

Immanuel United Church March 24/25, 2000

“The Long Journey Toward Healing: Reflections on the United Church of Canada and First Nations Communities”

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What I propose to do in these two sessions, this evening and tomorrow, is to share personal reflections of my own steps on this long journey, to share some historical material, to tell about some healing initiatives and give theological reflection on the matter. There will be opportunity for discussion of the material presented as well as time to share your own experience in small groups and plenary time for you to share stories and points of view or to ask questions.

These reflections involve each of us members of Canadian society as much as members of the United Church of Canada. There is so much more to the story than Residential Schools: racism, unemployment, land rights and land claims, the penal system and issues of self government to mention a few. Oka, Gustafson Lake, Burnt Church the Nisga treaty have caught the attention of many Canadians. But it is the residential schools and their legacy that has brought the attention of the churches into focus on matters related to First Nations peoples.

Of the over 6000 law suits commenced across Canada arising from operation of the schools, so far about 300 have implicated the United Church along with the federal government. After two years, the Port Alberni case in B.C. which involved a conviction of sexual abuse by a dormitory supervisor, is still before the courts, and is at the stage of assessing damages. More than half of the 28 complainants have settled out of court with the church and the federal government. At the request of the plaintiffs, the settlement terms have not been made public. However similar cases have been settled for around \$200,000 per person.

In 1995 Arthur Plint, a dorm supervisor at the Port Alberni residence was convicted of the sexual assault of 17 students which occurred in the 1950's and 60's. Plint is currently serving an 11 year prison term. The judge found the United Church and the federal government both responsible on grounds of vicarious liability. This has to do with being responsible for criminal acts which are carried out by an employee in the workplace particularly in cases where one has vulnerable persons in their care. To date the judge has not determined the degree to which church and government are each responsible and until his judgement is given, settlements are being made on a 50/50 basis and if necessary will be adjusted later.

While a minority of claims charge physical and sexual abuse, most are related to break up of families, loss of language, culture and spirituality. While the term sounds harsh, it is sometimes referred to as Acultural genocide@. The United Nations Genocide Convention Article 2 adopted in 1948 states:

Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- killing members of the group
- causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group
- deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
- imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
- forcibly transferring children of the group to another group

So this is where we find ourselves today: defendants in numerous claims of abuse and genocide. Restitution is being sought and in criminal cases where the church is found responsible, we are obliged to pay damages and settlements. No claim of cultural genocide has yet come to court. Presently the four churches involved, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican and United, have joined with the federal government in conducting a number of pilot projects based on alternatives to litigation. These will still be costly but will stop the adversarial justice system being played out in the courts which are as difficult for the church as they are for the plaintiffs. It is too early to know how successful these alternative methods will prove to be.

I think of the uneven steps I have taken on this long journey toward healing. My consciousness about land claims was first raised at a presbytery meeting in 1972 during a presentation by a Native group from the Fraser Valley. At the time they sounded radical as they spoke of the rights they believed they had to most of the province of BC where no treaties had ever been signed. The residential schools were something I was unaware of until the 1980's. I had never visited an Indian reserve and the few First Nations people I knew were United Church folks from northern and coastal communities that I had met at meetings of BC Conference. It was during a study leave in Africa in the mid 1980's that I began to understand what the indigenisation of Christianity meant and started to make connections with the evangelization of indigenous peoples in Canada.

The contrasts were startling between what I found in the larger cities and in the rural communities in Africa. In Nairobi, we attended a church choir festival with participants dressed in traditional western wine coloured choir gowns, standing still with arms by their sides singing European hymns accompanied by an organ. We worshipped in a Lutheran cathedral in Dar es Salaam with a painting of a white Jesus above the communion table, a white minister leading the service in English and a black congregation with the women (who had the children with them) and the men sitting separately and singing from European hymn books.

In some rural communities where I attended, the church was made of mud, thatched roof, windows without glass, roughly hewn benches, drums, songs and dances and no books save some well worn Bibles and the language was Swahili. When I arrived back in Canada I realized there were similarities between a new awakening in parts of Africa that was giving birth to African instituted churches, as different from the mission churches, and Aboriginal Spirituality that was coming to light in Native communities here. I later came to realize this is a world wide movement among indigenous peoples in parts of Europe, in Asia, Latin and Central America, Australia and New Zealand as well as in the US and Canada.

The next part of my journey related to the 1986 Apology. I now know that in 1982 there was a meeting held in Fisher River, Stan McKay's home community, where he was the minister at the time that developed a proposal to hire a national staff person to co-ordinate a means by which indigenous leadership would be encouraged to rise up in the church. There had been annual national consultations for several years where a great deal of anger and pain had been worked through and by 1983 it was clearly a movement of the people.

After that there were meetings held in communities and regions. During these meetings reconciliation took place between the Mohawk and Ojibway as they overcame old political separations in order to focus on the common struggle within the church. Alberta Billy talked at a General Council Executive meeting about how the church was in some ways responsible for the silence of the elders and she told the executive of General Council that it was time they apologized to native people. That led to a long discussion in the Executive who asked the National Native Council to prepare a process for General Council in 1986. They had 18 months during which they sought the guidance of congregations and Native communities across the church. In the end the National Native Council was convinced they must ask General Council to apologize.

To quote Stan McKay:

“Some of us had a deep fear about what it would mean if the church refused to make an apology. But I have an image that will always stay with me. One of the elders said, ‘We will have the drum group come.’ There was a discussion about that; then someone said, ‘What if the church doesn’t apologize? The elder’s response was, ‘Well it doesn’t matter. We have to dance whether they apologize or not.’ That positive framework of being a people, no matter what the church did, was for me the moment of a statement of liberation.”

The apology was requested on the floor of General Council in Sudbury and then all the First Nations commissioners left the court. They went down to the parking lot where they had a sacred fire and waited and prayed for two hours. Moderator

Bob Smith recalls meeting the elders in the moonlight that evening to read the apology the General Council had approved.

