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“Justice From Now On”

A Keynote Address to the United Church of Canada 38th General Council

Georges Erasmus
President of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation

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The Aboriginal Healing Foundation
801 - 75 Albert Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1P 5E7
(613) 237-4441
(888) 725-8886
<http://www.ahf.ca>

Right Reverend Marion Pardy, Commissioners, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank-you for offering to me the kindness of your audience.

This is a season of renewal, a time of possibilities.

Aboriginal people are looking inward –

– to bind personal wounds, restore fractured communities, to make a straight path through history's ragged wake.

I have read the words of the United Church of Canada contained in the residential school study guide, "Toward Justice and Right Relationship: A Beginning."

They are good words – words of understanding, humility, and wisdom.

And yet, it must be admitted that our paths are littered with the many, many good words of yesterday and today.

The Cayuga leader, Deskahe, said in 1924, "We want something more than that. We want justice from now on."

Good words show us what could be. They are the token of things unseen.

But although we speak in the subjunctive, we live in the indicative.

And so I will offer some practical suggestions for the days ahead.

My message, in brief, is that the work of healing Aboriginal communities is underway.

The healing has begun.

But it will require more time and more resources than the Aboriginal Healing Foundation has been given.

As a consequence, there must be concerted leadership to ensure that the healing continues.

There must be a sustained effort in the long-term task of reconciliation between Aboriginal peoples and Canadians.

Toward the end of my presentation, I will speak with more detail about what I believe are necessary actions that you can promote as individuals, members of congregations, and leaders.

But first, I will provide a brief overview of Canada's Indian Residential School System, in an attempt to put into our minds afresh the history which has brought us here.

I. An Overview of the Indian Residential School System

In the three centuries following first contact, Europeans and Aboriginal peoples regarded one another as distinct and equal nations.

This view is reflected in agreements such as the Kahswenta, or Two Row Wampum.

The principles of a just and peaceful relationship, rooted in mutual respect, were set forth in this belt.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the alliances of the early colonial era gave way to direct competition for land and resources.

Government officials began to speak at this time of "the Indian problem."

Duncan Campbell Scott summed up the Government's thinking when he 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 Indian Question and no Indian Department."

We, the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, did not ask for this "absorption." It was imposed, often with deception and force.

As you know, the residential school system was a part of this attempt to force Aboriginal people into accepting the Government's will.

The process of forcing your way on others has many names – among them, colonization, imperialism, and conquest.

Aboriginal people have other names for it: they call it "oppression," "tyranny" and "cultural genocide."

It is true that many dedicated and good people worked in the residential schools, but the system itself was not just.

The generosity and compassion of the honourable were exploited in pursuit of the forced domination of proud and independent peoples.

Generations of Aboriginal children suffered abuses in the residential school that include:

- kidnappings;
- sexual abuse;
- beatings;
- needles pushed through tongues as punishment for speaking Aboriginal languages;
- forced wearing of soiled underwear on the head or wet bedsheets on the body;
- faces rubbed in human excrement;
- forced eating of rotten and/or maggot infested food;
- being stripped naked and ridiculed in front of other students;
- forced to stand upright for several hours – on two feet and sometimes one – until collapsing;
- immersion in ice water;
- hair ripped from heads;
- eugenics and medical experiments;
- bondage and confinement in closets without food or water;
- application of electric shocks;
- and on and on.

But even those who were not abused in these ways experienced trauma.

For the residential school system was designed to teach children to abhor the ways of their parents.

It was a system designed to sever daughter from mother, father from son ...

... a conscious, deliberate effort to destroy the continuity of family, community, language, culture, and identity.

Former students concluded in a 1965 Government consultation that the experiences of the residential school were “detrimental to the development of the human being.”

The residential school system is not alone responsible for the current conditions of Aboriginal lives, but it did play a role.

This system of forced assimilation has had consequences which are with Aboriginal people today.

Many of those who went through the schools were denied an opportunity to develop parenting skills.

They struggle with the destruction of their identities, and with the destruction of their cultures and languages.

Generations of Aboriginal people recall memories of neglect, shame, and poverty.

To this day, families are broken. Communities are shattered. And our nations suffer.

