

WORKING TOWARD RIGHT RELATIONS ON THE INDIGENOUS DAY OF PRAYER

WELCOMING: Rev. Cory Vermeer-Cuthbert

Good afternoon. Bonjour. Aanii. Welcome on this Indigenous Day of Prayer. My name is Rev. Cory Vermeer-Cuthbert – I have been the minister here at Holy Trinity for almost three and one-half years, and a UCC minister for over 27 years. It has been during this time in my life that I have become aware of Residential schools, and the UCC's part in operating them. And each time I read about them, and hear the news, I learn a little more and become more engaged.

My hope for this time together this afternoon, is that we would allow our hearts to be touched through song and word; that each of us would come away with a little more understanding of Residential Schools and their impact upon our Indigenous brothers and sisters; and that we would return to our communities with greater conviction to go and learn more and make a difference that there might be healing and reconciliation for us all.

THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

For thousands of years First nations people have walked in this land. Their relationship with the land is at the centre of their lives and spirituality. We are gathered on the lands represented in the Robinson-Huron Treaty 61 of 1850, the Traditional Territory of the Serpent River and Mississagi people and acknowledge their stewardship of this land throughout the ages. May we live with respect on this land and live in peace and friendship with its people.

OPENING PRAYER:

Creator of all, send your Holy Spirit upon us and what we do here, that this gathering may be a time of blessing for all, and one more step along the journey of healing and reconciliation. Amen.

SMUDGING CEREMONY: Kathy Robitaille

And concurrently: STRAWBERRY TEACHINGS

PRAYER: Rev. Cory

(Written by Rev. Murray Pruden, Executive Minister, Indigenous Ministries and Justice, The United Church of Canada)

Creator, we give thanks for this day and each day you grant us life to walk on this great land, our Mother. Give us the heart and strength to come together in prayer in time of mourning, reflection, and peace. The news we have heard these [past few weeks] of our relations, our families, the children who have been physically taken away from us and who have now been found.

And with this news, we grieve for their memory, for their struggle, for their spirit. We pray for good understanding, guidance, and love for all our families and communities who will need direction and resolution at this time. And we come together in prayer and ask for your light to guide us to be a part of that needed peace, support, and resolve for everyone who is reacting to this great tragedy in our Indigenous nations of this great land.

Creator be with us, allow us to be brave. Allow us to be strong. Allow us to be gentle to one another. Allow us to be humble. But most of all, allow us to be like the Creator's love. Peace be with us, we lift up our prayers to you. In love, trust, and truth, peace be with us all. In Jesus' name, Amen.

INTRODUCTION TO THE UCC's "APOLOGY"

In 1980, the faithful from Native pastoral charges from across Canada, with the support of the whole United Church, held national consultations to gather, share stories, organize, identify needs, find their voice and to listen to wise Elders. The National Native Council was born and Stan McKay was hired as the national coordinator, and later the All Native Circle Conference was formed. Alberta Billy And Thelma Davis were to lead the Executive through their report. And as they were to enter the meeting, Alberta Billy turned to Rev. Stan McKay and said, "I think I'm going to ask them for an apology." It was in her heart and mind. And so she asked the church for an apology. It took a year and a half of preparations, to educate the church, for the moment at the 1986 General Council meeting in Sudbury, where delegates came from all across Canada.

In 1986, 80 Indigenous people gathered concurrently for a national Aboriginal Ministries Consultation. A sacred fire was built in a parking lot; a drum was brought, a tipi erected. Anishnawbe Elders Art Solomon and Jim Dumont offered teachings and prayers. By evening local Indigenous peoples joined the circle and the number of people waiting for an apology more than doubled. A group of Elders waited in the tipi.

During the course of the day UCC Moderator Rev. Robert Smith and others wrote an apology. At dusk the Moderator lead the way down the hill from the annual meeting locale, to the sacred fire, met with those Elders in the tipi, and then at the sacred fire he said these words. And these words are known as The Apology.

Listen, please to these words:

Long before my people journeyed to this land your peoples were here, and you received from your Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured.

We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you of the good news of Jesus Christ we were closed to the value of your spirituality.

We confused Western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ.

We imposed our civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel.

We tried to make you be like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were. As a result, you, and we, are poorer and the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred, and we are not what we are meant by God to be.

We ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the Spirit of Christ so that our peoples may be blessed and God's creation healed.

After hearing the apology, the people danced. The people danced, the clouds disappeared, the sky cleared and the moon shone. It seemed that all of creation and our Creator celebrated this new thing.

The Indigenous church received the apology, and took it back with them to discern what it would mean to live into that apology. Two years later at the 32nd General Council, in Victoria, Edith Memnook offered a response to The Apology. In part she said,

The Apology made to the Native People of Canada by The United Church of Canada in Sudbury in August, 1986, has been a very important step forward. It is heartening to see that The United Church of Canada is a forerunner in making this Apology to Native People. The All Native Circle Conference has now acknowledged your Apology. Our people have continued to affirm the teachings of the Native way of life...

[We] hope and pray that the Apology is not symbolic but that these are words of action and sincerity. We appreciate the freedom for culture and religious expression. In the new spirit this Apology has created, let us unite our hearts and minds in the wholeness of life that the Great Spirit has given us.

