

Braiding Reconciliation

A Prayer Ritual to Mark the 20th Anniversary of the Residential Schools Apology

- [At General Council 43 in Oshawa \(2018\)](#), the Youth Forum learned about the history of the United Church's Apologies. They were given a teaching from one of the Indigenous Elders present, who said that the lives of colonists, newcomers, and Indigenous peoples of this land are braided together—and that the braiding makes us stronger. In a moving worship service, the youth then asked General Council to help them create a braid to symbolize this relationship. To honour the 20th anniversary of the 1998 Residential Schools Apology, we ask you to do the same. Here's how. But first, if you can, check with Indigenous neighbours to see if they feel this is an appropriate action to take.

What do you need?

- Text of the [1998 Apology to Former Students of United Church Indian Residential Schools, and to Their Families and Communities](#) ("From the deepest reaches of your memories, you have shared with us your stories of suffering...").
- Strips of cloth or streamer rolls in the colours of the Medicine Wheel: red, white, black, and yellow.
- Braiding Prayer (below) marking the 20th anniversary of the United Church Residential Schools Apology.

What do you do?

- Plan a time to do this ritual in worship. It will take 10–15 minutes.
- Explain and read the 1998 Residential Schools Apology.
- Explain the symbolism of the braid, and ask small groups to gather with materials to create braids.
- When they are done, bring the braids forward to a focal area in your worship space.
- Together, read the Braiding Prayer, below.

Braiding Prayer

Marking the 20th anniversary of the United Church Apology to Former Students of United Church Indian Residential Schools, and to Their Families and Communities, by Sara Stratton, Reconciliation and Indigenous Justice Animator.

**God of struggle, and of reconciliation,
Be with us as we remember
what we have been a part of:
Cruel and unjust systems
Efforts to say "sorry" ... and to mean it**

**Remind us that our history as people
is like a braid
We are wrapped together
And there is tension in that, and pain
But there is also strength**

**Remind us of the beauty and sacredness
of braids
The beauty and sacredness of relationships
Remind us to never again sever these braids
But to honour them in everything we do**

**God of struggle, and of reconciliation,
Be with us as we recognize
what we must be a part of:
Loving and just relationships
Saying "sorry" ... and actively meaning it.**

Amen.

Braiding Reconciliation

Background

20th Anniversary of the 1998 Residential Schools Apology

We pray that you will hear the sincerity of our words today and that you will witness the living out of our apology in our actions in the future.

The year 2018 marks the 20th anniversary of the United Church Apology to Former Students of United Church Indian Residential Schools, and to Their Families and Communities. We hope that you will take some time to share the story of the Residential Schools Apology in your community of faith, either on October 28 or at another time that works well for you.

Between 1849 and 1969, the United Church (or its predecessor denominations) ran 15 residential schools, part of a federal system of 130 schools designed to remove Indigenous children from their families, communities, and traditional way of life in the name of “assimilating” them into mainstream Canadian culture. Over the years, 150,000 children were sent into these schools. Approximately 80,000 are alive today, 5,000 of whom attended United Church schools. We honour all those who survived, all who did not, and all who have suffered the intergenerational trauma of schools they did not attend.

In addition to the tremendous damage done by the stated purpose of the schools, many students suffered physical and sexual abuse. They were also malnourished, and often subjected to cruel medical experiments. This story was largely hidden, or ignored, until the 1990s, when former students began to come forward with court cases. One of the most important was [Willie Blackwater’s](#), which laid bare The United Church of Canada’s role.

[The church had in 1986 apologized to Indigenous peoples](#) for its role in colonization, and received not an acceptance of the Apology but an acknowledgement, with the expectation that the church would try to walk a more faithful path:

We ... 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.

In the late 1990s, the church found itself struggling to respond. It was not an easy time, and not everyone agreed, but on October 27, 1998, the United Church apologized for its role in the Indian Residential Schools system, with Moderator Bill Phipps saying, in part:

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.

From there, The United Church of Canada eventually entered into the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, which financially compensated survivors for the harm they endured; established a national Healing Fund; commemorated residential school sites; and established the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), whose Calls to Action The United Church of Canada seeks to help bring to reality. The [United Church’s Healing Fund](#) has been operating since 1994.

As we move forward in faith and in practice, the Apostle Paul’s message to the early church is a source of vision and hope: *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything becomes new! All this from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us this ministry of reconciliation* (2 Corinthians 5:17–18). We are grateful and humbled to continue this journey with residential school and intergenerational survivors.