You may all know the words of that apology but in the light of the current situation, I think it bears hearing again.

“Long before my people journeyed to this land, your people were here, and you received from your elders an understanding of creation and of the mystery that surrounds us all that was deep and rich and to be treasured.

We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you of the good news of Jesus Christ, we were blind to the value of your spirituality.

We confused Western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ.

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. As a result, you and we are poorer and the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred, and we are not what we are meant by the Great Spirit to be. We who represent the United Church of Canada ask you to forgive us and to walk together in the Spirit of Christ so that our people may be blessed and God’s creation healed.”

The elders response was “We must go back and talk to the people.” Everyone danced with the drum that night. That apology, which was made to Native United Church congregations, has been acknowledged but not accepted. That apology did not make explicit references to residential schools nor was it addressed to First Nations people in general.

The next step was the establishment of a form of self-government within the United Church. Keewatin in northern Manitoba and NW Ontario had already gone through development as the first all-Aboriginal United Church presbytery and while they had their struggles, they soon became a model for other parts of the country. Many elders from the north became symbols of the liberation represented by this new model of self determination.

The next steps were discerned through meetings of the Grand Council where it was determined the next steps were to move to their own forms of decision making by consensus using the model where the agenda is wide-open, the discussion wide ranging and the circle is the place where everyone has voice, is respected and included. This led to the formation of the All Native Circle

Conference (ANCC) at the 1988 General Council. Not all Native congregations chose to enter the ANCC. All the BC congregations made the choice to stay as part of BC Conference and some pastoral charges in other parts of the country also stayed as part of the presbyteries where they were located and thus remained members of other Conferences.

Attending the ceremony of the formation of the ANCC at the 1988 General Council was another step on my journey. Subsequently attending meetings of the ANCC Grand Council exposed me to a very different style of decision making used with up to 150 people. I was well aware of how to help smaller groups reach consensus but to be in the midst of the large circle where everyone, of all ages, could have their say was a new experience. The role of the elders is very significant in that model and I found myself wondering how it would work for most of us when we don't either know who our elders are nor do we give many persons that level of respect. When the large gathering can't decide, they give it to the elders to discuss and what the elders say seems to carry the day.

In 1988 I was President of BC Conference and spent several days in a Native village in northern BC. At that time there was a struggle going on in the local church about the use of button blankets and various artefacts in the sanctuary. One elder in particular had been very much against their use. He had died and the matter was being reconsidered. That was my first awareness of the lack of consensus that existed in some communities about the relationship between Aboriginal Spirituality and the practices of local congregations. Later I discovered that many church people participated in sweats, sweet grass ceremonies and the use of the sacred bundle in a Long House setting but they kept it separate from their church practices.

I visited other villages that year and although they were far from prosperous, there were always feasts and gift giving. Services consisted of lots of singing, mainly gospel hymns. In the places I visited there was no evidence of Native artefacts in the churches. There had been a Division of Native Ministries in the Conference for some time with a First Nations staff person in place since the early 1970's and the BC congregations had decided to stay with that structure believing that as coastal people they did not have a lot in common with the plains people.

Around that time, the First Nations Peoples in the area around Hazelton BC were involved in a court case regarding land claims. Their case was in the BC Supreme Court and subsequently went to the Appeal Court and then to the Supreme Court of Canada. The costs were back breaking for the communities. The BC Conference meeting in 1989 decided to ask the congregations and presbyteries in BC to raise \$1 million over five years to support various endeavours in BC Conference related to land claims. It was decided that appeals would be made to

individuals and congregations and that any undesignated funds that came to the Conference from sale of properties or bequests would go toward the \$1 million. Before the five years were up the \$1,000,000 had been raised and there was a great celebration. The appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada issued in the Delgamuukw decision which has become the benchmark for other decisions related to Aboriginal rights.

It was during this period that stories of the harm done by residential schools started to surface across the country and the well publicized case of sexual abuse of children by staff at an orphanage run by the Roman Catholic church surfaced from Newfoundland. Gradually stories of sexual abuse began to emerge related to First Nations experiences in residential schools but no United church schools were named in the reports.

I was part of General Council Executive during Walter Farquharson's term as Moderator, 1990-92, when a task group on residential schools was established. A group of three persons in BC Conference were to visit the Native communities to discern the effects of United Church residential school attendance and the legacy of the schools in the communities. Children from BC communities had also been sent to schools in other provinces and even schools of other denominations. While some former students were positive about their experience, the majority spoke of loss of language and culture and the damage done to families as a result of the children being schooled so far from home. There was no mention of any sexual abuse in United Church schools. A fund of \$150,000 to be spent for purposes of healing over a five year period was made available by the General Council Executive in 1993.

It was soon evident that this amount was inadequate and thus at the 1994 General Council, when I was elected Moderator, the Healing Fund was established. It was to have an explicit educational focus with a goal of \$1 million over three years. Funds would be disbursed by the Native constituency to assist healing efforts initiated in Native communities.

While United Church people responded quickly and generously to several special appeals over the same three year period, flood relief in Quebec and Manitoba, the North Korea, Central Africa and Central America special appeals, we were unable to raise the \$1 million dollars for the Healing Fund within the three year time span. Why? Is it because the media draw attention to these other situations and people respond better to mass media appeals than they do to appeals from the national church or from pulpits? Subsequently the fund was extended for another three years.

As I began my term as Moderator in the fall of 1994, I was briefed by John Siebert, the national staff person whose portfolio included human rights issues

and First Nations matters. He shared with me the brief the United Church had submitted to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. There was an acknowledgment of harm that had been done through loss of language, culture and spirituality through the schools. Although sexual abuse had surfaced at a number of schools administered by other denominations, I remember saying to John how relieved I was to know there had not been any charges of sexual abuse in our schools. His reply was, "Don't be so sure." Within months Arthur Henry Plint, a dorm supervisor in Port Alberni, plead guilty to charges by 16 former students and was sentenced to 11 years in prison.

