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'A journey of great promise'

Tour drums up awareness of commission

SOLANGE DE SANTIS

STAFF WRITER

Apr 1, 2008

Vancouver

In a soaring glass hall at the Museum of Anthropology, under the watchful eyes of a dozen huge totem poles, church, native and government leaders on March 5 pledged that the upcoming Truth and Reconciliation Commission will lead to healing as it hears the painful stories of Indian residential schools in Canada.

The event, which included a walk to the museum led by native drummers, was part of a four-city tour by the leaders that was called Remembering the Children and was designed to draw attention to the commission and its work.

Established as part of a settlement agreement that limited liability for churches and distributed compensation to former residential school students, the commission in its five-year mandate will hear stories of former students and use church and government archives to create an extensive historical record of the school system. The date of the commencement of the commission's work and its composition has yet to be announced by the federal government.

Archbishop Fred Hiltz, the Anglican primate (national archbishop), reiterated the church's 1993 apology for its role in the system, which operated across Canada from the mid-nineteenth century into the 1970s.

"I represent a church that was complicit in a system that took children far from home and family, took their clothing, cut off their hair and punished them when they spoke their own language. Some of our staff abused children. The Anglican church has so much for which to be so sorry," he said.

Gloria Moses, co-chair of the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples



ART BABYCH

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"As a church we have so much for which to be so sorry," said Archbishop Fred Hiltz, primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, in Gatineau, Que., at the launch of a four-city tour raising awareness about the pending Truth and Reconciliation Commission that will examine Canada's legacy of Indian residential schools.

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who attended St. George's residential school in British Columbia from 1949 to 1959, said in an interview before the event that she had mixed emotions about her experience in the school and about the commission.

"I got a good education, but the discipline was so difficult – slapping, strapping – and I was so lonely" after being taken from her family, she said. About the commission, she said she had hoped that "once the settlement was over and done with, we could dig a big hole and bury (the residential school legacy). But every now and then I feel that pain and anger, so it might be good to talk about it."

Another former student, Alvin Dixon, a member of the Heiltsuk First Nation, told the audience of about 200 that the commission is "an important step in moving away from that painful past." Chief Robert Joseph of the Gwa wa enuk First Nation said "somewhere in the telling of all of our stories, the truth will emerge and we will be seeking a kind of freedom we've never known before as aboriginal people."

The commission's interim executive director, Bob Watts, said it is a "journey of great promise," but noted that "there are many, many truths" about residential school experiences and "reconciliation will happen at many levels."

The Vancouver stop was organized by the Anglican Church of Canada and the Presbyterian, United and Roman Catholic churches hosted events in Ottawa (March 2), Saskatoon (March 9) and Winnipeg (March 10).

At the start of the tour, about 500 people at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (in Gatineau, Que., near Ottawa) heard Phil Fontaine, Chief of the Assembly of First Nations call the commission's work, "one of the most remarkable journeys that this country has ever taken."


It will provide "an opportunity to expose lies that we were forced to live with for far too long," he said, drawing applause from the larger-than-expected crowd. It will be an opportunity to "shine a light on Canada's darkest chapter and expose not just to Canada but to the world what was done to a people that didn't deserve it," he said.

"The Truth and Reconciliation process is an opportunity for us to hear the truth about and begin to break the enduring chains created by Indian Residential Schools," said Rev. David Giuliano, moderator (national leader) of the United Church of Canada.

For more information about the church leaders' tour and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, please see <http://www.rememberingthechildren.ca/>

With files from Art Babych

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