Then in 1998, twelve years after The Apology was made to the Indigenous Church, the then moderator, Rev. Bill Phipps, made a second apology to former students of the UCC Indian Residential Schools, and to their families and communities. In part he said:

As Moderator of The United Church of Canada, I wish to speak the words that many people have wanted to hear for a very long time. On behalf of the UCC, I apologize for the pain and suffering that our church's involvement in the Indian Residential School system has caused. We are aware of some of the damage that this cruel and ill-conceived system of assimilation has perpetrated on Canada's First Nations people. For this we are truly and most humbly sorry...

We know that many within our church will still not understand why each of us must bear the scar, the blame for this horrendous period in Canadian history. But the truth is, we are the bearers of many blessings from our ancestors, and therefore, we must also bear their burdens...

We seek God's forgiveness and healing grace as we take steps toward building respectful, compassionate, and loving relationships with First Nations peoples.

May God guide us as we travel this difficult road to healing and reconciliation.

SONG: Lois Jones: "215"

MESSAGE: Go, Make A Difference, or What Can I Do?, Rev. Cory
So, you have just heard some of our UCC history; we were one of four denominations engaged by the government of Canada to help run Indian Residential Schools. And through these last 35 years, slowly we have helped to make a difference in the lives of our Indigenous church, and in the lives of survivors and their families. We have struggled to live into the apologies, to match our walk with our talk. So, what can we now do? Or as Ann has phrased it, “What Can I Do?”

Here are some suggestions:

- Show up! You showed up to sing, to pray, to learn; you showed up to make a public testimony that this work of healing and reconciliation is important work for all of us, Indigenous, and white settlers
- Read books by survivors of residential schools, children’s book, books for adults
- Read the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s 94 recommendations – google it and you’ll have it
- Make a donation to the UCC Healing Fund, which is administered by the Indigenous Church to groups of people, to communities, for reclaiming language, culture, history, creation of safe places
- With humility and courage, take a step on this healing journey, realizing that the healing journey is for all of us, Indigenous people and white settlers
- Become an ally and an advocate – use your voice to uplift some of the challenges that indigenous people are facing
- Seek and out and celebrate the historic and current contributions of Indigenous people in our region
- And urge our government to uphold and implement UNDRIP – the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- And pray that apologies not yet made in the wake of “215” will indeed be made

Finally, in every step you take on this healing journey, you are helping to make a difference, to others and to your own self. Do not be afraid. The Creator’s Spirit is with us, walking with us, enabling us, teaching us. Thanks be to God.

SONG: Ann Foy and Friends: "Go, Make a Difference", written by Steve Angrisano and Tom Tomaszek, 1997.

Chorus: Go make a difference. We can make a difference.

Go make a difference in the world.

Go make a difference. We can make a difference.

Go make a difference in the world.

PRAYER: Rev. Cory

Creator, thank you for this fine summer's day, a day in which to savour the sun's warming rays, cool refreshing breezes, the fragrances of peonies, the song of the birds, the chatter of chipmunks. Thank you for your Spirit which has drawn us here together, to go and make a difference.

And so we pray for your healing Spirit to continue her work among Indigenous peoples, and among white settlers. In the words of our former Moderator, Rev. Jordan Cantwell, "If I do not understand my own need for healing from my bondage to colonial and white supremacist attitudes, then even my best efforts at reconciliation will likely perpetuate and entrench colonial ways, not dismantle them... This is about my liberation and your liberation, the liberation of each and everyone of us which is all bound together. May we have the courage and humility to embrace our healing journey that together we may be liberated to become what "we are meant by God to be." Forgive us, O God. Hear our prayer, O Great Creator.

Hear our prayer for those who have not yet come to the place of recognizing the need to make an apology. Convict them of this need, O God. Our country and its peoples, its First Nations and settlers cannot heal without it; we cannot go forward so that generations of people might find newness of life and wholeness.

Creator God, Healing God, you hear the cries of the heart, you see the tears that run, you know the groans from deep within the soul, you know the desolation and anguish your peoples have experienced. Compassionate God, hear our prayers.

Creator, Nurturing One, make a difference in us that we might be able to make a difference in the communities around us. Hear our prayers, O God, and in your love and wisdom, please answer.

THE LORD'S PRAYER, a Paraphrase, by Jim Cotter
 Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
 Source of all that is and that shall be.
 Father and Mother of us all,
 Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
 The way of your justice be followed by peoples of the world!
 Our heavenly will be done by all created beings!
 Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.
 In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
 In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
 From trials too great to endure, spare us.
 From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and for ever. Amen.

WORDS OF THANKS:

Words of thanks are important. Thank you to Kathy Robitaille for coming from Serpent River to begin our gathering with a smudging and to share drumming from her Indigenous culture. Thank you to Lois Jones, from Blind River, for being inspired to write the song "215" and sharing that piece of her heart with us. Thank you to George from North Shore Sound for lending us his equipment so that you could hear. Thank you to our Worship Committee who gave of their giftedness to enable this event to happen – Roger West for videoing the service and providing details on the UCC Healing Fund, Ann Foy for leading us in the theme song, "Go Make A Difference", and in helping to plan the order of service, for Kathy Calverley for preparing the paperwork and to Russ Foy for handing it out.

SONG: Miigwech Gi Chi Manitou, Kathy Robitaille
 (Honour Song for Honouring Children of Indian Residential Schools)

MiiGwetch Enh Gi Chi Ma ni tou (Thank You Great Spirit)
N'mahd Chi Bi Mo Say (I am starting to walk my journey)

GIVING AWAY OF SNAPDRAGONS -- a flower that symbolizes resiliency, strength and grace – plant it in your garden and may it be a visible reminder of this afternoon’s service, and your resolve to go and make a difference.