Shortly afterwards a group action civil suit was launched against the United Church and the federal government by 28 plaintiffs and another single suit, all asking for compensation as the result of physical and sexual abuse suffered at the Port Alberni school during the 1950's and 60's. Willie Blackwater was the spokesperson for the group action and he was one of the United Church people I had known from the Hazelton area.

In June 1995 I attended a week long Grand Council of the All Native Circle Conference. At that gathering I was once again made aware of the legacy of the residential schools as stories were told and in some cases tears shed. It was a very different kind of church gathering. We met out of doors under the shelter of a large tent. Prayers were offered in a variety of languages. Babies and children were an important part of the gathering. The youth kept the sacred fire burning constantly while we met and the elders were readily identifiable by where they were seated.

The elders were asked to make a decision about whether or not the sacred bundle (a large case containing artifacts, tobacco and sweet grass) would be opened during the meeting. The decision was that it would be carried in but not opened as some people objected to the contents being displayed and used in a church context. I started to understand there were differences of opinion among the people, similar to how I had found it in the village in northern BC: and not unlike the people in almost every congregation in the United Church!

In December that year, on very short notice, Elijah Harper called for a Sacred Assembly to be held in Hull. The purpose of the Assembly was to bring together First Nations Peoples and the churches in order to provide a forum for dialogue about their relationship. The leaders of every major denomination in Canada were there along with over 1,000 people, the majority of whom were Aboriginal. The heads of the churches who ran residential schools, Presbyterian, Anglican, Roman Catholic and United, were seated on the podium and each of us was invited to speak briefly. Those of us who had made apologies reiterated those and spoke of healing initiatives our various churches had undertaken.

Then one after another, a large number of Aboriginal people told graphic stories of the physical and sexual abuse they had suffered in the schools (the specific denominations were never identified) and how their language, culture, family structure and spirituality had been destroyed.

It was a very humiliating, painful experience for the four of us and there was nothing to do except absorb the hostility and pain that was being expressed. That was the time when I understood in the ground of my being that the stories had to be told again and again and my role was to listen, listen and listen.

In May 1996 the General Secretary of the General Council, Ginny Coleman, and I paid a visit to the Port Alberni community. We visited the site of the residential school and had conversations with some of the survivors of the school including some who were involved in the suit against the church. The meeting was hosted by the leaders of the Nuu-Chah-Nulth Tribal Council. I will never forget that meeting. Again the stories were told and the leaders sought an apology from me for our role in residential schools. They asked me for an apology as the designated leader of the United Church. It was something I could not give, only the General Council or its Executive could do that. I could only convey an apology that had been approved by the General Council or its executive.

It was the most difficult meeting I have ever been part of. The stories of sexual and physical abuse were difficult enough but it was seeing the place where the fence had stood that separated the children from their families who lived very close by. It was a fence the children could pass through only twice a year to visit their families. These were children as young as six years of age. I told the group gathered there that while I could not formally apologize on behalf of the church I would do what I could to encourage the church to move in that direction.

I spoke of my own grandchildren and how unthinkable it was that their parents could have been either forced or coerced to send their children away. It is hard to imagine the misery and despair of those parents and grandparents whose children were taken away from them and only allowed to return home twice a year. It must have had a severe impact on whole communities to have been devoid of children for months at a time. We know it resulted in generations who never learned how to parent.

In November 1996 the long awaited Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was released after seven years of interviewing and writing and the expenditure of \$56 million. I was privileged to be there for the presentations in the Museum of Civilization in Hull. In front of a BC Longhouse officials gave a precis of the report and there were Indigenous dancers, singers and huge media coverage.

There was virtually no mention of residential schools in the presentation although the report itself (four volumes) contains a large section dealing with the history and the legacy of the schools.

The presentation of the report was followed by a very lengthy silence on the part of the federal government. There were fears that the report had been shelved and finally nearly two years later, the Gathering Strength proposal to aid healing in Native communities was announced. I'm not aware of other recommendations from the report having been acted upon.

In May 1997, the spring before the General Council was to meet in Camrose, I attended BC Conference Annual Meeting where most of the business time was spent working on a petition asking for General Council to issue an apology to First Nations people specifically related to our role in residential schools. The whole court was engaged in the process with mind, emotions, body and spirit. First there was a proposed petition that came to the floor from the BC Task Force on Residential Schools. Then there was a reworking of it overnight having heard warnings of the possible legal implications of General Council apologizing. However the Conference retained the word apology, even though they knew it could be costly. It passed by a considerable majority.

Later that same month I attended another Conference Annual Meeting in a part of the country that did not have first hand experience of United Church residential schools. In my conversations with people there, I was once more reminded that there are parts of Canada who do not know the stories of the residential schools and if they do, they do not bear the same sense of responsibility for them. In my travels across the country, I discovered that the people west of the Ontario/Manitoba border were most aware of the plight of residential school survivors. In many parts of the country I found there was little interest in or concern about our part in that legacy.

In Camrose in August 1997, prior to the meeting of the General Council, there was a meeting of Aboriginal Peoples of the United Church. Many were members of the All Native Circle Conference, but almost half were not. Again, there were different points of view as some expressed dismay that the United Church was being sued, some wanting the church to apologize and others fearful about where that might leave the church in relation to law suits. Others said why another apology when the church has yet to live out the first one, which had still not been accepted by Native congregations.

When the General Council met, they had to decide how to handle the BC petition asking for an apology. There were no other petitions of that nature from anywhere else in the church. In the end the word apology was not used but instead reference

was made to “deep regret and sorrow for the injustices that were done and for the role of the United Church of Canada in the residential school system”: to recommit ourselves to living out the 1986 apology: and to continue dialogue and consultation with the First Nations of Canada in order to consider appropriate means to express our repentance and to take further steps along the healing path and toward reconciliation.

