

LIVING INTO RIGHT RELATIONS

NATIONAL TASK GROUP REPORT (May 2008–November 2013)

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors...that they broke.... But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel.... I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah 31: 31–34



Background

In 1986, the United Church offered an Apology to First Nations Peoples. It ended: “We ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the Spirit of Christ so that our peoples may be blessed and God’s creation healed.” Another apology followed in 1998 to residential school survivors and to their families and communities.

In 1988, Edith Memnook responded on behalf of the All Native Circle Conference, closing with the words: “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 October 2000, 94 people from across the church attended a three-day Leadership Support Gathering on Reconciliation and Justice for the purpose of identifying strategies and steps for implementing the United Church’s goal to work toward reconciliation between Natives and non-Natives in the church and Canada.

In May 2007, the Executive of the General Council gave a priority “to address the church’s brokenness in the relationships with Aboriginal peoples and moving towards healing and building right relations.”

In June 2007, an inter-unit planning team was gathered representing Aboriginal Ministries; Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations; the Residential Schools Steering Committee; and Racial Justice and Gender Justice, with representatives from All Native Circle Conference, B.C. Native Ministries, the former Ontario-Quebec (Aboriginal) Council, and Conferences with Aboriginal relations commitments. In November 2007, the Executive of the General Council approved a draw from the Morrison Bequest “to enable healing, reconciliation and long-term right relations work in the church.” In February 2008, the Living into Right Relations initiative came under the umbrella of the Residential Schools Steering Committee (now Committee of Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools).

Mandate

In May 2008, 92 people from across the church attended a three-day Living into Right Relations gathering in Pinawa, Manitoba, and covenanted together to explore, develop, and nurture just and respectful relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people across our church on a five-year journey, complementing and paralleling the Truth and Reconciliation Commission timeline. Each Conference had been invited to send three Aboriginal and three non-Aboriginal participants, who formed a home group to work in their Conference.



Delores Charles serves PM George during the Strawberry Ceremony.

The Broken Chalice: Staff from the General Council Office arranged for worship and other materials to be shipped to Pinawa for use at the May 2008 Living into Right Relations event. Although carefully packed, the pottery communion chalice arrived in three broken pieces. Initially panicked that this key symbol from the national office had been broken, upon deeper reflection the participants began to see the broken chalice as an important symbol in its own right, reflecting the broken relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in our church and land. There was recognition that the work of right relations must resist the historic patterns of “fixing.” And that this work is neither quickly nor easily done. The chalice, even while broken, reflects our abiding faith in the possibility of reconciliation, and as was noted at the inauguration of the Aboriginal Ministries Council office space, it is still possible to share communion from the cup even while it is broken.



The Living into Right Relations (LIRR) Task Group provided guidance and leadership to the church as it continued to live out its apologies and the covenant made at the LIRR Gathering for the five-year period between 2008 and 2013. The mandate of the task group was to:

- accompany and support programmatic work, resources, and networks (congregational, regional, and national) to help bring into reality the covenanted vision to explore, develop, and nurture just and respectful relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people across the church that began at the 2008 gathering
- facilitate processes to inform and engage the church and Canadians in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada process

Speaking, Listening, Learning from the Heart

Whenever we gather in circle, an Elder usually advises that we need to “speak from the heart.” Such speaking calls forth “listening from the heart.” And so, as Jeremiah records, God will write a new covenant on their hearts. The hearts of those who gathered and covenanted at Pinawa, and those who have come to join many other circles since through the work of LIRR practitioners have been profoundly broken, softened, and filled with hope and compassion. There is a resounding swell of “Do not lose heart.”

From the onset of the Living into Right Relations initiative there was an understanding, particularly from Aboriginal sensibility, that there needed to be intentionality in discerning what it means for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal to “be” together. This need is rooted in Canada’s colonial history whereby settler people imposed their culture, language, and systems onto the First Peoples of Turtle Island. This led to an incalculable disparaging impact that remains with Aboriginal people to this day. The United Church of Canada expressed regret for their complicity in this history in the 1986 Apology to First Nations Peoples: “We imposed our civilization as a condition for accepting the gospel. We tried to make you be like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were.”

