

Voicing the Past

A Presentation to Residential School Survivors

Background: Early in 2009, with the Kelowna General Council fast approaching, the Residential School Steering Committee contacted the Indian Residential School Survivors Society (IRSSS) of B.C. to explore whether engagement between Commissioners to General Council and B.C. residential school survivors might be possible. Five of the 13 residential schools with which the United Church was associated were located in British Columbia. Since the IRSSS was holding regional events across the province to help survivors and communities learn more about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), IRSSS decided to hold a TRC event in Kamloops immediately prior to GC40 and invite United Church involvement. The Moderator participated in the opening ceremonies of the Voicing the Past event on Friday evening, August 7. On Saturday, when the theme was "truth-telling," the United Church was invited to make a statement about its role in the residential school system.

The following presentation was given by the United Church General Council Officer for Residential Schools, the Reverend James Scott.

I want to begin by acknowledging the presence of the Elders and the many former students of residential schools and their families from across B.C., and also others who are here—former staff of the schools, church representatives, and members of local communities. This is an important event in the course of our collective healing journey, and I wish to thank the B.C. Indian Residential School Survivor Society for organizing it at a time and place that makes possible interaction with the national meeting of 600 or so United Church delegates from across Canada.

I also want to acknowledge that we stand on the traditional territory of the Secwepemc (formerly Shuswap) peoples.

The theme today is truth-telling. As the Moderator commented yesterday evening, The United Church of Canada has been on a long journey of learning the truth about the impact of residential schools on individuals, families, communities, and cultures. We do not yet know the whole truth. Perhaps we never will because we were not forced to experience the schools the way you were. So we are here to hear your truth and to learn more about what

these schools did to you, for which we bear so much responsibility. We have done that today and will continue to do so tomorrow, and in the years to come.

It is important however that we speak the truth that we *have* come to know. Speaking and facing the truth is central to taking responsibility for the harm that was done. It is also critical to our own healing. And it is important to speak the truth for other reasons. There was such silence about the residential school system for so long in this country. There has been an enormous conspiracy of silence. Students themselves were often admonished not to talk about the schools or were shamed into silence. The reality of the schools and the distorted thinking that brought them into being need to be brought into the light. Our country needs to know this part of its history so that it never happens again.

How did the United Church come to be involved in the residential school system?

The United Church of Canada was created in 1925 by merging the Methodist, Congregationalist, and many of the Presbyterian churches. Our roots in the residential school system however go back to mission work carried out by the Methodists and Presbyterians in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, which we inherited and continued. In the early twentieth century, the Department of Indian Affairs of the Government of Canada entered into a series of agreements with the churches in which residential schools came under the management of the churches. The motivation for our involvement in the schools was a combination of evangelizing and education.

As with other Christian denominations that participated in the residential school system, the United Church and its forbears saw their mission as one of converting Native peoples to Christianity *and* to the western European way of life. This arrogant and paternalistic approach was based on attitudes of cultural, racial, and spiritual superiority that discounted the value and wisdom of Aboriginal culture, heritage, and spiritual tradition. As our 1986 Apology stated: *"In our zeal to tell you the good news of Jesus Christ, we were closed to the value of your spirituality...We tried to make you be like us and in doing so we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were."*¹

The Methodist Church had a particular passion for education and supported schooling as a way of securing greater opportunity and justice for those who they saw as

¹ For the full text of the Apology, see: www.united-church.ca/beliefs/policies/1986/a651.

"underprivileged." However, this "ministry of caring" was built on the Eurocentric judgment that Aboriginal ways of living and learning were at best inferior, and at worst, evil. Residential schools were seen as a way to educate, but also as a means of removing children from the influence of their homes and heritage. Here is a quote from Thomas Crosby, a well-known missionary on the west coast, who wrote in 1914: *"Indeed in all our Missions, it had proven to be of the utmost importance that we should have Schools. The Missionary, however, finds among a people that are so constantly moving about that, if he is to expect real good work, it must be done by gathering a number of the children together in a Home or Boarding School or Industrial Institution, where they can be kept constantly and regularly at School and away from the evil influences of the heathen life."*²

It gets worse! As our journey of awareness and truth-facing has continued, our church has come to see that we were deeply complicit in the national policy of assimilation, a policy aimed at getting rid of the Indian peoples. We participated in a national program built on the view of Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, who said in 1920, *"I want to get rid of the Indian problem...Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no more Indian question, and no Indian Department..."*³

This is the truth that the United Church must speak and must face, the truth that the nation of Canada must face. It was acknowledged last year in a national apology by the Prime Minister when he said, *"Indeed some sought, as it was infamously said, 'to kill the Indian in the child.' Today we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, caused great harm, and has no place in our country."*⁴

This is our shame.