The next day the newspaper headlines read “United Church refuses to apologize”.. In contrast, when Jane Stewart, then Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development made her statement announcing the Gathering Strength announcement, the Assembly of First Nations referred to it as an apology and that is what the newspapers reported. In fact, the word apology was not used but it was a statement of reconciliation.

The matter of how to live out the actions of the General Council continued to be on the agenda of the Executive and a year later it was determined that the next step for us to take on this journey was to issue an apology. A significant factor in moving to an apology was the visit by several members of the General Council Executive to meet the people of St. Andrew’s congregation in Port Alberni. For two years that congregation, located close to where the residential school was located, met with survivors of the school, heard their stories and struggled with what would be an appropriate response from their congregation to the Nuu-Chah-Nulth Tribal Council in Alberni.

They decided to invite the Tribal Council and band members to a feast where they made an apology and gave a token gift of money to each person. The testimony of the people of that congregation about what a difference it had made in moving toward healing both for themselves and for the relationship with their neighbours had a profound effect on the members of the Executive. Videos of their experience were shown to the October meeting, ample time was taken to hear their stories and the reasons they were convinced that it was important for the Executive to now ask the Moderator to make an apology on behalf of the church. For many of these people, this reflected considerable movement from where they were at General Council a year before.

The 1986 apology to Native Congregations in the United Church acknowledged our part in the loss of their language, culture and spirituality. This 1998 apology made by Moderator Bill Phipps, is to all Aboriginal Peoples and it acknowledges our complicity in the operation of Indian Residential Schools. Perhaps you know it well or perhaps you will hear it for the first time but I want to read it because it has implications for us as church and for us as individuals.

“I am here today as Moderator of the United Church of Canada 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 pray that you will hear the sincerity of our words today and that you will witness the living out of this apology in our actions in the future.

We know that many within our church will 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. We must now seek ways of healing ourselves, as well as our relationships with First Nations peoples. This apology is not an end in itself. We are in the midst of a long and painful journey. A journey that began with the United Church’s Apology of 1986, to our Statement of Repentance in 1997 and now moving to this apology with regard to Indian residential Schools. As Moderator of the United Church of Canada I urge each and every member of the church, to reflect on these issues and to join us as we travel this difficult road of repentance, reconciliation and healing.”

So what are the implications of having made an apology? There has been concern that an apology would render us much more vulnerable in court proceedings. No one knows if that will be so. The judge in the Alberni case has already found both the federal government and the United Church as jointly liable and must compensate the victims of Arthur Plint’s abuse. While we are at trial in this one case, there are other lawsuits which have been received. While we don’t know exact figures, we do know the cost of litigation, settlements and alternative dispute processes will likely be significant. Whether an apology will make them more costly is something we will probably never know.

In many ways, we still think of sin as relating more to the actions of individuals than of that which can be ascribed to social, economic, political or religious systems. This is a hurdle we need to overcome lest we tend to think if there had only been more humane, kind and loving individuals involved, the residential school system would have been different. While there were some cruel or warped people with evil intentions who abused children, on the whole, the people

involved were well intentioned and most were humane, kind and loving Christians. It was a system that was flawed. We now recognize the policies of assimilation of First Nations people cost them dearly in terms of loss of culture, language and spiritual traditions.

Lest we think better systemic analysis would solve problems in the future, I remind you of Ephesians 6:12 “For our struggle is not against the enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

In his book *Engaging the Powers*, Walter Wink writes about our lack of understanding of these Powers. He says “Once we recognize that these spiritual forces are the interiority of earthly institutions or structures or systems, then the social dimension of the gospel becomes immediately evident. These Powers with which we contend (and the biblical writer assumes we are all engaged in that struggle) are the inner and outer manifestations of political, economic, religious and cultural institutions. Despite any excellences these institutions may individually possess, they are collectively caught up in a world-system blind to its Creator and drunk on self aggrandizement. They are at one and the same time divinely ordained and acolytes of the kingdom of death.”

It may take generations before we are reconciled with First Nations people and it is in God’s hands, not ours. It has been said that reconciliation is more “a spirituality than a strategy” but we do know there are some steps we can take on the long journey toward healing, healing that involves our own healing as well as that of First Nations people and the healing of our relationship.

First there must be the recognition that the relationship is broken and of the harm that has been done: taking appropriate responsibility and feeling remorse: then repentance, which is a continuing process that “turns us around”, that moves us to where we see events in a new way, where we come before God asking forgiveness and to be shown the way forward. It is much more than simply saying I’m sorry. Restitution is called for and while the courts may in the end make the decisions about the amounts of compensation, we know what has been lost can never be restored. What forms of compensation would truly contribute to the healing?

Tomorrow we will look at how the churches got involved in the first place, hear about some healing initiatives and engage in some theological reflection.

Saturday March 25 Immanuel United

The title I chose for these sessions was “The Long Journey Towards Healing: reflections on the relationships between the United Church of Canada and First

Nations Communities”. It will be a long journey because it was a long journey that got us to the place where we are today.

In preparation for this morning I have gone through records of meetings, newspaper clippings, the 75 page chapter on Residential Schools in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples Report, some United Church archival material, a number of reflective pieces written by United Church people, personal letters from people who worked in the schools, and the journals I kept during the three years I was Moderator. During my term, this issue weighed much more heavily on my heart than any other and the weight is still there. There are questions that will probably never be satisfactorily answered and there is much I still do not understand.

There is so much that is repugnant to us about children as young as six years of age living away from their families, being expected to learn a new language, forced through separation from their communities to adopt the ethos of another culture. How could any Christian institution get involved in such an enterprise? Reading the history, and where possible putting it in the context of the norms and standards of the day, helped me get a picture of what led to the creation of the schools and glimpses of why churches would have formed such a partnership with the government.