And despite the demise of the Indian residential school system, the policies of forced assimilation and domination continue in other forms.

It is within this context that the Aboriginal Healing Foundation was created to address the legacy of the residential school system.

II. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation’s mission is to encourage and support Aboriginal people in building and reinforcing sustainable healing processes that address the Legacy of Physical and Sexual Abuse in the Residential School System, including Intergenerational Impacts.

Our vision is one where those affected by the legacy of Physical Abuse and Sexual Abuse experienced in Residential School have addressed the effects of unresolved trauma in meaningful terms, have broken the cycle of abuse, and have enhanced their capacity as individuals, families, communities and nations to sustain their well being and that of future generations.

With no infrastructure or employees yet in place, and faced with the high expectations of Aboriginal communities, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation within days of its March 31, 1998 creation faced an influx of applications for funding.

As of August 1, 2003, we have received over 4,500 proposals requesting \$1.3 billion of healing program support.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation has committed \$327 million in project funding since it began giving out funds in May of 1999.

Over 1,300 funding grants have so far been approved.

Project activities include initiatives such as:

- healing circles;
- sex offender programs;
- wilderness retreats;
- elder support networks;
- education and training materials;
- memorials & commemorations;
- documentation of the residential school system;
- community needs assessment; and,
- conferences

The Funding Agreement between the AHF and the Government of Canada outlines what the Foundation can and cannot do.

Funding is strictly directed to activities within Canada which address the legacy of physical and sexual abuse arising from the residential school system, and the intergenerational legacy of this abuse.

Thus, we are unable to provide funding for:

- the purchase or construction of buildings and other capital property;

- advocacy on behalf of survivors;
- litigation-related activities;
- compensation; and,
- language and culture programs.

These limitations have created challenges.

Survivors have looked to the Foundation to be a voice which explains the impact of residential schools to the non-Aboriginal public.

Our funding agreement is clear that we must perform this role without becoming an “advocate.”

Some have seen, and still see, the Foundation as a source of compensation or litigation support.

They have been frustrated by our inability to give them what they seek.

But most difficult of all are the attacks upon languages and cultures – assaults considered by many survivors to be the most personally damaging.

The Foundation plays a role in addressing the effects of cultural colonization by directing to alternative funding sources projects which are, as a result of their larger community aspirations, supportive of language and cultural renewal.

Our view is that healing is a long-term goal that will be central to Aboriginal people’s ability to address other social issues now and in the future.

III. The Healing Must Continue

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation was given an 11-year mandate which ends March 31, 2009.

That portion of our 11-year mandate allotted for funding commitments ends next March 31.

Our final deadline for funding applications was February 28, 2003.

We will have committed the remainder of our available funds this October.

As President of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, I am encouraged by the good work of communities in which we have had the honour to play a small, supporting part.

I come today with the message that much courageous healing work is underway.

Thousands of Aboriginal people are on the healing journey.

This healing will provide a legacy for generations to come.

And yet, there are many who have yet to begin their healing.

Others will have made a beginning and will be vulnerable when the fund is exhausted.

And so, I suggest that the following matters require concerted action if the work of healing is to be supported.

IV. Ideas for Action

At the national level, the United Church can exercise immediate leadership to:

- One, promote a **national public inquiry** of the sort recommended by RCAP in 1995.

The public inquiry's main focus would be to investigate and document the origins, purposes and effects of residential school policies and practices as they relate to all Aboriginal people.

This would also be an appropriate forum to enable Aboriginal people to stand in dignity, voice their sorrow and anger, and be listened to with respect.

Its design and management should involve Aboriginal survivors and organizations. The church could get behind this initiative, with or without the Government's participation.

Individual congregations could seek out partnerships with Aboriginal people to design local meetings where the church and Aboriginal people could meet face-to-face.

- Two, the United Church could **increase its involvement in projects** across the country.

At the *national level*, there could be a coordinating desk for locally-run initiatives.

Projects could cover a number of areas, including for examples:

- Support for Aboriginal histories written by Aboriginal people;

- Memorials and public documentation of the residential school system;
- Reparations for the legacy of residential schools; and,
- Public education campaigns.

The United Church could use its resources to address the lack of historical awareness among Canadians, not only concerning residential schools but also the historic relationship between Aboriginal people and Canadians.

