

Backgrounder #4: Aboriginal Ministries

Introduction

This document provides background information on The United Church of Canada's history and relationship with Aboriginal people. It outlines current issues facing Aboriginal communities of faith and the church's role in Indian residential schools. It also offers insights as to why a new and different path is required as the church continues to live out its commitment to right relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.

Toward mutuality, respect, and equity: How long will it take?

In March 1985, Alberta Billy, a member of the Laichwiltach We Wai kai Nation in British Columbia, offered these words to the Executive of the General Council: "The United Church of Canada owes the Native peoples of Canada an apology and make it clear that our spiritualism was, in fact, our natural sacredness and not paganism as the missionaries implied."¹

The church responded with its first apology in August 1986. It addressed the church's history of mission that devalued Aboriginal spirituality and imposed European culture on Aboriginal people. The second apology followed in 1998. It communicated with more clarity the devastating impact the Indian residential school system had on Aboriginal people. For the full text of the 1986 and 1998 apologies, visit

www.united-church.ca/aboriginal/relationships/apologies.

At the 32nd General Council in 1988, the Aboriginal community acknowledged, but did not accept, the 1986 apology. The late Mrs. Edith Memnook, a representative of All Native Circle Conference, shared the following: "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."²

The United Church was one of the churches that ran Indian residential schools under contract with the government of Canada. The Indian residential school system contributed to the uprooting of Aboriginal community and societies. The assimilation policy at the core of this system denied Aboriginal children the right to their culture, language, and spirituality and resulted in significant loss. Children were separated from their parents for long periods of time and lived in institutions instead of with their families. Residential schools had severe consequences for these children, and denied them a healthy sense of parenting and family values. Many survivors of residential schools experienced mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual abuse, which has had intergenerational implications. A cycle of abuse and trauma remains. Time and commitment is needed to recover from loss, restore balance, and revitalize family and community.

Justice Murray Sinclair, chairperson of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](http://www.trc.ca) (www.trc.ca), said, "Reconciliation is not a new opportunity to convince Aboriginal people to 'get over it' and become like 'everyone else.' That is, after all, what residential schools were all about and look how that went. It is an opportunity for everyone to see that change is needed on both sides and that common ground must be found. We are, after all, talking

¹ Minutes of the Executive of the General Council, March 1985, page 122.

² See full text at www.united-church.ca/aboriginal/relationships/response.

about forging a new relationship, and both sides have to have a say in how that relationship develops or it isn't going to be new."³

The United Church of Canada is on a journey that will be intergenerational.

At the 41st General Council in 2012, the church took another step on that journey by entering into a new covenant in recognition that Aboriginal people were not invited to become signatories to the Basis of Union in 1925 when the United Church was formed. The General Council also approved changes to the United Church crest that recognized Aboriginal spirituality. The crest changes incorporated the four colours of the Aboriginal medicine wheel and added the Mohawk phrase "Akwe Nia Tetewá:neren," which means "All My Relations."

The changes to *The Manual* recognize that at least 60 Methodist and Presbyterian Aboriginal congregations existed when the United Church was formed, and "the tragic impact that European Christianity had upon Aboriginal congregations and [the need] to examine current practices in that light."⁴

Aboriginal leaders, communities of faith, and the wider church need more time to determine a future that will include the unity that the late Elder Memnook envisioned.

Going forward

Between February 2007 and November 2008, the Aboriginal Ministries Steering Committee was mandated to vision a new beginning for Aboriginal communities of faith. The committee expressed this vision of revitalization using the four directions or medicine wheel to articulate the journey: from the eastern direction we recognize who we were, our governance, our laws, and our teachings; from the southern direction we remember imposed systems; from the western direction we remember and reclaim our values, spirituality, and the gifts we have not lost; and from the northern direction we acknowledge what is—we are in a transitional time that brings both turmoil and healing.

Aboriginal communities of faith envision bridging traditional wisdom ways to this modern time. Over the past several decades, the church has heard these voices say it is time for the world to see Aboriginal contributions toward healing of the people and see their spiritual gifts at work in the church. Building relationships through truthful dialogue will pave the way toward the realization of this vision.

This process will extend beyond the Comprehensive Review Task Group's mandate. Therefore, it is important that the church strive to maintain funding for Aboriginal ministries at current levels while discussions continue.

