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Affirming Other Spiritual Paths

The Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Justice Murray Sinclair, has invited the churches who are Parties to the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement, to redress their history of devaluing and discrediting traditional Aboriginal spiritual practice by making statements of confession and affirmation. In humility, the United Church acknowledges its complicity in the denigration of Aboriginal wisdom and spirituality, and offers the following statements from its recent history.

In doing so, the Church recognizes with pain that this is a complex and sensitive issue for some within Aboriginal communities of faith who, as a result of our Christianizing work and the legacy of colonialism, are on a journey to restore harmony and spiritual balance.

Interfaith Statements

In 1966 the Report of the Commission on World Mission stated that God is at work in the religious life of all humanity. This denomination-shaping statement has led the United Church to an irrevocable commitment to interfaith dialogue and action, expressed in documents: *Mending the World: An Ecumenical Vision for Healing and Reconciliation*; *Bearing Faithful Witness: Jewish–United Church Relations Today*; and *That We May Know Each Other: Muslim–United Church Relations Today* and *Honouring the Divine in Each Other: United Church–Hindu Relations Today*.

“We believe the church can continue to affirm its own distinctive self-identity while affirming that other faiths and traditions have their own self-understanding. The Bible teaches that the Word and Wisdom of God are not limited to Christians, and the Spirit of God is free and faithful. We therefore affirm and cherish the differences between traditions as gifts of God, which can be life-giving and transformative”. (*That We May Know Each Other, Final Statement – 2007*)

Statements confessing our failure to value Aboriginal traditional spirituality

United Church Apology to First Nations (1986)

“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.

“... (W)e 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...”



United Church Apology to Former Students, Their Families and Communities (1998)

“...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...”

Circle and Cross, Dialogue Planning Tool (2008)

“I believe that if we all respected each other, we wouldn’t think of one faith as superior and ourselves better than the other. Perhaps this is only a dream, but I think and believe this is the only way we can have peace in the world.” Evelyn Broadfoot (former student)

“The *Circle and Cross* study developed a dialogue planning tool for engaging Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in conversation about spirituality in the context of the search for healing and reconciliation. This has been followed by Living into Right Relations, a process inviting people in the United Church to continue exploring these challenges and working towards justice in our life together in Canada”. (*Honouring the Divine, page 44*)



Living into Right Relations

In May 2008, 92 people from across the church, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, Christian and non-Christian, attended a three-day “Living into Right Relations” gathering and covenanted to walk together for five years to learn about each other and to explore, develop, and nurture just and respectful relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

United Church Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Alberta National Event

“...(W)e have learned that ‘good intentions’ are never enough, especially when wrapped in the misguided zeal of cultural and spiritual superiority.

“Thus, we have learned that we were wrong to reject, discredit and yes, even outlaw traditional indigenous spiritual practice and ceremony; in amazing circles of grace, as we have begun to listen to the wisdom of the Elders, we have found our own faith enriched and deepened. And we are grateful.” (Moderator Gary Paterson – Edmonton, March 27, 2014)

We know we have a long journey ahead of us. We are committed to make that journey in humility and partnership, engaging in the healing work of making “whole” our own spirituality, and acknowledging that holding both your spirituality and ours is possible through listening and learning with open hearts.

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Mel King

February 18, 2015