

Nearly 12,000 claims for compensation are registered by former students of native residential schools against the government and the four churches that operated the schools. The Anglican Church is currently named in approximately 18% of the compensation claims.

The highlights of the agreement include:

- Payment of 70 per cent by the Government of Canada and 30 per cent by the Anglican Church for all validated sexual and physical abuse claims at Anglican-run Indian residential schools up to a maximum Church contribution of \$25M.
- All Anglican dioceses will contribute to the payment of compensation.
- The Anglican Church will continue its dedication to the healing of individuals and reconciliation with all parties and will cooperate in the resolution of all abuse claims.
- The Anglican Church has created a separate corporation to establish a Settlement Fund to compensate survivors of sexual and physical abuse.
- The cessation of the practice of naming the Church as a third party in government court cases.

- The delivery of 100 per cent of compensation to former students of Anglican-run residential schools with validated claims.

This agreement does not cover compensation for language and culture claims. Both the Government of Canada and the Anglican Church feel that individual compensation is not the answer to a broader community and inter-generational concern. In December 2002, the Government of Canada announced a dedicated \$172.5M in funding to preserve, revitalize and promote Aboriginal languages and cultures. It is to be used to address issues as the loss of knowledge of traditional languages and cultures by Aboriginal peoples, including those who attended Indian residential schools.

Note

- ¹ The source for this speech is the website http://www.irsr-rqpi.gc.ca/english/news_11_03_03.html

