



# Truth and Reconciliation

Commission of Canada

March 29, 2014

Dear London Conference,

The United Church of Canada made its presentation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Friday afternoon. Several thousand people were present to hear what the church had to say. 'United in Reconciliation' badges peppered the crowd and the presentation was sprinkled with applause from those who heard the deep words of contrition and hope for tomorrow coming from the church.

The words of the United Church were spoken by senior leaders such as Rev. Maggie McLeod, Executive Minister of Aboriginal Ministries, former moderator, Very Rev. Bill Phipps and current Moderator, Rt. Rev. Gary Paterson. Our United Church words seem to be part of a great mix of willingness to go deeper into the conversation of relationship and the responsibility that we all have as Canadian people to work toward reconciliation, to live in respect and to find a better way together.

In the words of Maggie McLeod, "the church has taken baby steps" toward reconciliation. She reminded us that we still have a ways to go as a church.

Our indigenous elders were very much with us, supporting us, in the United Church presentation that shared honestly that the church has learned a lot, that we have accomplished much, but that we must go deeper into more courageous conversations. A portion of Maggie's presentation follows:

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

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

The journey of our church in its call to the ministry of reconciliation has also been fraught with challenges; some of which were highlighted by Bill Phipps and Gary Paterson.

The church is learning that it is through the acknowledgement of a troubled past and that by experiencing the turmoil and distress of this recognition, then and only then, can we be propelled from pain to new life. The church has taken baby steps in understanding that the path to true and authentic reconciliation lies deep within our hearts. It is not a program or initiative that has a beginning and an end.

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

Patterns of colonised thinking remain. We grapple to transform old habits.

Recent learnings have shown the church the importance of having Indigenous people at table before the path has been determined.

In 1986 the Apology to the First Peoples that was delivered by Moderator Bob Smith stated, "We (the dominant church) tried to make you (First Nations Peoples) be like us." We are still unlearning and striving to realize the gift of inter-culturalism. We are learning that Indigenous ways of doing and being, while different, are a tremendous gift to the whole church and indeed to the whole of society.

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

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

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

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

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

Maggie's words speak a truth we need to hear.

Also on Friday, the Canadian Council of Churches voiced a truth that needed to be said. The member churches all signed the statement presented as a gesture of reconciliation and the text of that document can be found at the Canadian Council of Churches website at: [www.councilofchurches.ca/ccc-offers-expression-of-reconciliation-at-trcs-final-national-event-in-edmonton/](http://www.councilofchurches.ca/ccc-offers-expression-of-reconciliation-at-trcs-final-national-event-in-edmonton/). It was read by representatives of the Canadian Council of Churches, one of whom is a familiar face to London Conference, Rev. Dr. Susan Eagle, who spent years in ministry with us.

Gestures of reconciliation, like the Council of Church's statement, are placed in the Bentwood Box. Also added to the box yesterday was Toronto's proclamation of November 12, 2013 of a Year of Reconciliation. Both Edmonton and Calgary have also declared a Year of Reconciliation. All are taking steps to continue the difficult conversation in their political circles with respect to reconciliation. These bodies are also placing budget behind these conversations and actions.

An aboriginal man approached President Newman after a Church Listening Circle and made the observation that at this gathering in Edmonton more than at any other gathering, he is sensing a new spirit, a commitment to actually do something on the part of churches and politicians. He hears an openness and an honesty about where we have been as a country, where we have been as churches and that real steps are now beginning to be taken, steps that move us toward healing and reconciliation. He was hopeful.

May he not be disappointed.

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