

Twenty Years beyond the Apology

A timeline of United Church–First Nations history since 1986

by Dean Salter

1986 On August 15, at the General Council meeting in Sudbury, Ontario, The United Church of Canada issues a formal apology to First Nations peoples within the church. It's the first official recognition of the need to apologize for a troubled, painful, and destructive history. (See the text of the apology on page 6.) Speaking on behalf of the United Church, Moderator Robert Smith says, "We tried to make you like us and in doing so we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were."

The 1986 apology is "joyfully received" by First Nations peoples within the United Church but, to this day, it has not been "accepted." The road of repentance is a long pathway in which apologies must be followed by concrete acts that clearly demonstrate that the church is committed to living in right relationship with First Nations peoples.



A boy holding a torch stands between Bob Smith and Floyd Steinhauer after the formal apology at the 31st General Council.

1987 Francis Sandy Theological Centre is established near Paris, Ontario, through the cooperation of the national United Church and Native United Church congregations in Ontario and Quebec. The centre is designed to train First Nations individuals for ministry in First Nations communities as well as to provide educational events, workshops, and other opportunities for all people to foster cross-cultural understanding and respect.

ABOUT 1986 The British Columbia Native Ministries Consortium is established during the mid-1980s. Under the direction and with the support of First Nations communities, a consortium of Anglican and United Church organizations is developed to sponsor community-based theological education programs for Native ministers, both lay and ordained. The program permits Native church leaders to live, work, study, and learn in their own cultural environment.



Alberta Billy speaks at the 31st General Council in 1986. It was Billy who asked the United Church for an apology.

Stan McKay, shown at his installation service, is elected the United Church's first Aboriginal Moderator in 1992.

1992 In August, the Rev. Stan McKay is elected Moderator at the 34th General Council meeting in Fredericton, New Brunswick. McKay, a former high school teacher who grew up on the Fisher River Reserve in Manitoba, is a powerful voice for Native concerns and a long-time advocate for the rights and gifts of First Nations faith communities within the United Church. He is the first Aboriginal person to serve as Moderator. McKay, who began ordained ministry in 1971, had been chosen in 1982 as the United Church's first national coordinator for Native ministries. In that role, he worked with great strength and care to ensure that the Native voice was heard in the wider United Church and his efforts helped to lay the groundwork for the establishment of the All Native Circle Conference.



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1994 The General Council, meeting at Fergus, Ontario, in August, establishes the Healing Fund—a five-year fundraising and educational campaign to help address the impact of the residential school system on Aboriginal peoples. The church decides to keep the fund open for donations and to date well over \$1.2 million has been contributed across the United Church. The Healing Fund Council, comprised of First Nations United Church members from across Canada, meets twice a year to consider grant proposals from local groups seeking the healing and health of First Nations communities.

1997 Anticipating the General Council's upcoming meeting in Camrose, Alberta, the United Church's First Nations congregations come together in Alberta for a national consultation on key issues and concerns that impact their communities, such as fishing rights, land rights, and access to resources. The impact of the Indian residential school system on Aboriginal communities is a major focus.

1997 Also at Camrose, the 36th General Council, responding to the Anti-Racism Task Group's report, reaffirms the church's commitment to act for justice and anti-racism in all areas of its life. It affirms that a United Church anti-racism strategy should involve all church courts across the country. "The anti-racism work," says the General Council, should "include development of a strategy to equip local congregations with practical tools to help them combat racism in their own context."



Floyd Steinhauer passes Alf Dumont an element of worship during the service where the All Native Circle Conference is constituted at the 32nd General Council.

1997 At the 36th General Council meeting in Camrose, Alberta, in August commissioners listen to presentations by the First Nations consultation cataloging the systemic abuse and harm caused by the residential school system. In a subsequent statement, General Council acknowledges that the United Church had supported this system that "...has tragically resulted in pain and suffering and injustice for many." The statement recognizes "...that the Native residential school system contributed in a primary way to the uprooting of Native societies and to the rejection of Native culture by removing children from their communities and by denying them access to their language, traditions and spirituality..." The statement calls on the church to make a clear statement of repentance and contrition in anticipation of any efforts for healing and reconciliation.