There were struggles and there were new insights at pivotal points within in this five-year endeavour. Fully engaging in the building of good and right relations is more than simply “doing,” and it is to be present and alert to the work of the Spirit.

Membership of Task Group

There were eight voting members:

- Two co-chairs (one Aboriginal and one non-Aboriginal)—initially, Maggie McLeod and Russell Daye; replaced by Kathryn Fournier and Rodney Smith-Merkley
- One person named by All Native Circle Conference—Donna Kennedy and Don Little alternated
- One person named by B.C. Native Ministries—Chris Bolton
- One person named by Ontario and Quebec Aboriginal congregations—Dixie Shilling
- One non-Aboriginal member-at-large who attended the May 2008 gathering—Marion Best
- One Aboriginal Elder—the late Sophia Jamieson, replaced by Pukwis Johnson
- One non-Aboriginal Elder—Bill Phipps
- One corresponding member from the Residential Schools Steering Committee (now CIJRS)—Elaine Jacobs replaced by George Montour

Resource staff to this committee initially included Laverne Jacobs, Chad Beharriell, Gail Allan, Kim Uyede-Kai, and Debbie Siertsema.

As of 2013, resource staff have included Maggie McLeod, Executive Minister, Aboriginal Ministries; James Scott, General Council Officer, Residential Schools; John Bird, Program Coordinator, Aboriginal Justice; and Cecile Fausak, Liaison Minister: Residential Schools.

How the Task Group Lived Out Its Mandate

The task group had 12 meetings, several of which were in community and the others in Toronto from 2009 to 2013.

• Resource Development

Almost the entire proceedings of the Pinawa gathering were video-recorded. Four short videos were mounted on YouTube and made available on CD to spread the message of the context of building right relations, what that could look like, and naming some of the issues that may well arise. After extensive exploration as to what other resources might be produced using this footage, none were made.

In 2010, each home group was provided with a small library of relevant resources including such items as *Circle and Cross*, KAIROS's "In Peace and Friendship," and the UNDRIP booklet.

The home group members were invited to and encouraged to be facilitators of the workshop "Reconciliation: What Does it Mean to Us?" a resource produced by CIJRS in 2012.

• Community Visits

The task group met in Ohsweken in January 2010. After attending the Atlantic TRC national event in Halifax, members travelled to Tatamagouche Centre for their October 2011 meeting. In April 2012, the task group met in Saskatoon, and joined a circle of some 30 people preparing for the Saskatchewan national TRC event. In October 2012, the meeting was held at Five Oaks, concluding at Nations Uniting at Six Nations. At the April 2013 meeting, joint meeting time was spent with the Racial Justice and Gender Justice Committee, and two guests from Church in Mission spent time with us also.

- **Communications**

A list of over 300 e-mail contacts, not necessarily connected with home groups, form the LIRR network.

The first LIRR national update was published August 2009. The Aboriginal Justice and Right Relations program coordinator has continued, every six months, to gather, edit, and circulate this round-up of the major activities of the home groups and the task group in the preceding period. Newsworthy articles, links to informative videos, invitations to events, announcements of new resources, and so on, are circulated on a regular basis.

- **Consultations**

In November 2010, one Aboriginal person and one non-Aboriginal person from each Conference was invited to join the task group for its meeting in Winnipeg. There was some sharing of resources and the questions considered were:

- *What is your vision of right relations at present, based on your experiences thus far?*
- *What has been successful for your home group? What barriers does your home group face on its path of right relations?*
- *What would assist your home group to realize your vision of right relations?*

Priorities that emerged were the need to “crystallize the vision” and to have an engaging communications strategy to increase involvement. All groups were struggling to successfully engage both the non-Indigenous church and Indigenous partners, and to make connections to the TRC.

