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ANGLICAN JOURNAL | 100

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Commission an opportunity 'to acknowledge the truth,' says bishop

ART BABYCH
Nov 27, 2007

Can non-aboriginals handle the truth about the abuses that happened in Canada's Indian residential schools?

That is a concern of Robert Watts, named early this year as the interim director of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, part of the \$4-billion settlement agreement reached between the federal government, the churches involved in running the schools and the Assembly of First Nations.



ART BABYCH
Bishop Mark MacDonald

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One of the factors affecting healing and reconciliation between residential school survivors and the rest of the country will be the "receptivity of the country to the truth," said Mr. Watts, the former chief of staff to Phil Fontaine, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations. "We can have all the truth in the world, but if people aren't listening ... in terms of building for the future, we will miss an opportunity."

He was speaking at a Nov. 19 event that included Bishop Mark MacDonald, the Anglican Church of Canada's first national indigenous bishop. The event, titled, "Confronting our Aboriginal History Towards Healing and Reconciliation," was held at Ottawa's Church of St. John the Evangelist, and was organized by the parish's PWRDF committee.

Mr. Watts and his staff are seeking members to serve on the commission, which is to be an independent commission appointed by government order-in-council. A selection panel is sifting through more than 300 applications from across Canada, and is expected to come up with a short list for the position of chairperson and two commission members by early in the new year.

During its five-year term, the commission's duties will include hosting

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seven national events across the country to hear from residential school survivors, churches, and government. "We want to hear the voices of the people who were involved in the residential schools to help create an accurate history of residential schools," said Mr. Watts.


The commission is to table a report on the historical findings of its research half way through the project and provide a listing. "We're hopeful in the second half of the mandate that we'll have an opportunity to do a lot of important things at the community level, to work with indigenous communities in terms of truth telling, and working with them in terms of healing," said Mr. Watts.

Bishop MacDonald said he views the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a "doorway" and "an opportunity for us to acknowledge the truth." He also drew on words of aboriginal elders when asked what parishes can do to help in the healing and reconciliation process. "Walk with us," is what the elders would say, said the bishop. "At a very simple level, that's a very profound thing to say ... but consider for a moment that in North America, First Nations peoples have volunteered and died (in wars) at a higher rate than any ethnic group. The rates both increase in every war that's been fought. First Nations people have known how to walk, sacrificially, with the rest of Canada on so many issues and have paid a price so dear in so many ways," he said. "And they continue to do that."

The bishop is optimistic about an improvement in the relationship between First Nations people and non-aboriginals. "That isn't necessarily because the institutions have become so wonderful, but it appears to be that the Creator, through the Spirit, is doing things in peoples' hearts and minds that have the capacity to transform institutions," he said. "I see a lot of good things in motion."

Art Babych is editor of CrossTalk, the newspaper of the diocese of Ottawa.

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