The United Church was involved in 13 residential schools and several of their antecedents—about 10 percent of the total number of schools. Five of those schools were in British

² Thomas Crosby, *Up and Down the North Pacific Coast by Canoe and Mission Ship*, typescript manuscript, [1914], United Church Canada Archives (UCCA), accession 78.091C, box 22, file 6, p. 83.

³ Statement by Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, as evidence before the Committee of the House (of Commons) © Indian and Northern Affairs. Reproduced with the permission of the Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada (2009).

Source: Library and Archives Canada/Indian Affairs/RG10, Vol. 6810, Reel C-8533 File : 470-2-3, Part 7, Memorandum of the Six Nations and other Iroquois, 30 March 1920.

⁴ For the text of Prime Minister Harper's apology on behalf of Canadians, see: <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=2149>.

Columbia including Ahousaht, Coqualeetza, Kitamaat (or Haisla), Port Simpson, and Alberni. Most began as mission outposts. We also ran the Edmonton Indian Residential School to which many children from northern B.C. were sent.

Many of those who worked and taught in the schools did so with good intentions and kindness. Indeed many saw this work in remote locations and under difficult conditions as an act of faithfulness to their beliefs and to their church, as their "ministry." As the reality of the purpose and impacts of the schools has become more public, some former staff have felt let down by the church. One former principal who is married to a former teacher wrote to me: *"For (my wife) in particular... it has been difficult seeing the church turn its back on people like her who thought she was doing her best for children from the remote reserves of Manitoba as well as carrying out the mission outreach of the church she loves."*

Yet we know that even with caring staff, the humiliation started when a child entered the door of the school for the first time—with the delousing process, the cutting of the hair, the assigning of a number rather than a name, the change in clothing, and the prohibition against speaking their own language. Even brothers and sisters were not allowed to visit with each other.

That same former principal also wrote: *"Cultural genocide, where language was concerned, did not emanate from the church or the staff. It was the law. Even in day schools children were forbidden to speak their language on school property. Principals, like me, who had come into education after spending time among the people in a different context, largely ignored this law, but it was there, and if an inspector from Indian Affairs ever came around, staff could be reprimanded for dereliction of duty. It is totally unfair of the church to castigate residential school staff for doing what the law required of them. At one school where (she) taught she was, in fact, severely reprimanded for allowing the children to speak their own language while under her supervision."*

While recognizing that many employees worked with dedication and caring, as a church we must acknowledge the wide range of harms that occurred at the schools. We have heard the numerous painful stories of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse that are told as part of the legal claims filed against us. We have heard about poor food, insufficient heat, neglect and humiliation, brutal physical punishment, and deprivation. And we have heard about it not just from students, but from former staff.

On October 3, 1929, teacher Lucy Affleck wrote to the United Church Superintendent of Indian Missions describing what she called the "true conditions" at a residential school in Saskatchewan. She noted that the children were often cold, the food was inadequate, the pigs were fed the milk, there was a lack of clean water, and she suspected that at least 90 percent of the children had tuberculosis. "*The school exists for the profit of the staff, more than for the profit of the students,*" wrote Affleck, claiming that the principal and his wife, the school's matron, were drawing additional salaries from vacant positions. She also reported that the principal sold apples and oranges to the children for 5 cents apiece for additional profit. Her greatest concern, however, was her sense that the children lacked proper parenting at the school. The principal took "no fatherly interest" in the boys, and his wife was a strong disciplinarian and failed to mother to the children.⁵

Ms. Affleck was fired for "disloyalty." This is our shame.

We acknowledge that some students experienced horrendous physical and sexual abuse at the schools. In the most notorious example, Arthur Plint was convicted in 1995 and 1997 of 36 counts of indecent assault and three counts of assault causing bodily harm for acts committed between 1948 and 1968 while dormitory supervisor at Alberni Indian Residential School. He served an 11-year sentence at Mountain Penitentiary. Others were guilty of similar acts.

We acknowledge the pain caused to families whose children were taken against their will, to a place, often many miles away, where they were taught a different language, a different culture, and a different spirituality, all the while being told that who they were and the family, community, and heritage they came from were no good. We acknowledge and can scarcely imagine the silence in the community when all the children were gone, the emptiness in the home, the sorrow in the heart.

