

Residential Schools Update—July, 1999

Archdeacon Jim Boyles, General Secretary

Numerous reports in the media have focused attention on the historic residential schools and the many lawsuits that have been filed by former students. In most cases, the churches have been sued along with the federal government. For Anglicans, this means that both General Synod and the diocese where a particular school was located have been named.

Some have asked: "Will the Anglican Church survive?" Of course it will. Assets are at risk at the national level and possibly in those dioceses in which the schools were located, but we have little idea yet as to the extent of the risk.

I want to report on our current situation, and the actions we are taking in response to this situation. It is important that church members be informed and able to assess the media reports in the light of our church's approach.

Justice, partnership, self-determination

Since 1969 and the publication of the Hendry report, the Anglican Church has sought to stand in partnership with the indigenous peoples of Canada. Our [Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples](#), and its diocesan counterparts, are evidence of this partnership. We have consistently supported native peoples in issues such as land claim negotiations, treaty conversations, and movements towards self-determination. We were instrumental in the creation of the inter-church group now known as the [Aboriginal Rights Coalition](#), which continues to press for justice for native people. Our goal is to support native people in their movement toward a healthy, spirited, economically viable native community in Canada.

Within the church, native Anglican leaders in 1994 signed a [Covenant](#) expressing a vision of greater self-determination, "a truly Anglican Indigenous church." In response our national executive council resolved to journey with Aboriginal Anglicans as they begin to live out the Covenant. That remains the basis of our current direction in partnership.

Apology and reconciliation

In 1993 the Primate, Archbishop Michael Peers [apologized](#) on behalf of the church for our role in residential schools. Speaking to the national Native Convocation gathered in Minaki, Ontario, he said, "I accept, and I confess before God and you, our failures in the residential schools. We failed you. We failed ourselves. We failed God....On behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada, I offer our apology."

Even earlier, the church had established a working group on residential schools and began committing financial resources to a [Healing and Reconciliation Fund](#). Grants for community healing initiatives total more than \$485,000 to date. These initiatives continue and, in fact, resources dedicated to healing and reconciliation are increasing.

Litigation and alternatives

The General Synod is named in more than 200 lawsuits filed in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario. More than 1,000 plaintiffs are involved, some claiming sexual and physical abuse, others claiming cultural deprivation or cultural genocide. A trial has concluded in one instance, involving the residential school in Lytton, BC, but the judge has yet to release a decision. Within the framework of the courtroom, we argue that the federal government is primarily responsible for the policy of assimilation, which was the accepted policy of Canada in the earlier part of this century, and that the government was in fact the body primarily responsible for the policy and operation of the schools. We believe these arguments are true and valid historically, and important from a legal justice standpoint; at the same time, we continue to stand by our apology.

We have been engaged with First Nations and government representatives in a series of dialogues about "alternative dispute resolution" (ADR) processes, to see if there are better ways (other than going to court) of responding to the claims. The government has proposed a series of pilot projects, in which groups of plaintiffs would work with government and church to validate claims and assess compensation. These projects would deal only with cases of sexual and physical abuse. "Cultural deprivation" is not recognized as a basis of legal action, and neither the government nor the churches are accepting legal liability in this area. Both, however, acknowledge the need to deal with community healing beyond individual cases. It is hoped the pilot projects may find some ways to respond to this need.

The Council of General Synod has approved funds for General Synod's participation in up to two such projects, and various local groups are being consulted now about this possibility. There are issues outstanding, and our talks continue with both government and Assembly of First Nations representatives.

Our tasks

We have several tasks. One of the things we've learned from the dialogues with first nations people is that the work of "apology" is a process, rather than a discrete moment. The Primate's apology in August 1993 was a vitally important action, but the process of apology continues as we continue to hear the stories of those who were harmed by the schools, and work with them to bring healing.

At the same time, we need to tell our wider story to our own people and to the Canadian public. They need to know about our Healing Fund, the work of our Indigenous Council, our ministry in 210 indigenous congregations across the country, our ministry among urban native communities, our support for the recommendations of the [Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples](#), and our continuing role as agents of reconciliation among the cultural communities of our nation. Nationally, the churches are working together to impress upon the government the importance of our presence in the social fabric of Canada, as spiritual agents of healing and reconciliation. As a matter of social policy, we believe it makes no sense to allow the churches to be crippled so severely that their healing work would be eliminated.

Similarly, our work in justice for native peoples must not slacken. Many of you are involved locally with initiatives in ministry with native people, or in social action in support of land claims, self-determination, environmental protection or other native justice issues. This work is vitally important, and we encourage you to [seek further opportunities for local involvement](#) in it.

Finally, we must keep clearly before us our long term vision for the health and wholeness of all the peoples of Canada, a vision inspired by the wholeness of God's creation.

Can you as leaders in the church help with these tasks? We ask you also to continue to pray for the indigenous peoples of Canada, especially those damaged by the residential school experience, and to pray for the Church and its ministry of healing and reconciliation, and those involved in this ministry in so many different roles and locations.