

Behold the Apology
A Call for a Fulsome Living Out of The UCC 1986 Apology to Indigenous Peoples

In the Spring of 1985, Alberta Billy of We Wai kai Nation stood before the General Council Executive and asked the United Church of Canada (UCC) to apologize for the hurt and harm its' colonial policies and practices caused to Indigenous Peoples over the years. Her witness remains a sacred act of truth-telling, courage and invitation to deeper relationship. After much discernment and debate concerning responsibility and reconciliation, The UCC offered its apology in 1986. That apology is attached.

In 1988, Edith Memnook of the All-Native Circle Conference acknowledged the apology. That response is attached. In her statement she said she hoped the apology was "not symbolic but that these are the words of action and sincerity". Her response continues to call the church toward a living reconciliation rooted not only in words, but also in faithful action and enduring relationship. Unlike, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which attached 94 specific and measurable Calls to Action to its report, the UCC Apology never took that step of establishing clear actions steps to which the UCC could be held accountable.

In the absence of sufficient UCC actions and sincerity, the apology to this day has not been accepted by Indigenous Peoples.

In a 2016 interview on the 30th anniversary of the 1986 apology former Moderator Bob Smith said that little had happened in living out the first apology and noted its "glacial pace". In fact, the colonialism that had encrusted The UCC and Canada as a whole, was still firmly in place in 2016. As it is today. Moderator Smith's reflection invites the church into renewed honesty, humility and commitment.

We are grateful for UCC acts such as the residential school Healing Fund and the positive remit vote to establish a fully autonomous and self-determining Indigenous church. And we rejoice about significant congregational actions and acts of solidarity and learning including many examples where congregations have returned land to indigenous communities in their areas. One such example is Faith United Church in Kingston, who intentionally began walking with their indigenous neighbours in a 10-year journey that included learning about indigenous history, culture and realities and resulted in the repatriation of United Church property to an indigenous trust. Actions such as these are signs of hope and reminders that transformation is possible when the church listens with humility and openness. At the same time many indigenous leaders, people and communities continue to remind us that our work of reconciliation with them remains unfinished.

That reconciliation work includes awareness that the tragic harm and the trauma of residential schools did not end in 1969 with the closure of the last UCC residential school, nor did it end in with the apology in 1986. The harm that we caused is on-going. In some cases, six generations of Indigenous children were "stolen" and placed in those schools. The genocidal inter-generational- multi-generational trauma continues to be passed on generation after generation. We see it in the ever-escalating rates of Indigenous struggles with mental,

emotional and physical health and with anger, violence, poverty, deplorable housing, early death, suicide and incarceration. Naming these truths is not an act of condemnation, but an act of moral and spiritual responsibility. Recognition in the UCC crest, while important, is not enough as symbols alone cannot bear the full weight of reconciliation without sustained relational and restorative action.

A Fulsome apology rooted in repentance and lived out in restorative action is imperative until the day The Indigenous Peoples of The UCC and the intergenerational survivors of the United Church residential schools can look us settlers in the eye and say we have walked with them with the respect birthed to each by the Creator. And then, perhaps, the words: We accept your apology.

But, in want of that day, what does a fulsome apology look like and require?

A fulsome apology is a Peace Dove fed and feeding on Repentance. Recall that in our faith Repentance means a radical “turning”, turning of a life’s direction. It is a turning away from destructive ways and a turning towards life-giving ways for oneself and community. In part, it means turning and looking back in order to go forward. Behold the apology! A turning back means to begin repairing the harms we have been part of or “benefit” from. Repentance also means turning forward and helping enact new life-nurturing and policies and restorative actions of church, community and government.

It can mean honoring Indigenous teachings by living with respect in creation, supporting and respecting Treaty promises, embracing Government “Land Back” initiatives, prison reform, adequate First Nations housing and many other initiatives for health of body and spirit. Currently First Nation Reserve size is frozen at original levels (while municipalities continue to be granted additional land from provincial governments) forcing many young people to flee to cities when they too often languish on the streets and often end up in prisons. Ninety percent of all land in Canada is “owned” by Provincial and Federal governments. Some of that land could be returned to First Nations and homes provided for street and prison returnees, healing lodges built and staffed, and guaranteed annual incomes provided. All of this to help build a peaceable future rooted in repentance and lived out in reconciling actions. But... apologies not rooted in hearty repentance are like a dove with few feathers or an olive branch that will not become rooted.