– Three, the United Church could promote **an extension, renewal, or replacement of the Healing Fund**

To continue the work of healing, there needs to be a longer and more adequate commitment. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation should be extended, or some suitable replacement provided.

The mandate should include language and culture, and there should be solid funding, better investment guidelines, and an open-ended time-frame rather than an arbitrary life-span.

– Four, the United Church has an opportunity to advance the idea of a comprehensive initiative, designed by Aboriginal people, to address the systemic assaults on Aboriginal languages, cultures, and spirituality.

The United Church could consider lobbying to convince Government that the Aboriginal Language Institute should be a foundation with an endowment, rather than another program which must use up its funding in a few years.

At the *congregational level*, possible actions are:

- education of congregations concerning Aboriginal peoples, cultures, and histories;
- partnerships with local Aboriginal organisations to design specific, outcome-oriented community activities (e.g. gatherings, feasts, sharing circles); and
- promotion of community efforts to combat racism and foster understanding.
- At the individual level, members of the United Church may:
 - educate themselves;

- write letters to Members of Parliament on issues related to government actions and Aboriginal peoples;
- challenge racism both inside the church and outside;
- look for new, or support existing, opportunities in the church and community to promote relations between Aboriginal people and Canadians; and,
- learn about and assist existing healing work in the community where appropriate and in consultation with Aboriginal people.

Members of the United Church of Canada have the resources, capacity, and creativity to put into action any initiative of their choosing.

I have made suggestions that, to realize, would require only commitment and leadership.

V. Reconciliation and Solidarity

I say “only” commitment and leadership, but even these in themselves are no small matter.

I recommend to you a concerted effort of a decade — an effort that should include:

- continuing in the work of your healing fund;
- reviewing the recommendations of RCAP and, with attention to the needs and aspirations of the communities, supporting Aboriginal people in their quest for the honouring of their rights;
- influencing the elected leaders of Canada to act upon the recommendations of RCAP — especially, but not only, in the areas of land rights and governance;
- challenging government to fulfil their historical obligations and agreements; and
- walking with Aboriginal people in solidarity — in mutual pursuit of justice and peace.

Reconciliation means “to make friends again, to bring into harmony.”

It can also mean “to become content, to reconcile oneself to something.”

Let us not become reconciled to the ugly prospects of expedience.

Let us instead look to the once and future friendship of our peoples.

V. Concluding Words

As I said at the beginning, your words are good.

I can see that you have given careful thought to your future course.

And you have been listening to Aboriginal people.

I would like to leave you with some thoughts of my own, for your consideration.

I have found in my travels that not all Aboriginal people are aware of the apologies of the churches and government, or that they are only vaguely aware.

Some have been deeply touched, and others feel that the apologies were made from a distance by people with whom they had no personal connection.

Consider that no Aboriginal community, however remote, has been untouched by the residential school system.

The resources of a century were given to the past's so-called "Indian problem."

Aboriginal people are today asking, What will be dedicated to the making of this better future?

I encourage you in your work and I acknowledge the challenges you face as a community of faith.

You are called by your traditions and faith to live in harmony with creation.

The prophetic tradition calls you to uphold the cause of justice, and to challenge the powerful.

You know well that we live in a culture not accustomed to the language of healing and reconciliation.

You can provide invaluable leadership by helping to inform your fellow citizens, and by raising the level of public awareness.

I encourage you to promote healing and right relationships by expanding the public discourse concerning the residential school system ...

- by furnishing an alternative to the media culture of fear, scandal, and conflict...
- by taking a historic view ...
- by upholding the principles of truthfulness and honest dealings.

Many believe that Aboriginal people are out to bankrupt the churches.

This is simply not true. But it frightens people and sells newspapers.

Because healing and reconciliation are long-term undertakings, you will need to cultivate a patient spirit.

Be aware also that some Aboriginal people are quite happy to go on without you.

Not everyone will want to be your friend.

But the integrity of your actions will be respected.

Like you, Aboriginal people honour an open mind and a willingness to listen.

Survivors know that to heal, they must forgive.

It is in our interests to have reconciliation in our time.

I thank you for listening to me.

Masi.