

From Apology towards Reconciliation

30th Anniversary of the United Church's Apology to First Nations Peoples

Litany

This litany and story are based on the memories of the Very Rev. Stanley McKay and others who took part in the earliest national Aboriginal ministries consultations in the 1980s. There has been an attempt to give Indigenous people the dignity of being named in this history. An attempt has also been made to accurately reflect the history; any errors or omissions are not meant to cause harm but are the limitations of the writer, the Rev. Susan Beaver.

One: Loving God, we are your church, practising your love, justice, and peace in the world.

All: Guide us by your Holy Spirit.

One: You gave us the commandment to love and a teacher to follow.

All: Guide us and build us up for the journey.

One: We the church did not always realize how we were breaking the commandment and brought spiritual, social, political, economic, cultural, emotional, and physical suffering upon Indigenous peoples in Canada.

All: Wake us up and guide us in the way forward, together.

One: Indigenous peoples are resilient. You remain faithful, giving them strength and courage.

All: Help us to bring our faith and our strength together.

One: In 1980, the faithful from Native pastoral charges from across Canada, with the support of the whole church, held national consultations to gather, share stories, organize, identify needs, find their voice, and to listen to Elders like Gladys Taylor, Lavina Day, Jessie Saulteaux, Gordon Woods, Gordon Steinhauer, and Dora Benson.

All: We give thanks for the work of your Spirit in your people and in your church.

One: At the first consultation in 1980 in White Bear, Saskatchewan, the Indigenous people asked the non-Indigenous people to leave the consultation for a time because they did all the talking and drowned out the voices of the Indigenous people.

All: Help us now to speak with and listen to one another in good ways.

One: The Indigenous people formed the National Native Council, including Thelma Davis, Alberta Billy, Floyd Steinhauer, Gordon Berens, Murray Whetung, and Emily Oake; and hired Stan McKay as a national coordinator to do the work of the consultations between meetings.

All: We give thanks that you called good and faithful servants to your church.

One: The Native Council learned and followed the process and protocols of the church, which depended on written reports.

In March 1985, the Council's report to the General Council Executive recommended several important steps, including the formation of All Native Circle Conference and training leadership from First Nations communities.

All: Inspire us with your vision now, as you did then.

One: The Council chose Alberta Billy and Thelma Davis to lead the Executive through the Council's report. As they were about to enter the meeting, Alberta turned to Stan McKay and said, "I think I'm going to ask them for an apology."

All: We give thanks for the prophets you send among us and for the persistence of the women.

One: Alberta's request was shocking.

The request for an apology wasn't in the report.

It was never discussed in the Council.

The need for an apology was just in her mind and in her heart.

Stan said to her, "If that's what you need to do then you need to do it."

All: Continue, we pray, to send your Holy Spirit among us, to startle us and move us in the direction of your justice.

One: The Executive, who were caught off guard, responded with utter confusion.

The Indigenous people did not know how Alberta would be received.

Alberta's request was out of order and not on the agenda.

Yet the Executive were moved to respect her request and decided to work seriously on a response.

All: We give thanks for your spirit prodding us.

One: And so the church formed a working group that included Alberta and Stan to present the request to the 1986 General Council in Sudbury.

The group created print materials to educate the church, even as they wondered if anyone cared or read them.

They lived for a year and a half, preparing yet uncertain.

All: Continue to give us the perseverance to serve justice, and open our hearts to follow your prompting.

One: The Native Council instructed organizers to bring a drum to the sacred fire in Sudbury so the people might dance and greet the apology together.

All: We give thanks for the heartbeat of life.

One: The Indigenous people were not certain. Some asked, "What if they don't apologize?"

The people did not know if they would be heard. But affirming hope and the call to a task that might fail, the Elders said, "It doesn't matter. We still dance."

All: Continue to send your prophets among us to encourage us always.

