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A road map for healing



Photo by Merle Robillard

How congregations can engage Aboriginal neighbours as part of the national journey toward justice

By *Andrea Davis*

Rev. Jim Thompson vividly recalls the story he heard from a Native elder more than 20 years ago, in which the elder compared Native spirituality to a broken vase. It was 1986, after the United Church's apology to First Nations people.

"He told a story of when the white settlers came to this land with their culture, their language, their traditions. They took that vase and smashed it on the ground," he says. "Over time, with residential schools and the plans for assimilation, the pieces got buried and lost from sight. And so our task now is to try to find those pieces and reconstruct the vase to its original splendour the way the Creator intended."

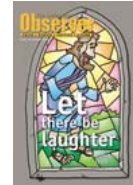
This past May, Thompson and the congregation at Humbervale United in west Toronto hosted a special service to symbolize their commitment to walk faithfully and intentionally with First Nations people. The congregation invited several First Nations representatives and unveiled a specially crafted broken vase, which remains in their sanctuary as a constant remembrance.

The purpose of the service was "to try to encourage our congregations to [foster] a more intentional relationship with First Nations people, to help restore the value and integrity of Native spirituality," says Thompson.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) — part of the landmark \$4-billion residential schools settlement signed in 2006 between the federal government, churches involved in running the schools, and the Assembly of First Nations — gets under way this year. So it's more important than ever for congregations to start laying the groundwork for a relationship with First Nations communities. Native minister Rev. Sanadius Fiddler of Sandy Lake Ont., says the Humbervale event was a good example of that. "It's important to reach out to Natives. We need to work together."

"We're not going to be able to engage very comfortably in the formal commission if we don't know each other at all," adds Rev. James Scott, the General Council officer for residential schools with The United Church of Canada.

Part of the settlement agreement includes \$20 million for events and memorials to



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commemorate the legacy of Indian residential schools. The agreement also includes \$100 million in cash and services toward healing initiatives, to be contributed by the churches involved in the administration of the schools.

Here are some things your congregation can do now so it can hit the ground running when the TRC outlines its formal plans.

Take inventory

Do an inventory of the resources your congregation already has, advises Scott, including relationships. Are there Aboriginal people in the congregation? If not, does the congregation have connections with Aboriginal people in the community or surrounding area? Are there Aboriginal organizations or service organizations in the community with which the congregation could make some links?

Scott cautions that the process will not likely be easy. Congregations have to overcome their own fear and hesitancy about engaging people who may not welcome the contact.

“Cold calls are awkward,” says Scott. “So try to build on relationships you already have just to get advice on who to approach or how to approach — and what are the protocols — so it’s not the awkwardness of a cold call to the general number of the friendship centre. The inventory is partly about who we already know, and where are the connections already that might have been invisible to us.”

He recommends getting in touch with Rev. Laverne Jacobs, co-ordinator of Aboriginal ministries with the United Church’s national office, who may be able to help congregations foster local contacts.

Educate yourselves

Along with taking inventory, it’s crucial that congregations educate themselves about the legacy of the residential school system.

The United Church website (www.united-church.ca) offers several resources for congregations interested in reaching out to First Nations people. *Toward Justice and Right Relationship: A Beginning* is a study guide and DVD (or video) that can serve as a road map for a journey of healing, justice and building relationships.

Circle and Cross is a new resource that invites Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities to begin a dialogue for learning and healing. In addition to guidelines for starting a talking circle, it offers information on Canada’s colonial heritage, model agendas for a Circle and Cross gathering, and thematic worship resources.

“It’s good for the broader community to educate themselves,” says Rev. John Thompson (brother of Jim Thompson), chair of Keewatin Presbytery. “There’s a lot of writing now about the legacy of the residential school system that was so traumatic and devastating to the First Nations people.”

Make connections

Don’t underestimate the value of a face-to-face connection.

Janice Boneham, administrative assistant with Knox United in Fort Frances, Ont., and member of an informal “right relations” group in northwestern Ontario, attended a four-day ceremony last year at the Dr. Jessie Saulteaux Resource Centre near Beausejour, Man. The event included a sweat lodge, a sacred fire, feasting and a pipe ceremony.

“Part of our education should be learning about First Nations spirituality,” she says. “The time spent meditating was very moving.”

In planning the service at Humbervale United, Jim Thompson found personal contact with members of First Nations — over the telephone or in person as opposed to e-mail — invaluable. “That personal contact means more than words can say,” he says.

Be prepared to listen

Humility and sensitivity are key ingredients for the journey toward healing the painful legacy left by the residential school system. The need to listen is also crucial.



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“Patience is important,” says Scott. Another ingredient is a willingness to travel to their place, “not ask them to come to ours. This isn’t about them coming to help us figure it out. It’s about an invitation to engage. But it has to be done without a pre-set agenda.”

John Thompson, who lives in a remote community in northern Manitoba accessible only by airplane, has been involved in First Nations ministry since before he was ordained in 1971. He emphasizes the need for humility.

“Sometimes when people get into learning more about traditional teachings and traditional ways, they want to be leaders in it,” he says. “But in Native spirituality, the teachers are given that right [to teach] by the elders. And it’s not the right of individuals to take it upon themselves and to make themselves a leader on their own behalf. Humility is one of the main qualities necessary. So people who are flamboyant and want to be in the limelight and are arrogant and proud are not in the right space for sharing a lot of the teachings.”

“We have to be very clear that this is an attempt to explore relationships with our Aboriginal brothers and sisters,” says Scott. “This is not an attempt to recruit Aboriginal people into the church. That’s not to say that would be the intention of congregations, but it could be interpreted [that way]. It’s about our churches being willing to listen to [First Nations people] in their own milieu, in their own culture, in their own history, in their own spiritual traditions.”

Be intentional

A large component of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s work will be community based. Congregations can start being intentional now about how they plan to be involved.

“It will give congregations, communities, white folk permission to take ownership and help do something about making corrections,” says Alvin Dixon, chair of The United Church of Canada’s residential schools steering committee. “My only thought is: take ownership of this and run with it.”

And while the TRC has a five-year mandate, no one is pretending that reconciliation between churches and First Nations communities is going to be achieved in that time frame.

“This is a long-term, multi-generational journey we’re on,” says Scott. “People need to see this as something that’s part of the commission’s work but also as a living-out of the apologies our church has made.”

Andrea Davis is a freelance writer and editor in Guelph, Ont.

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