In January 2013, a consultation paper was sent to each Conference home group contact and executive secretary, with the following three questions:

- *How would you describe the LIRR work of the future?*
- *What are the factors that your home group need to address in order to walk together strongly into the future?*
- *What are the ways that the LIRR National Task Group might be most helpful in 2013 to energize and strengthen LIRR work in your Conference with a view to sustaining it until it is part of the fabric of the church?*

There was a response of some nature from all but four Conferences: ANCC, B.C., London, and Newfoundland and Labrador. It was very difficult to draw any conclusions or themes from the responses. See section “Assessment of Home Groups” below.

- **Walks**

One of the themes arising from the October 2010 consultation was the idea of “walking together” or “paddling side by side,” physically as well as spiritually and socially. Over the next year, home group members were encouraged to and did join national walks such as Mother Earth Walk and Walk4Justice, and/or plan local and regional walks.

- **Logo Development** (see cover)

Responding to a call in 2012 for help to design a LIRR logo, graphic designer Michelle Harland collaborated with Brian Wildcat and Heather Hobbs. It portrays the harmonious inclusion of symbols from the Indigenous spiritual tradition (circle, four colours, eagle, sacred pipe) along with Christian symbols (cross, chalice, dove of peace).

- **Behavioural Covenant for Living into Right Relations**

Brian Strom, a conflict resolution consultant, was engaged to help the task group look at barriers and keys to right relations, and to write and adopt a behavioural covenant at the April 2012 meeting. Considerable energy was put into the possibility of hosting regional workshops/similar conversations with home group members and interested others. However, by late fall 2012, it was decided this was not feasible, and perhaps not needed given the variety of other upcoming learning opportunities and gatherings.

- **Expression of Reconciliation at TRC**

At the October 2011 Atlantic National Event in Halifax, co-chairs Kathryn Fournier and Russell Daye offered an Expression of Reconciliation. A symbol was presented to the Bentwood Box of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

- **Funding**

Meeting costs of the national task group were covered by the Aboriginal Ministries Council budget. The task group also approved grants to various home groups for a number of programs and projects that were funded from the budget of the Committee of Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools. Each year, the budget was \$150,000. Over the five years, the grants totalled \$133,121.56.

At the start, home groups were asked to provide up to 1/3 of the funding for any project; beginning in December 2010, that requirement was removed. Ten of the 13 home groups applied for funding in 2010. In 2013, three home groups applied for grants: Saskatchewan, Manitou, and Bay of Quinte.

- **Assessment of Home Group Work**

When the LIRR National Task Group met in October 2012, it concluded that the following factors appear to lend strength to the work being carried out by home groups:

- strong, consistent leadership (seek less reliance on General Council/Conference staff)
- opportunity to meet face to face, more than once per year
- focus, a clear strategy or project that was successful and inspired everyone to continue
- nurturing of partnerships and networking with other groups with similar goals
- being part of Conference structure and budget
- more than six people in the group
- consistent involvement of at least two to three people from Aboriginal communities
- intentional nurture of connections with each presbytery within a Conference
- prior existing relationships
- the Blanket Exercise and It Takes a Village were used most extensively of any scripted resources

It seems that most groups struggled with maintaining a continuous Aboriginal representation constituting half of the membership, be it from United Church Native ministries or other Indigenous members of local communities. Most groups also suffered from changes in the non-Aboriginal membership over the length of the time period.

Although strong groups are functioning in about 8 out of 13 Conferences and have plans in place to continue, it is also noted that there are “energy centres” for this work in some of the Conferences without LIRR home groups or circles as such, for example, Aboriginal Neighbours on Vancouver Island, Nations Uniting within Hamilton Conference, and ANCC.