How, when and where were we involved in the schools? We were involved in three different kinds of educational institutions: there were Industrial Institutes, Residential Schools and Day Schools. In 1927 there were 13 residential and 42 day schools listed in the summary of Methodist and Presbyterian Indian Work that came into the United Church at the time of union. Three of the residential schools were located in Manitoba in Norway House, Portage La Prairie and Brandon.

In the pre Confederation period of the new Canadian government, the seeds of the policy of assimilation were sown. It was designed to move communities and eventually all Aboriginal peoples from what was deemed their “helpless savage state” to one of “self reliant civilization” to make Canada one community which would be non-Aboriginal and Christian. Education was deemed the best solution to what was referred to as the “Indian problem”. Sir John A Macdonald’s government had looked into the Industrial Schools in the US and liked what they saw.

On his return from the US, the Canadian government’s emissary, having consulted with the leading men of the US government program as well as clerical and lay people on the subject, recommended setting up industrial boarding schools that would be off reserve and teach the arts, crafts and skills needed for a modern economy. He also emphasized how necessary it was that the children be removed from their homes so they could be “kept constantly in the circle of civilized

conditions” where they would receive “an education that would fit them for a life in modernizing Canada”. The RCAP report states this plan received the unqualified support of the churches and the department.

It was also true in the context of the times to say that schools were part of a network of institutions that were to support society’s need for order, lawfulness, labour and security of property. The residential schools were part of nation building. But Aboriginal leader George Manuel a residential school graduate saw it this way:

“The schools were the laboratory and production line of the colonial system....the colonial system that was designed to make room for European expansion into a vast empty wilderness. It needed an Indian population that it could describe as lazy and shiftless.....the colonial system required such an Indian for casual labour.”

The Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian churches formed a partnership with the government and a combination of boarding schools and industrial schools were built reaching a maximum number of 80 in 1931. Schools were built in every province and territory except Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Newfoundland.

Quotations from both government and church documents reveal the confidence of both church and state in the superiority of European culture and the Christian faith. A book published by the Presbyterian WMS in 1915 entitled “The Story of Our Missions” included a report on the Portage La Prairie School:

“The enrollment is 78. The children come from a number of reserves in the vicinity and some from as far as 250 miles north. The Sioux band itself is located about three miles south of the city on the banks of the Assiniboine. Paganism there has disappeared and every Sabbath one can listen to the church bell calling its worshippers together. The Long Plains Indians, who have been most conservative, and for many years refused to have dealings with our mission or Christianity, have at last changed from strong opposition to hearty sympathy through their confidence in the principal at Portage La Prairie and many recruits are entering our school.”

An 1886 report from the Inspector of schools for the north west said “It is to the young that we must look for a complete change of condition”. It was said there was little hope for the adults as they were deemed by the Indian department of the time to be “physically, mentally and morally unfitted to bear such a complete metamorphosis”. The most that could be hoped for was with help they could be

“taught to do a little farming and stock raising and to dress in a more civilized fashion, but that is all.”

The department saw the key to the children reaching their potential was to remove them from their families. This was echoed by the Archbishop of St. Boniface who said they should be “caught young to be saved from what is on the whole the denigrating influence of their home environment”. However the Minister of Indian Affairs Frank Oliver pointed out that such a move was un-Christian because it went against one of the 10 commandments: love and respect by children for parents. He said “It seems strange that in the name of religion a system of education should have been instituted, the foundation principle of which not only ignored but contradicted this command”. His protest was ignored and the department suggested it would be “highly desirable ...to obtain entire possession of all Indian children after they attain to the age of seven or eight years and keep them at schools...until they have had a thorough course of instruction.”

The school’s purpose was one of re-socialization relating to the whole life of the child. While the classroom work was designed upon the provincial curriculum, students also were trained in practical skills. The boys learned agriculture, carpentry, shoemaking, blacksmithing, tin smithing and printing and the girls, sewing, shirt making, knitting, cooking, laundry, dairying, ironing and general household duties. Into the 1950’s and in some places into the 1960’s the day was divided with students spending 1/2 day in the classroom and the other 1/2 in practical activities. Many of the chores the children did made the operation of the institution possible because the schools were very poorly funded.

As early as 1906 there was a government admission that the financial ills of the schools lay in underfunding rather than, as was often charged, the inefficiency or extravagance of church related principals who were in charge of the daily operation of the schools. In 1938 the per capita grant to the schools was \$180.00 while in Manitoba at that time the province paid \$ 642 per capita to the School for the Deaf. Buildings were poorly built and badly maintained and overcrowded which put strains on both students and staff. The food was said to be lacking in both quality and quantity. The inadequate per capita grants put tremendous pressures on the principals and administrators of these church run schools and the government left it to them to deal with how to meet the costs of the operation. Charity clothes, meager amounts of food, especially meat, and the students work on the farm were all ways that were used to balance budgets.

It was a goal that the children should adopt the values of the dominant society: practices of cleanliness, obedience, respect, order, neatness, honesty, thrift, self maintenance, charity and industry. Christianity was to supplant Aboriginal spirituality so there was no place for Aboriginal beliefs or rituals. Their hair

would be shorn when they entered the school and they would wear European clothing. A life of seasonal hunting and gathering would be replaced by order and routine run by clocks and bells. Their unorganized games and activities were replaced with brass bands, football, baseball and hockey where the children learned the value of rules and discipline. Thus children were separated from their families physically, spiritually and culturally.

Corporal punishment was permitted in the schools and this was also a standard of the day in non Aboriginal schools through this period. While officially there was always to be a distinction between chastisement and abuse, survivors of the schools tell stories of physical and verbal abuse that goes beyond anything experienced in the public school system. Other means of discipline such as being deprived of food, confined or lectured were often used.

Great stress was put on the children learning English (or French as the case may be) and there was a Department order that “the use of English in preference to the Indian dialect must be insisted upon”. Despite the order, there are stories of schools where the children did speak their own language in the playground but classroom instruction was in English or French. There are stories of severe punishment if students were caught speaking their own language.