³ Justice Murray Sinclair, "Reconciliation not opportunity to 'get over it,'" *CBC News* (April 18, 2014). Retrieved from www.cbc.ca/news/aboriginal/reconciliation-not-opportunity-to-get-over-it-justice-murray-sinclair-1.2614352.

⁴ Kevin Cox, "Historic Moment Revisits Basis of Union and Crest," posted August 12, 2012, www.gc41.ca/news/historic-moment-revisits-basis-union-and-crest.

Aboriginal communities of faith: Context

| By Conference | Total Number of Communities of Faith | | | | | Number Receiving Mission Support Grants |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| | | Remote (fly-in) | Outreach Ministries* (urban & rural) | Communities of Faith (urban) | Communities of Faith (rural) | |
| All Native Circle Conference | 40 | 15 | 4 | 1 | 20 | 40 |
| Montreal/Ottawa | 1 | | | | 1 | 1 |
| Bay of Quinte | 2 | | | | 2 | 2 |
| Toronto | 2 | | | | 2 | 2 |
| Hamilton | 5 | | 1 | | 4 | 4 |
| London | 1 | | | | 1 | 1 |
| British Columbia | 11 | 6 | 1 | | 4 | 8 |
| Total | 62 | 21 | 6 | 1 | 34 | 58 |

*Note: Outreach ministries meet the needs of the wider community by offering a variety of programs that promote reconciliation, culture, and language revitalization, as well as deliver services that address poverty, healing, education, and empowerment.

Trends in Aboriginal communities of faith include declining membership, aging congregants, financial challenges, a desire to connect with youth, and a need for simpler governance. These trends are consistent with those of the wider church. However, the [Comprehensive Review Consultation Report: A Conversation with United Church Communities of Faith about Our Future](http://www.united-church.ca/communications/news/general/140204) (www.united-church.ca/communications/news/general/140204) revealed these distinct aspects in Aboriginal communities of faith:

- History: Remembering Aboriginal history is seen as an essential aspect of moving forward.
- Buildings: Church buildings are essential and considered sacred space in Aboriginal communities.
- Denomination: There is a strong and positive connection to the denominational identity.
- Community: Aboriginal church members are deeply engaged with issues in their communities, including housing, safety, and poverty.
- Youth: The desire to attract younger members of their communities is even more central and urgent in Aboriginal communities of faith than in the rest of the church. This desire may relate to the intensity of social issues facing the communities and the desire to help.
- Music: Music is essential to the identity, worship, and community life of Aboriginal communities of faith.

Challenges

Structure and process

- There is a sense of frustration and isolation among many Aboriginal communities of faith.
- Clarity is needed with respect to navigating church structure and processes.
- Some communities experience disconnection from their Conference and presbytery. They have communicated a need for these bodies to listen to and acknowledge their concerns, as well as to consult with and involve them in decision-making processes.
- Transparency and effective communication strategies are needed.

Nurturing and supporting spiritual leadership

- Leadership development and training is needed for ministers and board members.
- Tangible signs of support and mentoring are needed. Ministry personnel are often engaged in crisis management, leaving little time for visioning, planning, and mentorship. Boards need training.
- Communities of faith need access to local educational opportunities that are rooted in an Aboriginal world view.
- Ministry personnel and leaders who serve in Aboriginal communities must be encouraged to engage in healing and reconciliation processes within the context of their community and wider church. Where this is not the case, communities are experiencing conflict.
- Opportunities for leadership to develop skills and processes for restorative justice need to be offered.
- There is a need to develop leadership skills in the area of biblical/wisdom teachings, spiritual nurture, and support for children and youth that are relevant to the community.
- Ministers must have opportunities to develop skills that can lead communities of faith in a time of change and renewal.
- There is a pressing need to develop and implement a cultural sensitivity training program to equip non-Aboriginal ministers to serve in Aboriginal communities.
- Aboriginal candidates for ministry must be encouraged to answer calls to serve the wider church (for example, outside their home communities).

Capacity for ministry leadership

- Aboriginal communities of faith do not have the financial resources to sustain ministry. Most receive Mission Support Grants to support ministers' salaries and benefits.
- Spiritual healing is a fundamental aspect of restoring spiritual health and balance to Aboriginal communities.
- Most Aboriginal communities of faith need full-time ministers.

