

*A Speech*

Prepared for Executive Director Mike DeGagné  
The Aboriginal Healing Foundation

National Reconciliation Week, 2005  
Canberra & Sydney, NSW, Brisbane, Queensland  
Australia

Thank-you for the gracious invitation to address you today.

I acknowledge those of the Stolen Generation in attendance. It is an honour to be your guest.

I've had the occasion to visit several times in the past few years, always with great pleasure and a keen interest in current events.

As you know, my name is Mike DeGagné, and I am the Executive Director of an Aboriginal-run organization based in Ottawa and called the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

This not-for-profit private corporation, established March 31, 1998 and funded by the federal government of Canada, was entrusted with a one-time grant of \$350 million dollars and an eleven-year mandate, ending in 2009.

Our mission is to encourage and support, through funding and research, community-based projects which address the legacy of physical and sexual abuse suffered by Aboriginal people – Metis, Inuit, and First Nation – in Canada's Indian Residential School System.

This system of forced assimilation, established through a formal partnership between the government and churches, was official policy between 1892 and 1969, although government-funded missionary-run Indian schools operated before this period, and government-run Indian residential schools continued afterward.

Seven years ago – the year of Australia's first Sorry Day – then-Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Jane Stewart read a "Statement of Reconciliation," expressing regret for the role of the Government in the administration of residential schools.

This Statement was itself a response to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples November 1996 Final Report, a five-volume work examining the historical relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

Seven years intervening, we reflect upon that which has been done and that which remains to be done.

It is too easy to underestimate the importance of the fact that stories of abuse and injustice in the residential schools are today a matter of public account. Not long ago, Aboriginal people were silenced by fear and shame.

Their moral courage has borne a considerable distance the burden of healing, and although there is distance to go, the course is irreversible.

Today there are roughly eighty-seven thousand former students of Indian residential schools in Canada.

The Foundation's research shows that over 111,000 survivors, their families and members of their communities – all of whom we know have been affected by the residential school system – have participated in healing activities supported by 1,345 Aboriginal Healing

Foundation grants. Most of these participants have never been involved in a healing program before.

These activities include both traditional and Western therapeutic models of healing, alone or in combination.

We have funded for examples memorials, counseling, conferences, plays, parenting skills workshops, educational resources, training for healers and healer support programs, and on-the-land activities.

The message I bring you today is that the success of this community-driven healing work has implications for Aboriginal peoples everywhere.

I encourage you to learn from our mistakes, and I hope that you may benefit from our successes.

One of the most encouraging successes of the healing movement in Canada, in which the Aboriginal Healing Foundation has played a modest part, is the consensus we today have in Canada thanks to the resilience and determination of countless committed individuals.

For there is now a coalition of the willing, of one mind in the understanding that we must go forward with the long-term project of healing and reconciliation.

One of the effects of the healing movement has been the building of new relationships, between Aboriginal people, the churches, and members of governments and the Canadian public.

Again, there is a distance yet to go. Nonetheless, we have a momentum which gives up hope.

I believe it is fair to say that, although there is not universal agreement on every detail, the persistence of a decade has resulted in principled and practical agreement on the matter of what needs to be done.

The list includes:

- an apology from the Prime Minister of Canada on the floor of Parliament
- a universal compensation package for residential school attendees
- truth-telling, healing and reconciliation activities
- public education
- and adequate long-term support for healing projects like those supported by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

(I mention in passing that the Aboriginal Healing Foundation has already committed the funding with which we were provided. We have received over 1.3 billion dollars in funding requests — an amount well beyond our capacity.)

Concerning the issue of redressing past injustices, there is broad agreement on the principle of survivor-centred activities which provide the greatest possible range of options from among which to choose.

Litigation, Alternative Dispute Resolution, compensation, healing, memorials, and truth telling, healing & reconciliation activities are some of the options which today exist in Canada, or (in the case of compensation) which are at this moment being actively negotiated.

Reconciliation of course means “to bring back into harmony; to become friends once again.” It is a matter of looking back and moving forward — addressing both the errors of the past and the requirements of the future.

In Canada, we have the examples of the earliest agreements between Aboriginal peoples and those newly-arrived from distant shores to guide and inform us.

We recognize that, on both sides, there are those either unprepared for or uninterested in reconciliation.

However, this neither negates nor relieves us of the responsibility of laying the foundation of a better future. We know the alternative and would have something better — for ourselves, our children, and our communities.

For this reason the Aboriginal Healing Foundation continues to deliver the message that healing and reconciliation are long-term projects requiring long-term support, resources, and commitment.

We promote, according to our means, conditions which contribute to and enhance awareness, understanding, and constructive change.

On the occasion of the very first National Day of Healing, I offer my best wishes for the successful realization of your efforts, and I encourage you to continue in your good and necessary work of healing and reconciliation.