What the Home Groups Did

In some Conferences, there were already committees or groups functioning well in building right relations and being allies concerning Aboriginal justice issues, and the home groups blended with them, or spawned another “core” in a different area of the Conference. In some Conferences, the home groups were more or less starting from scratch, and had to seek additional members and support—they did so with greater or lesser success. In yet other Conferences, the home group was not ever really able to meet again and stay connected, and still core groups of vitally engaged persons rose up.

- **Gaining Conference Support**

Some home groups had to seek a place within the Conference structures, staff support, and budget, and others found a ready-made place. Some have seen that support dwindle, grow, or remain about the same. Most notable are perhaps Toronto Conference and ANW Conference, where home group chairs have a place on the Conference Executive and line budgets.

- **Mobilizing for Participation in TRC National Events and Community Hearings**

Every Conference has done an amazing job of preparing people to witness, raise funds, volunteer at events, and hold sharing and learning circles to build understanding and trust. The United Church presence at national events and community hearings has consistently been very high relative to other denominations and the wider public.

- **Planning and Hosting of TRC Community Events**

In Bay of Quinte, Toronto, and ANW Conference, the United Church was involved in planning and hosting significant regional TRC events.

- **Circles and Workshops—Standalone Events and at Church Meetings**

The bulk of any home group time was spent in smaller gatherings, learning from one another and sharing that understanding with others—sometimes at camps, education centres, in church basements, in healing lodges, schools, treaty offices, in conjunction with pow wows, and so on.



Retreat at Golden Lake, Bay of Quinte Conference, September 2012

Toronto Conference home group visits teaching lodge on Georgina Island, November 2013



The home group in ANW and MNWO along with ANCC congregational members facilitated “The Blanket Exercise” many times. B.C. Conference created a tour with Kathi Camilleri and the experiential learning exercise “It Takes a Village” to six locations throughout B.C. In Saskatchewan and London Conference, people developed their own script for “It Takes a Village.” MNWO and ANCC Conferences, together with Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre and the Centre for Christian Studies, have hosted two annual Feasts for Friends in September 2012 and 2013 at Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre.



Dancers at Feast for Friends 2014 at Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre

- **Walks, Canoe Trips, Vigils and Rallies**

Many church folk have joined walks, vigils, and rallies for healing, Idle No More, Sisters in Spirit, equitable funding, and to draw attention to local environmental issues and First Nations land claims and rights. Often they carried banners and joined KAIROS campaigns. A number of canoe trips have also been enjoyed and built strong team relationships, notably in Saskatchewan, Bay of Quinte, and B.C.

- **Returning to Spirit**

The two-part reconciliation program known as “Returning to Spirit” was hosted by ANW Conference and Saskatchewan Conference home groups. Three educational centres have offered the program: Dr. Jessie Saulteaux Centre, Five Oaks, and Tatamagouche. The first part is a personal five-day healing journey, with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in separate workshops. The second part is a five-day reconciliation workshop, when the two groups are brought together. CIJRS has also provided individual funding to up to 10 Aboriginal and 10 non-Aboriginal people each year for registration, accommodation, and meals.

- **The Ripple Effect/ Right Relations ambassadors**

Some Conferences have been more intentional or effective at engaging, educating, and supporting a small number of people in each presbytery to carry the work forward. The Ecumenical Working Group on Residential Schools sponsored a two-day workshop in Ontario, and in the Maritimes to develop “ambassadors for reconciliation.”



Alberta and Northwest Conference LIRR Home group meeting, February 2013

Patricia Robertson's Research on Transforming Societal Conflict

In 2011, Patricia Robertson (co-chair of ANW Conference home group) completed a master's research project for Royal Roads University, entitled "Healing the personal wounds of colonization: Utilizing third party consultation to transform Canada's post-residential school societal conflict." She surveyed LIRR home group participants, and sought to "gain an intercultural perspective for creating a peacebuilding model that might potentially advance the relationship building between cultures." Some of her findings and analysis were as follows:

- That 90% of the survey participants were over 45 years of age with a wealth of experience in building right relations. This strongly pointed to the need to draw more young people into this work (page 40).
- Respondents also seemed to feel that there was a "need to address basic needs [of First Nations] before more individuals will be ready to confront the collective societal issues" (p. 42).
- A total of 61.9% of respondents thought they at least slightly impacted the community to some degree, whereas 38.1% felt ineffective or offered no opinion (page 48). Patricia observed "this low level of optimism is unlikely to kick-start a social movement for change if the work continues along the current path."
- It was almost unanimous with 95.5% of the respondents feeling that at least some percentage of the population needs to address personal healing before effective, long-term collective societal healing will occur.
- While 90.9% were in agreement to some degree with the statement "that addressing the deep systemic issues is a precursor to collective societal healing," Pat indicated that "it is puzzling why only 63.6% of the respondents sense that their right relations home group has made addressing systemic issues a goal.... To say you are engaging in right relations work without addressing systemic issues is to be in a state of confusion or chaos. Right relations work is systemic work." Patricia pointed out: "Some difficult conversations need to occur to decide what the overarching goal is for home groups. Is it to build relationships within the milieu of the church between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples or is it to address the legacy of the residential schools for all Aboriginal peoples so that social development rises substantially in Aboriginal communities to meet the level found in non-Aboriginal communities?"
- The respondents were asked to select only five key goals or expectations of their right relations work . The selections were ranked as follows:
 1. Intercultural relationship building,
 2. Creating a more truthful history together,
 3. Reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians,
 4. Generating intercultural understanding; and,
 5. Building capacity in order to address deep underlying issues.

While evaluating personal healing as a precursor to collective societal healing is the premise of this research, yet right relations gatherings have not ranked it in the top five elements. As well, while government involvement is key to transformation, advocating for political change ranked fairly low.

Patricia proposed an Infinite Possibilities Intercultural Peacebuilding Model to enhance the work of home groups. She noted that "it is important to ensure the right relations home groups have goals that are aligned with the six UCC Principles [adopted by GCE in fall 2003] and that actions are aligned with attaining those goals." She suggests that key roles of LIRR home groups would most effectively be 1) Advocate for public education 2) Influence grass roots by encouraging personal healing 3) Influence grassroots by community networking to build social movement for change (page 69). The full paper is available at

https://www.academia.edu/7208215/Healing_the_personal_wounds_of_colonization_Utilizing_third_party_consultation_to_transform_Canadas_post-residential_school_societal_conflict

The Evolving Context

Since the Pinawa event, and the establishment of the LIRR National Task Group, there have been significant changes within the United Church, and in society in relationship to the context in which we are seeking to live into right relations.

Within the Church

- **The Aboriginal Ministries Council** was established in 2008, and in early 2010, the Aboriginal Ministries Circle gained a new Executive Minister, Maggie McLeod, and into 2012 continued to recruit their full staff complement of seven people. At GC41, a covenant was signed to acknowledge the changes in the crest incorporating the four colours and the phrase “All my relations” in the Mohawk language as well as the insertion introducing the Basis of Union recalling the long history of Aboriginal congregations.
- **The Residential Schools Steering Committee** was renamed and remanded to become the Committee on Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools, which recognized that residential schools were one tool of colonization, and that reconciliation would require a wide variety of steps related to seeking justice for Indigenous people.
- **Partners** in seeking justice, interfaith and intercultural ministry, and anti-racism work **within Church House** have sustained significant staff cuts. Restructuring of the Justice, Global, and Ecumenical Relations unit in 2009 led to a Partners in Mission Unit and a Communities in Ministry Unit, and in 2013 to one Church in Mission Unit. Significant energy has been invested “toward becoming an intercultural church” and talking about differences using the Courageous Conversations protocol. Webinars on “circle culture” for small group ministry have also been conducted. In 2011 and 2013, national conferences bringing together the justice ministries and advocates in the church have been convened; each one has sought to lift up Aboriginal justice issues.
- **The Racial Justice and Gender Justice Committee** was once two committees and was amalgamated in April 2013.
- **A Comprehensive Review Task Group** was established after General Council 41 (August 2012) to review everything about the way The United Church of Canada carries out its ministry, and expects to report its recommendations for “radical change” in 2015.
- **KAIROS and the Indigenous Rights Circle** in the face of significant financial cutbacks are in the process of “resetting the relationship” to ensure that Indigenous concerns, values, and rights inform all the work of KAIROS. They have been supporting participation in the TRC with their “It Matters to Us” campaign, seeking truth, reconciliation, and equity, and through the Women of Courage program.