Children and youth

- The Aboriginal Ministries Youth Leadership Program has been involved in numerous regional and national youth events since it began in 2012. Youth and young adults have shared their experience of having little or no opportunity to engage with Aboriginal ministries and communities of faith. Many have little knowledge of the structure and programs that exist, such as the Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre and the Committee on Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools.
- Positive steps have been taken toward acknowledging the opinions of children and youth. Ongoing efforts must be made to bridge the gap that exists with youth. The

Aboriginal Ministries Council recently reviewed ways to include youth and young adults in decision-making and to create and maintain safe and youth-friendly spaces. Aboriginal youth participating in church events are primarily those not connected with an Aboriginal community of faith. The National Aboriginal Spiritual Gathering mandate allows for two community members from the 62 Aboriginal communities to participate in the event. This excludes those youth who are currently active within the broader church, in particular urban youth. The spiritual gathering is the only space for Aboriginal youth and young adults to gather. Terms of reference need to accommodate this growing and active sector of Canadian society.

Buildings

- In March 2014, the Aboriginal Ministries Council began to establish a Real Property and Capital Plan for all United Church buildings in Aboriginal communities. This plan addresses repairs, upgrades, and restoration to these buildings. Issues relating to buildings in Aboriginal communities are long-standing and complex. Many Aboriginal church properties are in appalling condition, including some that have no heat, doors, or plumbing.
- The Comprehensive Review consultations with communities of faith showed that as many as 30 percent of all United Church congregations believe they will enter cooperative ministry or close in the near future. These findings are consistent with Aboriginal responses. But Aboriginal congregations have said they will not leave their buildings behind. Integral to a vibrant Aboriginal community is the gift of remembering a shared history. This includes the historical presence of the church buildings and the stories from church elders. There is a sense that if the Aboriginal community loses church buildings, it will lose its stories. These buildings are considered sacred spaces.
- To achieve the objectives of the Real Property and Capital Plan, significant support and input from Aboriginal communities and their stakeholders, as well as collaboration from all levels of the church, will be required. As principles for determining project priorities begin to emerge, communities of faith must give voice to what vital ministry means in the context of their communities.

Aboriginal Ministries in The United Church of Canada: Current Structure

Aboriginal Ministries Council

The Aboriginal Ministries Council is a decision-making body composed of representatives from Aboriginal constituencies across The United Church of Canada. It also include representatives from French and intercultural ministries, and Inuit/Métis.

The Aboriginal Ministries Council meets twice a year to discern and make decisions on matters of leadership, community, and congregational development, as well as healing and real property. The Aboriginal Ministries Council works in partnership with the Committee on Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools and meets with it annually to set directions for the coming year. The Aboriginal Ministries Council names six of its members, including the chair, to serve on the Executive of the General Council, which governs the denomination between meetings of the General Council.

The Aboriginal Ministries Council receives direction from Aboriginal communities of faith through the National Aboriginal Spiritual Gathering, which occurs every three years. The purpose of the spiritual gathering is to gather two representatives from each of the Aboriginal communities of faith and outreach ministries to discern matters of ministry and spirituality.

Through the work of the Comprehensive Review Task Group there has been broad consultation on the relationship of Aboriginal ministries within the church. Emerging from this important and ongoing dialogue is the need to build a relationship and structure that is based on mutuality, respect, and equity.

Aboriginal Ministries Circle

The Aboriginal Ministries Circle is the staff unit of the General Council Office that resources the Aboriginal Ministries Council and works in full partnership with the rest of the church. The Circle is composed of an executive minister, healing programs coordinator, youth leadership development coordinator, community capacity development coordinator, program support, and administrative support.

All Native Circle Conference

In response to a request from Aboriginal representatives to establish their own Conference, the General Council in 1988 established the All Native Circle Conference. This significant step toward building relationships of mutuality, respect, and equity began to address the marginalization Aboriginal communities of faith experienced when navigating church procedures, structures, and decision-making. The All Native Circle Conference is the only non-geographic Conference. It consists of four presbyteries (All Tribes, Plains, Keewatin, and Great Lakes Waterways) and 40 communities of faith, four of which are outreach ministries. It covers a geographic area from Alberta to Quebec, and the Conference office is located in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

The All Native Circle Conference adheres to the policy and polity of the United Church and uses the circle governance—the consensus model—for its decision-making. The Conference has an Executive membership of 13. It has two Leading Elders (one male and one female), who are equivalent to Presidents in other Conferences; the Speaker (Executive Secretary); and one staff for each of the Council on Learning and the Council on Sharing. The Council on Healing and Respect and Youth Council's responsibilities are shared by the Speaker and program staff. The Councils meet in the spring and fall, as a whole every other year, and every three years during Grand Council (Conference meeting.)