The hope for the Industrial Institutes was that they would be a bridge between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture where graduates would find employment, reside in towns or on farms along side white people and become part of the general community. By implication this would eventually lead to the disappearance of reserve communities. However there were no placement programs for graduates, racial prejudices were common and graduates were usually forced to return to reserves. Having been isolated during their school years from both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal communities, many of these young people were unable to make their way in either place: they were torn between two cultures.

While changes in the whole Indian education system accelerated after World War II, it reflected many of the changes that were taking place in the realm of public education. For example, public school teachers were now required to have higher qualifications, completing high school was seen as a minimum requirement for almost any employment, an increased percentage of students went on to higher education than ever before and curricula were being revised.

In the late 1940's hearings into Indian education were held by a joint parliamentary committee on Indian affairs and strong representation came from Indian groups for “an end to the policy and practice of segregated education”. This led to the department taking the emphasis off residential education to the creation of a day school program. Thus began a policy of integration and the

understanding was that Indian children would attend white schools under provincial jurisdiction. There would also be substantial financial saving in a move away from an exclusively federal system of residential and day schools. This policy still required students to function in French or English in integrated schools.

Further by the mid 1950's the department did a complete turn around from earlier policies and said that maintaining the parent/child relationship was key and "that there can be no complete substitute for the care and concern of parents and the security which children feel when living at home". The government then set up a number of school communities where federal schools still existed in order to stimulate parental and band interest and involvement which later led to further involvement of First Nations communities in the management of education. While these committees made up of band council members had some authority in relation to the schools, they were not given control of the curriculum until much later.

As integration proceeded (and these changes came in an uneven way across the country often dependent on roads being constructed, transportation being available and negotiations completed with local and provincial bodies) the residential schools became a supplementary service for those who couldn't commute to school from their homes. Some were a combination of residential education, day school and a place for room and board for pupils attending a nearby public school.

To get some idea of how large some of the day schools and residences were, here's the 1963 report on United Church operated schools or residences in Manitoba:

Norway House: 110 pupils in residence, 212 day pupils. All grades up to VIII and kindergarten class for reserve pupils

Brandon: 160 pupils in residence up to 12 years of age. Half attend classes in town and half at the residence. 70 pupils are 6 or 7 years of age

Portage La Prairie: 91 teen agers, 59 in High School grades all attend school in town 75% of the pupils are from Northern Manitoba

A further development saw the residential schools develop a welfare function in situations where it was deemed that parents could not assume responsibility for the care of their children.

Provincial child welfare agencies would determine cases of neglect and place children in care and residential schools apparently became an option within the wider child care system. As integration programs increased the department became concerned that the residential schools were becoming a repository for so called neglected children. A confidential 1966 department report estimated that 75% of children in the schools were "from homes which by reason of overcrowding and parental neglect or indifference, are considered unfit for school children".

In 1969 the partnership with the churches was formally ended and by 1972 the government accepted the principle of Indian control of Indian education. Schools were turned over to communities and by 1986 the government was no longer involved in residential schools.

The why question is still there: why did the churches get into this partnership with the federal government? One can only speculate but in his papers written in 1970, former Board of Home Missions Secretary E.E.M. Joblin writes

“Adjustments to changehave been necessary in the evolution of education for the Indian people. We have made many mistakes, but through these years, in the main, we have been willing to change in response to new conditions, new needs and new aspirations of Indian people. It may not be too soon for a competent researcher to attempt an evaluation of the past three centuries of European efforts to prepare the Native People of Canada for full participation in the life we share as Canadians.”

Education was seen as a route to full participation in Canadian society: Joblin said the four churches who were involved, Anglican Roman Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist all put a high value on education and I am sure the motives were altruistic as well as evangelical. The 19th and early 20th Century were periods of evangelization and nation building. The birth of the United Church in 1925 came at a time when one of the national goals was to make good Canadians of the immigrant population, a goal not so different than the Indian assimilation goal. Church and nation were closely bound together. There are records that indicate there were those who wanted the church to get out of the partnership as early as 1947 but other voices prevailed as to the importance of the church's Indian work. There was also a recognition that people in the pews gave to the M&M fund (precursor to the M&S fund) precisely because of this kind of mission.

There were committed, kind, well educated Christian people who came to work at the schools out of a sense of ministry and mission believing they were contributing to the possibility of a better life for Native children. Many of them need our support now as some tell of their confusion, sense of being betrayed by the church and in some instances are feeling ashamed to have been part of a system that is now so widely condemned.

It is so much easier to ask why in retrospect.

Through reading the history and reflecting on the present situation, I realize that the most significant changes in attitudes and positions on residential schools were

prompted by the actions of First Nations people themselves rather than as the result of church or government interventions. As painful as it is, the current lawsuit and others that are in the wings, have moved at least segments of the church out of any complacency.

Althea Miller from Jamaica was present with us at the October General Council Executive meeting as we struggled with the next steps on the road of repentance. She reminded us that it was the rebellion of the slaves that led to their freedom. In the suffrage movements it was women who led the way to their own emancipation. It is when the power shifts to those who have been the victims of an oppressive system that radical change takes place.

In October 1998, the Moderator, on behalf of the General Council Executive, apologized for the pain and suffering that our church's involvement in the Indian Residential School system has caused. The Executive's decision was taken after lengthy deliberation and two days of reflection on the meaning of repentance and in recognition of the risks involved in doing so. While the 36th General Council in August 1997 expressed deep regret and sorrow, the word apology was not used. But that Council did express the church's desire to find "appropriate means to express our repentance and to take further steps along the healing path and towards reconciliation".

What steps are being taken toward healing?

