



Remembering the Children

The Church and Aboriginal Leaders Tour

The following are the remarks made by the Most Reverend Fred Hiltz, Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, in Ottawa, Ontario on 2 March 2008 during the Church and Aboriginal Leaders Tour.

TODAY MARKS THE BEGINNING of an Aboriginal and Church Leaders Tour with stops in Ottawa, Vancouver, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg to promote awareness and anticipation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to be established by the federal government in consultation with the Assembly of First Nations.

In a recently published volume, *From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools* (produced by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series), we read in the introduction:

Aggressive civilization to accomplish colonial goals was thought to be futile in the case of adults. Residential schooling was the policy of choice to reshape the identity and consciousness of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children. The persistence of colonial notions of superiority is evidenced in the fact that residential schooling ... punished the expression of Aboriginal languages,

spirituality, and life ways and attempted to instill a Euro-Canadian identity in Aboriginal children.¹

This policy of assimilation had its origin in *The Gradual Civilization Act of 1857*. It was reinforced by *The Indian Act of 1876* and sanctioned by successive Canadian Parliaments. The language used to describe this policy was itself disturbing, for it spoke of removing children from their “evil” surroundings. Simply stated, the “savage” child would be remade into a “civilized” adult.

The Church had a significant role in this program of assimilation in that we provided the teaching staff and supervised a number of the residential schools. The Anglican Church of Canada, which I represent, ran 24 of these schools concurrently through the 1920s. Over time, we ran 36.²

The theme of the walk we begin today is “Remembering the Children.” They were taken far from home and family and then denied their language and culture as we went about remaking them in our image. The children were punished for speaking their language. They were abused physically, emotionally, and sexually. Many were scarred for life. Many survived their experiences. Many others went missing. Many died.

As churches we have *so much* for which to be *so sorry*.

In August 1993, Archbishop Michael Peers offered an apology to Aboriginal peoples on behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada at the National Native Convocation in Minaki, Ontario. His apology included the following statement:

I know how often you have heard words which have been empty because they have not been accompanied by actions. I pledge to you my best efforts, and the efforts of our church at the national level, to walk with you along the path of God's healing.³

Fifteen years later, the Anglican Church of Canada, along with other churches, views the establishing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a very significant step along the long road toward the healing of which Archbishop Peers spoke.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission will provide an opportunity for survivors of the residential schools to tell their stories. It will enable those who listen to grieve with them as they speak of how they were robbed of their language and culture, how their dignity was diminished, how their bodies were abused, and how their spirits were broken. It will enable Canadians to begin coming to terms with the long-term impact of the residential schools. It will enable Canada to compile

an honest, accurate, public, and permanent record of the residential schools. At a January 2008 gathering of Anglicans involved with work arising from the legacy of abuse in residential schools, Esther Wesley (co-ordinator for the Anglican Indigenous Healing Fund) spoke of the need for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission clearly and directly. She said, "This is a history that belongs to all of us. It belongs to all Canadians and we need to know our history to prevent it from ever happening again."

When the truth has been told and the truth received, when the truth has been borne and properly recorded, then we shall be much further along the path of understanding that will lead to reconciliation and a renewed national resolve to respect the dignity of every human being.

As church leaders, we welcome the news of the establishing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and we eagerly anticipate the appointment of the commissioners. We are committed to the truth-telling the Commission calls for, and we pledge our best efforts to continue raising the profile of the Commission's work over the next five years. We recognize that the road to healing and reconciliation is a long one, and we remain committed, hand in hand, to see this journey through.

In this sacred work of "Remembering the Children," we ask for the Creator's blessing and guidance.

Notes

- 1 Castellano, Marlene Brant, Linda Archibald, and Mike Degagné (2008:1–2). Introduction. In *From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools*. Ottawa, ON: Aboriginal Healing Foundation: 1–8.
- 2 Between 1820 and 1969, the Anglican Church ran a total of 36 schools, with its peak involvement occurring in the late 1920s, during which the Church had concurrently operated 24 schools.
- 3 Peers, Michael (1993). *A message from the Primate, Archbishop Michael Peers, to the National Native Convocation Minaki, Ontario*, Friday, August 6, 1993 (see Appendix 3). Retrieved 26 November 2008 from: <http://www2.anglican.ca/rs/apology/apology.htm>

PHOTO: P7538 (151) St. Peter's Residential School, Hay River - students in class. -- [1918].

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