The All Native Circle Conference communities include diverse language groups and cultural protocols, which are recognized and respected. The Conference is committed to understanding and honouring the traditional spiritual beliefs that are present within this rich diversity.

British Columbia Native Ministries Council

The British Columbia Native Ministries Council emerged from what was known as the Coast Regional Group. Its goals are to increase the number of ordained Aboriginal ministers, support and encourage the vision of Aboriginal ministry within the context of community, and strengthen Aboriginal awareness and knowledge of church structure, enabling full participation in making decisions, sharing responsibilities, and contributing to church growth.

In 1988, BC Native Ministries chose to concentrate on the development of local congregations to strengthen them to serve in partnerships with all sister churches within BC Conference, rather than become part of the All Native Circle Conference.

The British Columbia Native Ministries Consortium was established in 1986 and is under the direction and support of Aboriginal communities. This consortium of Anglican and United Church organizations develops and delivers a community-based theological education

program for Aboriginal lay and ordained ministers. The program permits Aboriginal church leaders to live, work, study, and learn in their cultural environment.

Ontario and Quebec Native Ministries

Ontario and Quebec Native Ministries is made up of two representatives from each of the ten Aboriginal communities of faith and one outreach ministry in the following Conferences: Bay of Quinte, Hamilton, Toronto, London, and Montreal & Ottawa. This body appoints four delegates to serve on the Aboriginal Ministries Council. It gathers twice a year. The role of the representatives of these communities of faith is to link their communities to the wider church.

In 2014, the Ontario and Quebec Native Ministries embarked on a visioning process. The following statement emerged: "The vision of the Ontario and Quebec Native Ministries will give voice to All Our Relations and share our understanding and love of Creator God." The group experiences God's call to be messengers of faith and walk in right relations, spreading the Word of God. It seeks to live out this vision by

- sharing stories of ministry
- receiving updates on the work of the wider church
- collaborating on initiatives that contribute to the vitality of ministry and build on the existing gifts and wisdom of the communities
- acknowledging, valuing, and sharing the excitement and energy that emerge from this focus
- actively supporting current leaders as well as seeking out leaders who will take part in the vision
- developing a communication strategy to share information more broadly

The Ontario and Quebec Native Ministries work collaboratively with other Aboriginal constituencies, such as the All Native Circle Conference, on the Native Peoples Retreat planning committee. The Native Peoples Retreat is an annual event that has 50-plus years of history within Aboriginal communities of faith in Ontario and Quebec. This gathering holds space for fellowship, spiritual nurture, Bible study, celebration, children and youth ministry, and worship.

Committee on Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools

The Committee on Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools, once known as the Residential Schools Steering Committee, was established in 1998. The committee currently includes mostly Aboriginal members, two of whom are residential school survivors, and has dedicated staff support. The committee guides the United Church's response to the legacy of Indian residential schools and seeks ways to advance truth-sharing and reconciliation in the decolonization process. Reporting directly to the Executive of the General Council, the committee's mandate is to

- coordinate all aspects of the issues related to Indian residential schools, including the legal, pastoral, communications, and alternate resolution possibilities, healing and reconciliation initiatives, and financial planning.
- assist the church in living out its apologies through theological reflection and education and advocacy for Indigenous justice issues, including but not limited to land, rights, treaties, the impacts of colonialism, and racism.
- work in partnership with the Aboriginal Ministries Council and collaborate with KAIROS, ecumenical partners, and Indigenous organizations. It carries specific

responsibility for the distribution of the Justice and Reconciliation Fund and nurturing the Living into Right Relations network.

Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre

The Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre (www.sandysaulteaux.ca) is an Aboriginal theological and ministry training program of the United Church. It prepares Aboriginal people for lay and ordered ministry by affirming a style of leadership appropriate to Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal church experience and developing and testing curricula and models to uphold this style of learning.

Ministry students attend eight learning circles annually and are also involved in presbytery, Conference, and denominational work for an additional credit each year. Students are placed in church- and Conference-recognized ministry contexts for community-based learning as they apply the lessons from learning circles.

Successful completion of the five-year program fulfills the *testamur* requirements of the United Church for ordered and lay ministry as determined by presbytery and Conference.

The Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre provides cross-cultural and spiritual awareness for the larger community through its educational activities on its peaceful, 37-acre retreat facilities along the Broken Head River in Manitoba. The staff brings an awareness of Aboriginal history, culture, and current issues in educational outreaches to schools, churches, community groups and Conferences locally and across the country.

A brief history of Indian residential schools

During the 19th century, the Methodist and Presbyterian churches were committed to universal public education, beginning in Ontario. The earliest Methodist school for Aboriginal students was at Alnwick in 1838. The Wesleyan Society developed it into the Alderville Industrial School and opened the Mount Elgin School (Muncey) in 1851. There were more than 40 day schools in Aboriginal communities across Canada, but due to isolation and seasonal movements of Aboriginal peoples, it was deemed more suitable to establish a large residential school in a stable settlement. There were also "homes" that grew into schools, such as the Crosby Girls' and Boys' Homes begun in 1879 in Lax Kw'alaams (Port Simpson) in British Columbia, and the Methodist McDougall Orphanage and Training School, which opened in 1883 in Morley, Alberta.

Following the Indian Act in 1876 and on the strength of the Davin Report in 1879, the federal government established partnerships with churches to operate industrial schools on a residential basis, primarily in the West. The government's intent to break Aboriginal family bonds and destroy Aboriginal culture was clear from the outset. The first Methodist boarding school in the West was the Red Deer Industrial School, which opened in 1893, followed by Brandon in 1895. The first Presbyterian boarding school was established in Round Lake, Saskatchewan, in 1885, followed by Portage la Prairie, Manitoba; Crowstand, Saskatchewan (later established on Cote reserve) in 1888; and File Hills in 1889.

When the United Church formed in 1925, it assumed the operation of numerous day schools and eight Indian residential schools from the Methodists and six from the Presbyterians. The United Church was still involved in five schools when it withdrew from operating them in 1969. It continued to be involved with the Teulon Residence in Manitoba until 1996. Of approximately 80,000 residential school students alive today, about 10 percent attended United Church-run schools.

It was not until the early 1980s that the extent of physical and sexual abuse in the schools began to be revealed and an understanding of the cycle of violence was gained. An early precedent-setting lawsuit against the United Church was a group claim known as the Blackwater case. The case went to trial in 1998. It was not settled until 2005, when the court ruled that both the federal government and the church were liable and set the proportion at 75 percent and 25 percent, respectively. The United Church continued to settle many claims out of court and through the alternative dispute resolution process.

On May 30, 2005, the federal government appointed the Honourable Frank Iacobucci to work with all stakeholders (the Assembly of First Nations and other Aboriginal organizations; the United, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic churches; and legal counsel for former students) to develop a fair, final, and comprehensive resolution package to the class-action lawsuits and the tragic legacy of Indian residential schools.

The Executive of the General Council of the United Church approved the Settlement Agreement on April 30, 2006, and the federal Cabinet did so on May 10, 2006. It was implemented on September 19, 2007. The financial obligation of the United Church was \$6.9 million, of which \$1.1 million was distributed for projects with survivors, their families, and communities by the United Church Healing and Reconciliation Service Evaluation Committee, rather than paid directly to the federal government for settlement. The Settlement Agreement had five components:

- a Common Experience Payment to each former student
- a revised alternative dispute resolution abuse claim adjudication process called the Independent Assessment Process (the United Church continues to send a representative to the hearing if the claimant wishes)
- a five-year community-based Truth and Reconciliation Commission (extended two years), including document collection, seven national events, and hearings across Canada
- \$20 million for commemoration projects
- \$125 million for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation

The United Church has received nearly 2,900 abuse claims from former students. British Columbia Conference has employed a mobile counsellor to provide psychological and emotional healing services to residential school survivors and their families in four coastal communities.

Throughout this process, the church has acknowledged its troubled past and has increasingly understood how the path to reconciliation requires more than a programmatic approach or a settlement agreement. Healing and restoration of Aboriginal communities from the legacy of the Indian residential school system will take generations. The patterns of colonized thinking that remain within the church will take time to change.

This journey requires ongoing commitment to the spiritual practices of listening and learning, healing, and reparation, as well as denouncing racism and other destructive attitudes and policies that give rise to oppression. As the church seeks a relationship of mutuality, respect, and equity, it must ensure the full involvement of Aboriginal people in all decisions that affect them.