We acknowledge that the abuses have had a lasting affect on your lives and communities and have often manifested themselves in addictions, intergenerational abuse, lateral

⁵ Lucy Affleck to Dr. Barner, Superintendent of Indian Missions, Toronto, October 3, 1929, and November 11, 1929, UCCA, accession 83.058C, box 114, file 11; and the Reverend R.J. Ross, Principal, Round Lake Indian Residential School to Dr. Cochrane, 9 November 1929, UCCA, accession 83.058C, box 114, file 11.

violence, isolation, broken families, suicide, loss of language and culture. The impacts have been intergenerational and long-term.

In the words of our 1998 apology, *"You did nothing wrong. You were and are the victims of evil acts that cannot under any circumstances be justified or excused."*⁶

We also acknowledge that there were far too many deaths in the schools. Inadequate funding, overcrowding, poor nutrition, and inadequate health care contributed to diseases such as tuberculosis and measles. While the conditions were not the same in all the schools or in all time periods, we acknowledge that the system was fatally flawed and created these deplorable conditions.

This is also our shame.

Convinced that we were doing a good thing, we were deaf to the voices that began to raise concerns about the residential schools. A 1935 report of the Board of Home Missions and Woman's Missionary Society cited a number of disadvantages of the schools including that:

- children are taken from home at an early age, breaking the bond between a child and his or her parents
- children, because of the discipline, 24-hour supervision, and restrictions are unfit to return to their communities, and
- parents feel that the children are unprepared for the normal life of trapping, hunting, farming, and fishing⁷

In this period, the United Church saw its role in educating Aboriginal youth as a contribution to the larger national responsibility and treaty obligations. The Board of Home Missions reported that: "It must never be forgotten that uplift work among Canadian Indians is a National responsibility. We are under Treaty obligation as Canadian citizens to care for the original inhabitants of this country and we must never rest satisfied until these wards of our Government become accredited citizens of the Dominion. It is quite clear that without the aid of the Christian Church this much to be desired goal cannot be attained."⁸

⁶ For the full text of the 1998 apology, see: www.united-church.ca/beliefs/policies/1998/a623.

⁷ Board of Home Missions and the Woman's Missionary Society of The United Church of Canada, "Report of Commission appointed to survey Indian Education," 1935, UCCA, accession 83.058C, box 114, file 3.

⁸ United Church of Canada, Record of Proceedings of Sixth General Council, Kingston, Ontario, September 1934, UCCA, p. 338.

Even up to the 1960s, our assessment of the value of the schools was positive. The author of a 1958 United Church commission noted that while the funding from the government was not sufficient to run the schools, the principals needed to be better trained, and there were difficulties of enlisting suitable personnel: "There can be no doubt that the Residential Schools have, for more than 100 years, made an incalculable contribution to the lives of the Indian people of Canada. Moreover, few will deny that they will be needed for many years to come."⁹

We did not listen to the voices of dissent. We did not hear your voices. We did not hear teacher Lucy Affleck when she told us her truth in 1929. We did not listen to the voice and wisdom of former teacher Marion Adams, who taught in Norway House from 1957–1960 when she wrote this poem to a student:

*We took your hand to lead you on a path to the 20th century.
We held your hand to place our useful tools for the 20th century.
We supported a partner's huge umbrella—to shelter you,
the umbrella that shut out your sky, your sun, your roots.
We laughed and learned and loved you inside the sheltering form,
but we stayed together under the expanded ribs too long.
Its shadow snapped us up in the years ahead,
its hovering form wounded like an animal's trap, haunting our souls and minds with
deprivation of family, loss of Native tongue.*

*Now our umbrella home-life together
leaves us tortured by our unwitting mistakes.
Ungodlike—we shrink from those once happy times,
wishing healing for us all who lived and worked and played under the umbrella,
healing for you of yesterday who once glowed with promise for the 20th century.*

This is our shame, not yours.

Our role in the residential school system officially ended in 1969. Over the last 25 years we have been coming to terms with our responsibilities. We have been learning about the

⁹ The United Church of Canada, "Commission to Study Indian Work," 1958, UCCA, accession 82.079, file 1, p. 14.

breadth and depth of the harm done, and what it means to live out our apologies. There remains a long road ahead and big challenges.

In our 1998 Apology to former students, we said: *"We are in the midst of a long and painful journey as we reflect on the cries that we did not or would not hear, and how we have behaved as a church. 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."*

May the Creator strengthen and assist us in this task.

Thank you for listening to me.