One group of people who have been deeply hurt are those who with the best of intentions worked in the schools. Last weekend I was privileged to facilitate a weekend event sponsored by the national church for some 35 people ranging in age from 60 to 88 years. The purpose of the weekend was so they could have an opportunity to tell their stories to representatives of the wider church and the Moderator and three others from General Council Executive were there to listen.

There were three First Nations people there who told their stories of the impact of the schools on them and their communities. The ambiguities of the situation were stated by Alvin Dixon, a resident at Port Alberni Residential School for 8 years. He spoke of how the elders would want him to thank these people for the good work they did. He told the story of a local man who used to bring his harp to the school and play music for them to fall asleep by, and the man who came and read them bedtime stories. Alvin said because of connections he made at the school, he has a broad network of Native people and it has helped to found self help groups that have agitated for rights.

At the same time he told of working his way through University working in a government liquor store but he was not allowed to purchase liquor. He spoke of

the loneliness as a child separated from his brothers and sisters who had been sent to different schools, some even to Alberta. Denomination did not seem to be a criteria for where one was sent.

One worker told of being fired by the church in 1931 because she had fraternized with local Native teenagers. She was angry at the church but ashamed of the fact she had lost her job and had waited 70 years to tell the story. Another elderly woman revealed that she had asked her family not to include her years of teaching in a residential school in her eulogy.

Everyone expressed gratitude to the church for bringing them together. Many said they had waited a long time for this to happen.

Here are some of the comments people wrote at the end of the event:

“It has broadened my understanding of the problems facing everyone involved in the residential schools situation whether they be students or staff. Hopefully it will also make me more aware of other unjust situations in my present environment.”

“I did not look forward to the weekend but I did appreciate and enjoy it when I got here. It is funny after years of ‘dropping pennies’ for the church to spend some of that money on us but it did seem appropriate and I thank those who arranged it.”

“Very positive. We felt that the church heard they had good people working in the system.....no matter how flawed the system.”

“A wonderful experience. I feel that I can now go public with my residential school work that I have not spoken of for years.”

“It has helped me to be more aware that I am not alone in my sadness I feel as I reflect back to the rich experiences I had with the girls in the Crosby Home in Port Simpson.”

“Very positive. It gave me a much better understanding of the question, of its complexity, of the great diversity of opinions, attitudes, of reactions of those who lived in residential schools and now have to cope with the damning of the system evident in the media and public opinion.”

“The speeches of the three First Nation people which I found very moving particularly the message from the Elders passed on by Alvin thanking (not once but twice) all those who did a good and dedicated job in the residential schools.”

“The opportunity to be with a group of people with shared experience.....these conversations have not been possible within my congregation.”

“All my contacts this weekend had a healing effect and I feel restored to wholeness.”

“Hearing the denial that exists among some UCC ministers and other UCC members.”

“Realizing the hurt and damage done to families by the separation and abuse in a flawed system.”

“It is obvious that those in denial have not experienced the voices of the survivors, nor have they read the personal accounts or seen the videos of the survivors.”

“I would like to explore ways to have a conversation re residential schools in my congregation. What are we doing now causing harm to others, and how do we explore these issues without defensiveness?”

“A well organized, sensitive function. I am closer to having a complete pot, although it will never be completed (*reference to scripture used in worship: 2 Corinthians 4*). I am not certain yet where my piece fits, but that’s alright. I am confident that I’m in the same archeological dig. I hope that I can assist my congregation and presbytery to see some of the pieces and their part in it.”

Recently at Naramata Centre there was a one day program which included a professor of Canadian history from a local college and First Nations people from the local reserve and municipal officials to be in dialogue about issues related to land rights. 75 people registered for the event and another 30 were on the wait list due to lack of space in the meeting room.

Last week at the Centre two Native women and two non-Native leaders led an event on barriers to education and there were 27 Natives representing four generations in attendance. The event was partially funded by the Gathering Strength program of the federal government and they have applied to the UCC Healing Fund to produce a video and other educational materials as a result of the week long event.

The legacy of residential schools is one of the barriers to learning. It affects at least three generations. The parents and grandparents still talked about the

loneliness and what it was like being separated from the family. They remember being hungry all the time. There was never enough food. Even if they were in the same school they were separated from siblings. In some communities there were no children and the elders had no one to teach.

The theme of the gathering was how to move on: the story telling was always predicated on being followed by questions:

What can I contribute to remove barriers to learning?

What can my community contribute to remove barriers to learning?

What questions do I have?

It is a political empowerment model involving truth telling, opportunity to problem solve and the move to self empowerment.

Healing initiatives are taking place in communities with the aid of the UCC Healing Fund. With the proceeds from a recent bequest, the fund has now reached \$1.5 million for projects in First Nations communities that contribute toward healing, which often means projects related to recovery of culture and language. The church is being challenged to raise the fund to \$2 million from the current \$1.5.

The Moderator has challenged us as a church to give leadership in helping Canadians learn about our own history. Few schools include First Nations history in their studies.

Consider twinning with a First Nations congregation.

Make contact with First Nations resource centres: many have programs we could learn from.

We too quickly want to offer something to them: it needs to be a two way sharing.

Local bands and churches need to talk with one another and much of this could be done ecumenically. We need to listen, listen and listen!

What does our faith require of us?

Most of the theological reflection which follows comes from discussions with a group of eight people who were asked to produce resources for the Division of Mission in Canada on this matter and I have taken excerpts from drafts of that material to share with you.

One of the questions frequently asked is: Why should we today be responsible for acts that were carried out by others years ago?

Response to this question may depend upon one's understanding of the nature of the church. In the New Testament understanding, not only is every member of a local congregation an indispensable part of the whole body, but also each congregation is related to all other congregations in mutual service and responsibility.

New Testament churches were also reminded that they were dependent on the testimony, faithfulness and even mistakes of preceding generations of believers. No individual comes to faith except through the witness of the prophets and apostles; no generation of believers arises without benefit of the teaching of prior generations. A great medieval scholar surveyed what seemed then to be astonishing achievements in philosophy and science. "We see as far as we do today," he said, "because we stand on the shoulders of giants."