As we approach the 40th anniversary of the 1986 Apology, we invite United Church congregations into a season of prayerful reflection, learning and faithful action. We respectfully urge congregations to consider reciting the 1986 Apology together on Sunday, October 4, 2026 instead of or in response to a Land Acknowledgement. We also respectfully urge you to prayerfully determine an action you might take perhaps beginning with having an annual “Pay Rent Service “ in which you symbolically collect money to support an Indigenous organization(s) in your area in recognition that you are on Indigenous land. Taking such small and bigger reconciliation actions are an important demonstration of our UCC commitment to a Just Relationship with Indigenous Peoples.

Those bigger actions could include congregational actions based on the hundreds of Recommendations for change, including many for systemic change, in the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples , the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)and the 2019 report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. The attached APPENDIX notes some specific TRC actions for your congregation's consideration.

Our Hope is not simply to remember words spoken in the past, but to continue nurturing relationships grounded in respect, humility, justice, and Creator-given dignity. We pray for the day when healing is more fully realized, trust is restored, and Indigenous People recognize the Settler United Church as a fully Reconciling Church. Let us work toward that day in the spirit of Repentance, Reconciliation and Hope.

APPENDIX

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Some Possible TRC Calls to Action for Congregations to Monitor and Contact MP's and Ministers about concerns

Call to Action 43 - the call for federal, provincial, territorial and municipal to fully adopt and implement the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)* as the framework for reconciliation.

Call to Action 44 – the call for the Government of Canada to develop a national action plan, strategies and other concrete measures to achieve the goals of *UNDRIP*.

Call to Action 48- the call for church parties (which includes the United Church) to the residential schools Settlement Agreement to formally adopt and comply with *UNDRIP* as a framework for reconciliation.

Call to Action 53- the call For Canada, in consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal Peoples to establish a National Council for Reconciliation to monitor progress on the implementation of the 94 TRC Calls Action.

Call to Action 55- the call for Canada to provide multi-year funding for the National Council for Reconciliation (which has not been established as called for in Call to Action 53- set above) to monitor and report on progress towards reconciliation such as comparative funding for education of children on and off reserves , the health gap between indigenous and non-indigenous communities, the rate of criminal victimization of aboriginal people and the over representation of Aboriginal in the justice and correctional systems.

Calls to Action 74 and 75- the calls for churches to work with Governments and Aboriginal communities to establish an online registry of residential school cemeteries and inform families of the burial sites of children who died while at residential school

Call to Action 94- the call for Canada's corporate sector to adopt *UNDRIP* and obtain the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples before proceeding with economic development

1986 Apology to Indigenous Peoples

Long before my people journeyed to this land your people were here, and you received from your Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured.

We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you of the good news of Jesus Christ we were closed to the value of your spirituality.

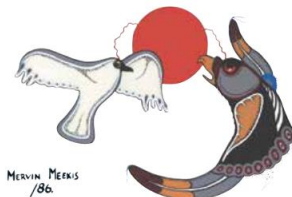
We confused Western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ.

We imposed our civilization as a condition of 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. As a result, you, and we, are poorer and the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred, and we are not what we are meant by God to be.

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.

The Right Rev. Bob Smith
General Council 1986
The United Church of Canada



The Meeting of the Eagle and the Dove by Mervin Meekis, an artist from Sandy Lake Reserve who died in 2000, was presented to the 31st General Council 1986 during the consideration of the Apology to Indigenous Peoples.

The 1988 Response

In 1988, at the 32nd General Council, the Indigenous church acknowledged the apology, expressing its hope that the church would live into its words. Mrs. Edith Memnook, a representative of the All Native Circle Conference, said:

The Apology made to the Native People of Canada by The United Church of Canada in Sudbury in August 1986 has been a very important step forward. It is heartening to see that The United Church of Canada is a forerunner in making this Apology to Native People. The All Native Circle Conference has now acknowledged your Apology. Our people have continued to affirm the teachings of the Native way of life. Our spiritual teachings and values have taught us to uphold the Sacred Fire; to be guardians of Mother Earth, and strive to maintain harmony and peaceful coexistence with all peoples.

We only ask of you to respect our Sacred Fire, the Creation, and to live in peaceful coexistence with us. 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.

The Native People of The All Native Circle Conference hope and pray that the Apology is not symbolic but that these are the words of action and sincerity. We appreciate the freedom for culture and religious expression. 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.

1988 Record of Proceedings, p. 79