Within Society

- **Idle No More**, an Aboriginal-led national movement, arose in the fall of 2012 in response to a series of bills in the House of Commons affecting many pieces of environment legislation, and thus First Nations land, which was done without free, prior, and informed consent. Many rallies and educational sessions have been held across the country over the past year, initiated by four Aboriginal women. Many Indigenous people, especially young adults, and allies have created a vibrant social movement.



Churches visit Chief Teresa Spence when she was fasting, January 6, 2013, Ottawa

- **The Truth and Reconciliation Commission** chose to host the mandated seven national events over the period of five years. Funding for community TRC events was only available up to the end of 2012. The shape of the national events and how the church might participate evolved from event to event.
- **Social Networking and Changes in Technology** have rapidly changed the way we can communicate, and the way we can nurture networks and provide opportunities for learning and sharing stories, and “meeting.”
- **Returning to Spirit** is an independent non-profit organization dedicated to providing workshops that lead to transformed relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Their funding to date has come primarily from the Roman Catholic Entities Corporation, but is now relying on other donations and host partners in addition to the registration fees.

Farewells at the final meeting of the LIRR Task Group, November 2013, Knox United Church, Winnipeg





Don Little, Evan Smith, and James Scott fashion the dream wheel at November 2013 meeting of the LIRR Task Group

What Comes Next

At the final meeting of the LIRR Task Group with additional guests from the Conference groups in November 2013 in Winnipeg, five themes were named, and the whole circle was invited to envision what direction each one might take, as it was named.

1. Youth and young adults. We recognize that, while KAIROS events and summer and adventure camps include youth, many young people are engaged outside the church and we need to let go of some old expectations of what youth leadership development is. Because teaching is the role of the Elders, we should encourage new covenanting arrangements for youth and Elders to learn from each other and make use of relationship-building opportunities through college and university chaplaincies or others.

2. Healing of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. While we acknowledge that healing takes time and requires relentless application, there remains important work to do on understanding how this might

occur for all. Aboriginal people say we need time and space to do our own healing; some are not ready to hear about non-Aboriginal people speak of their own need for healing. Racism is still a reality. Initiatives like Retuning to Spirit may be helpful. We need to avoid “the hierarchy of oppression.”

3. Advocacy and justice. Issues identified include: UNDRIP; free, prior and informed consent; honouring treaties and land claims; environment and healing the earth. Examples of current initiatives include Water Keepers and Keepers of the Athabasca. Methodologies include listening and learning days with politicians, “showing up as the church,” community ministries, learning from international models, and better preparation in theological schools.

4. Education and resources. Considerable resources exist: The Blanket Exercise, *Circle and Cross*, Union of Ontario Indians booklet on “We are All Treaty People,” resources from Church in Mission and Affirming Churches, *A Healing Journey for Us All: Uncovering the Wounds of Empire*. A resource list from ABNW Conference was circulated. There is a need for resources on Doctrine of Discovery, being Treaty People, and UNDRIP for use in conversations.

5. Communications, sharing, and attending to the network. Questions were raised about identifying new leadership for the work, addressing communications gaps, and balance between face-to-face time in circle with communications in other forms. Home groups will be evolving, named differently, and the network will become more diverse, which makes the communication even more challenging.

The Aboriginal Ministries Council, and the Committee of Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools will continue to explore these directions, and carry the responsibility of assisting the church to live into the wholeness of “All My Relations.”