All of this may be summed up in the church's doctrine of "the communion of saints." The community of believers can never be circumscribed within the bounds of a single congregation or group at a given place and time. Looked at from the perspective of eternity, the church extends through all time and space. We are partakers with Christians of all other times and places in the unfolding story of the community called church, all of the "saints" together. We benefit from all the good that comes to us as partakers and we also shoulder the weight of the family history when it has been less than edifying.

In the communion of saints we benefit from one another's strengths and we bear one another's burdens.

Most of those who were members of the United Church and alive at the time of the abuse in UCC residential schools were no more involved in the commission of the acts of abuse than we who live a generation or two later. The point may not be to determine, "Who is to blame and therefore who must pay?" What is required may be to respond to the existing reality that there are wounded individuals and a wounded people who are kin to us, either as fellow members of the body of the Christ, or as those who bear the image of God. In view of the ways the whole of the society has benefited from the despoiling of Aboriginal peoples we may also need to respond to our own need for healing and restoration. It is a scandal if we do not respond to the sisters and brothers in need. As Paul says in I Corinthians 12, no member of the body can say to the other members, "I have no need of you." "If one member of the body suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it."

The United Church of Canada is in a crisis of identity because we have seen ourselves as champions of justice and now we find ourselves named in courtrooms as the offender, the perpetrator of injustice. How can we as a church be in solidarity with the ones who hold us accused? We believe we are in a time and place of mourning and grief. This means that sometimes we are in denial, sometimes rage and disbelief, sometimes tears and despair. We do not equate the tears of the offender with the tears of the violated. We are in a place of asking about restorative justice and many of us desperately want reconciliation. We need healing, healing for First Nations survivors and communities. healing of relationships, and healing for the church.

We offer a **four stage process** that is informed by the Judeo-Christian tradition of lament, by pastoral grief work, and by Aboriginal healing circles, recognising that the church needs wisdom beyond its own resources.

1. Truth-telling

We believe that all of us in the church need to hear the story of Indian residential schools. We need to listen with our hearts and minds to the witness of former students and communities. We need to do some soul-searching about how the church could go so wrong in not listening to a peoples pain. We know that individuals have been shocked when they have realised the enormity of what has happened, when they learn that generational cycles of abuse still wrack First Nations communities today.

Truth-telling also involves naming the assumptions behind the establishment of residential schools and the assumptions underlying Christian mission--for example, presumptions of the superiority of Western race and culture. Truth-telling involves a willingness to question our most dearly cherished beliefs. It is to sift the good from the bad, the life-giving from the destructive. It is to name racism, the confusion of culture with gospel, the truth of being wrong. Truth-telling is the opposite of assuming that our truth is the only truth. Rather, it is “the truth that sets us free”, the truth that is painfully honest, that does not deny other truths.

2. Lament

Truth-telling regarding the residential school legacy leads to lament. The enormity of loss, grief, suffering, and broken spirits for Aboriginal communities is so great that the only compassionate response we can envision is lament. What in the name of God has the church done? This is where we realise the depth and magnitude of the sorrow and cry out, “We are sorry, we are engulfed in the pain of this.”

Lament is both communal and personal, the communal point where we want to wail. It is a crying out of anguish over inflicted pain, suffering and loss. It expresses the soul's reaction to the truth, the psalmist's cry, "There is no health in me." At different times it can be rage, anger, blame, questions of, "Why me?" and the naming of confusion and despair. Lament is not familiar for a Protestant church that is more comfortable with rational, head-type responses, but it is an integral part of healing. It is a faithful, biblical response. Lament purges, it brings the offender into a place of solidarity with the offended, the violator with the violated. It is an integral stage of the healing process.

3. Letting Go

When our tears are spent, when we cry until the tears come no more, in the process of grief we come to a place of quiet, an empty stillness. We believe that we come to a place where we can let go of the things that do not give life and of the things that are no more. These may be things we have cherished, but have brought others pain; they may be hopes and dreams that cannot be realised in the changed circumstances of our lives. Jesus said, "To gain your life you need to lose it." How is this true for the institutional church, for the church that ran the residential schools, that in its mission required that people give up their spirits to save their souls? Some of the things we believe we need to let go in light of the residential school aftermath are:

- racism and assumptions of Western cultural superiority
- an expectation that the church has a privileged place in the state
- hierarchy and power-over
- belief that the church has a corner on the truth
- belief that mission is a mandate to take the gospel as we have defined it to people with no gospel.

4. Invocation of the Spirit

When we are in this self-emptying place, we know our need, that we do not have the resources, the answers, the way. We have experienced suffering and death and we are now at the stage of asking, How can we go on? Our inherited theologies, understandings of church and mission led us to the creation of Indian residential schools. After our truth-telling, lamenting and letting go, where do we turn? We believe that all we can do is ask for the help of God's Spirit. We need to invoke the Spirit. Although the Spirit is with us in the truth-telling, in the lament and the letting go, we feel that this is the stage where, instead of acting, we need to wait upon God; instead of talking, we need to listen.

As Protestants we tend to feel that we do it all ourselves--we find the answers, we determine the actions, we get the correct words and formulas to make things right. We tend to want a quick fix when there is no quick fix. We want reconciliation when we cannot expect the offended parties to reconcile with us on our time line, following our agenda. We need the gifts of the Spirit--patience, humility, compassion, gentleness, and respect--things we cannot manufacture ourselves.

There is a time to plumb the depths of a painful truth. There is a time to weep with those we have wounded. There is a time to let go of the things that do not give life, a time to lose our collective life as a church in the faith that out of the ashes will spring new life. There is a time to invoke the Spirit of God because the reconciliation and healing we need is beyond our own making. This is a time for the invocation of the Spirit. Come, Holy Spirit, come.