

Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Vancouver



March 31, 2008

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Editorial**Churches deserve fair reporting**

By Paul Schratz



The article on the facing page from the Nanaimo Daily News is significant for one reason: it is the first time a daily newspaper has suggested there's more than meets the eye to a Church-conspiracy theory many mainstream media outlets have been reporting on.

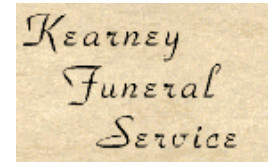
It's an opinion piece, and it doesn't necessarily present the Kevin Annett story from the Archdiocese of Vancouver's perspective, but it's noteworthy because it does something no other media outlet has to this point: it questions the allegations being made by Annett.

This archdiocese has been dealing with Annett for at least a decade. He's a former B.C. United Church minister who since the 1990s has been accusing the Catholic, Anglican, and United Churches of a massive cover-up of the murder of thousands of babies and children in church-run residential schools.

Police have investigated Annett's allegations and dismissed his claims, but now he is benefitting from the technology that makes Facebook and YouTube the phenomena that they are. He is presenting his conspiracy theory to a new crop of editors and reporters who are unaware of his background or who, because they work with decimated newsrooms, no longer scrutinize his accusations. Alternative media have adopted Annett and his crusade, inviting him to speak on college and co-op radio and repeat his claims unchallenged.

Sadly, mainstream media such as the CBC and the Globe & Mail have been adopting the standards of the new media, unquestioningly reporting his accusations of a "Canadian Holocaust" perpetrated against natives, with the graves of thousands of bodies of murdered babies and children deliberately concealed.

Imagine a disgruntled ex-Liberal alleging that the Liberal sponsorship scandal was more massive than anyone imagined, implicated numerous officials, and involved a conspiracy to conceal tens of thousands of secret payments, hidden bank accounts, outright fraud, money laundering, and influence peddling.



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It would be such an extraordinary story no journalist would fail to take the next essential step: verify its accuracy.

Verification means examining the credibility of the source and the plausibility of the allegations. It means seeking corroborating sources and giving the accused, in this case the churches, a chance to respond. For some reason the standards of journalism that apply to political reporting don't make the transition to the religion beat.

Now Annett is ramping up his guerrilla tactics, protesting and disrupting church services, issuing "eviction notices" to churches across the country, and issuing "letters of demand" to everyone from the prime minister to the Queen and the Pope. He has refused invitations to meet, instead making outlandish (and untrue) declarations such as accusing Archbishop Roussin of having "fled to Mexico."

Annett and his group disrupted Palm Sunday Mass at Holy Rosary Cathedral, ordered the Catholic Church to get off "Squamish territory," and promised to occupy churches on Easter Sunday to mark the "resurrection of the Squamish people." The archbishop was forced to draft a letter to parishioners advising them what to do should their Masses be disrupted. The letter can be found at www.rcav.org.

Throughout the coverage, not one reporter contacted the Archdiocese of Vancouver to ask for a comment, to ascertain Annett's credibility, or to examine the veracity of his allegations. Only when the Squamish Nation issued a statement condemning the church occupations and declaring that Annett did not represent them did any media even suggest his claims might warrant more scrutiny.

The issue is not about whether abuse took place at the residential schools. That sorry history has been well documented. Criminal charges have been laid where possible, and the legacy of pain and abuse from the failed residential school system has been abundantly documented.

Certainly there are more stories to tell, and more work to be done in rebuilding relations between churches and natives. That is why the archdiocese has for more than a decade maintained a thriving and active First Nations Council, where constructive work is done in the direction of healing and reconciliation.

It's why a national Truth and Reconciliation Commission is about to get under way, with the full participation of the churches.

It's why Christian leaders from coast to coast recently issued additional apologies for the pain and suffering that went on in residential schools and pledged to continue working with natives to build bridges from pain to healing.

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