The 36th General Council resolves to recommit the church to its 1986 apology. It acknowledges the United Church's role in the residential school system and expresses "...deep regret and sorrow to the First Nations of Canada for the injustices that were done..." The council urges all individuals and courts of the church to learn from Native persons their experiences with the residential school system. It calls on the United Church to continue to dialogue with First Nations people in order to consider appropriate means to express its repentance and take steps toward reconciliation.

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Evelyn Broadfoot speaks at the 36th General Council, which committed the United Church to a journey of repentance for its role in the Indian residential school system.



1998 Having heard more and more stories of the suffering of First Nations peoples in the residential school system, the General Council Executive issues the United Church's second formal apology in October. Addressing former United Church Indian residential school students, their families, and communities, Moderator Bill Phipps says, "I wish 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." Phipps goes on to offer a "sincere apology" from the church "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..." Acknowledging a tragic history of dishonouring the struggles and the gifts of First Nations peoples, Phipps says, "As we travel this difficult road of repentance, reconciliation, and healing, we commit ourselves to work toward ensuring that we will never again use our power as a church to hurt others with attitudes of racial and spiritual superiority."

2002 Recognizing the importance of deepening the relationship with First Nations churches and related ministries throughout Canada, and of supporting the issues and concerns of the United Church's Aboriginal members at a national level, the church establishes the position of Program Minister, Aboriginal Ministries, at the General Council Office. Laverne Jacobs is the current Program Minister.

2003 Bill C-7, the proposed First Nations Governance Act, is allowed to die by the federal government in the face of dramatic, nearly universal opposition from the First Nations community. The United Church, both individually and as part of a wider church coalition, supports Aboriginal peoples in their condemnation of the proposed legislation, which they believe threatens inherent and treaty rights, perpetuates discriminatory federal policies, and would be imposed on First Nations without their consent. Former Moderator Anne Squire represents the United Church in a meeting of representatives from seven denominations, the Assembly of First Nations, and the Federal Department of Indian Affairs in March to share concerns about the impending legislation. The church leaders call on church members to urge the federal government to abandon the bill.

2000 In June, the United Church's First Nations congregations hold another national consultation in Regina. Participants reiterate concerns about fishing rights, land rights, and access to resources and how current government policies and procedures negatively impact Aboriginal communities. The legacy of residential school abuse is again a key issue for discussion. Participants express concern that the United Church's decreasing funding for Native ministries is pushing many First Nations congregations to the brink of closure when their voices are critically needed in struggling Aboriginal communities.

2000 In September, the Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative (CEJI), together with the Aboriginal Rights Coalition, launches a national campaign in support of Aboriginal land rights. The campaign reminds Canadians of the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which stated that "the negotiation of an adequate land base and resource base is the central prerequisite for cultural renewal, economic self-reliance, and self-determination for Aboriginal peoples." The campaign urges Canadians to call on the federal government to establish an independent commission with the mandate to implement Aboriginal land, treaty, and inherent rights. The United Church is an active member of CEJI and church members respond in large numbers to a related campaign petition that is circulated among local congregations.

2003 At the General Council Executive in October the United Church adopts six guiding principles in the journey to repair the damage of residential schools and to build right relationships with Aboriginal peoples (see page 7).

2004 Invited by the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), the United Church, the Anglican Church, and the Women's Inter-Church Council of Canada join NWAC to launch Sisters in the Spirit. The one-year campaign calls on the federal government to establish a \$10 million fund to assist in research, education, monitoring, and action related to violence against Aboriginal women, some 500 of whom have "gone missing" in the last two decades.

2004 In November the General Council Executive affirms the work of the Healing Fund Council and remandates its work of discerning which local projects best fit the goal of healing and cultural restoration in First Nations communities. The executive also approves a position to staff the Healing Fund.

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