One: In 1986, about 80 Indigenous people gathered in Sudbury for the national Aboriginal Ministries Consultation alongside the General Council. Members of the consultation spoke to the court: “We are asking for this apology from the church.” Then they left the meeting and invited the Indigenous commissioners to join them at the sacred fire kept nearby.

All: We stand in the silence with only you to hold us, Holy One.

One: Eighty from the consultation and a dozen Indigenous commissioners gathered by the sacred fire on a cloudy day. Anishnawbe Elders Art Solomon and Jim Dumont offered teachings and led the people in prayer. By dusk, Indigenous people from the surrounding communities joined the circle and doubled the number who were waiting. They did not know what the church would decide to do. The waiting was not easy.

All: What a blessing it is to see the circle grow larger and stronger. May it continue to widen.

One: Elders Edith Memnook, Murray Whetung, Stanley McKay Sr., Dora Benson, Rev. Dr. Johnson Garrioch, and others waited in a tipi near the fire. They were called to be the first to receive the response from the Moderator on behalf of The United Church of Canada.

All: It is hard to wait and live with uncertainty. Give us strength, hope, and patience now as you did then.

One: Most of the General Council followed the Moderator down the hill and joined the people at the sacred fire. Hundreds of people were now gathered. After the Moderator met with the elders, he came to the sacred fire and the people and spoke the words of the apology:

All: *Long before my people journeyed to this land your peoples 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 closed 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 of accepting the gospel.

We tried to make you be 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 God to be.

We ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the Spirit of Christ so that our peoples may be blessed and God’s creation healed.

One: After hearing the apology, the people danced. One man said he danced as he never had danced before. He hadn’t dared to hope that the church would apologize. But the apology and the dance turned the whole church in a new direction on the path of history. As the people danced, the clouds disappeared, the sky cleared, and the moon shone. It seemed that all of creation and our Creator celebrated this new thing.

All: All glory is yours, God most Holy.

One: The next morning, the Elders advised the Indigenous people to simply acknowledge the apology. They told the people to take the apology back home for the people to hear and discern what it means to live into the apology, and that we are entering a time that would not be easy.

All: God of wisdom and grace, continue to walk with us.

One: In 1988, at the 32nd General Council in Victoria, Elder Edith Memnook, a lay commissioner for the recently formed All Native Circle Conference, offered this response to the apology:

The Apology made to the Native People of Canada by The United Church of Canada in Sudbury in August 1986 has been a very important step forward. It is heartening to see that The United Church of Canada is a forerunner in making this Apology to Native People. The All Native Circle Conference has now acknowledged your Apology. Our people have continued to affirm the teachings of the Native way of life. Our spiritual teachings and values have taught us to uphold the Sacred Fire; to be guardians of Mother Earth, and strive to maintain harmony and peaceful coexistence with all peoples.

We only ask of you to respect our Sacred Fire, the Creation, and to live in peaceful coexistence with us. We recognize the hurts and feelings will continue amongst our people, but through partnership and walking hand in hand, the Indian spirit will eventually heal. Through our love, understanding, and sincerity the brotherhood and sisterhood of unity, strength, and respect can be achieved.

The Native People of The All Native Circle Conference hope and pray that the Apology is not symbolic but that these are the words of action and sincerity. We appreciate the freedom for culture and religious expression. In the new spirit this Apology has created, let us unite our hearts and minds in the wholeness of life that the Great Spirit has given us.

All: Open our hearts and our minds to receive this message given in love and hope.

One: Thirty years later we are still waiting to see what the apology means. What effect has it had? Have relationships changed? How have we acted? What healing remains to be done? The church has taken many steps, but many of us still wonder what the apology really means.

**All: We are not there yet—not all is forgiven or made whole between us.
Great Spirit, unite us as we continue to walk towards justice, reconciliation,
being family, and living with respect in creation.**

Words of Assurance

God, who hears our every prayer, moves with us in every dance step, and knows our every thought, says to us:

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs forth! (Isaiah 43:19)

Know that you are forgiven. Walk from here healed and free.