

MANY THINGS TO SAY

June 16, 2019

Pentecost 1

[Proverbs 8:1-14](#)

[John 16:12-16](#)

(holding talking stick)

(prayer)

In the summer of 1986, in Sudbury, Ontario, the Right Reverend Bob Smith (who was *moderating* the 31st General Council meeting of the United Church of Canada that year) made his way down to a group of United Church indigenous leaders who - that week - were tending a nearby sacred fire, and said this on behalf of the church:

Long before my people journeyed to this land your people 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.

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Two years later, at the next General Council gathering, this time in Victoria BC and *moderated* by Anne Squire, the newly constituted All Native Circle Conference formally responded:

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. Our spiritual teachings and values have taught us to uphold the Sacred Fire; to be guardians of Mother Earth, and strive to maintain harmony and peaceful coexistence with all peoples. We only ask of you to respect our Sacred Fire, the Creation, and to live in peaceful coexistence with us. We recognize the hurts and feelings will continue amongst our people, but through partnership and walking hand in hand, the Indian spirit will eventually heal. Through our love, understanding, and sincerity the brotherhood and sisterhood of unity, strength, and respect can be achieved. The Native People of The All Native Circle Conference hope and pray that the Apology is not symbolic but that these are the 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.

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Ten years later, in 1998, on behalf of the General Council Executive, then Moderator, the Right Reverend Bill Phipps, offered this statement to former students of United Church Indian Residential Schools, and to their families and communities:

I wish to speak the words that many people have wanted to hear for a very long time. On behalf of The United Church of Canada, 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 peoples. For this we are truly and most humbly sorry. To those individuals who were physically, sexually, and mentally abused as students of the Indian Residential Schools in which The United Church of Canada was involved, I offer you our most sincere apology. You did nothing wrong. You were and are the victims of evil acts that cannot under any circumstances be justified or excused. 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. Our burdens include dishonouring the depths of the struggles of First Nations peoples and the richness of your gifts. We seek God's forgiveness and healing grace as we take steps toward building respectful, compassionate, and loving relationships with First Nations peoples. We are in the midst of a long and painful journey as we reflect on the cries that we did not or would not hear, and how we have behaved as a church. As we travel this difficult road of repentance, reconciliation, and healing, we commit ourselves to work toward ensuring that we will never again use our power as a church to hurt others with attitudes of racial and spiritual superiority. We pray that you will hear the sincerity of our words today and that you will witness the living out of our apology in our actions in the future.

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Indian Residential Schools operated in Canada from the 1870s through the 1990s. The last one closed only two years before Bill Phipps' statement: the *Gordon Indian Residential School* (operated by the Anglican church in Saskatchewan) didn't shut down until 1996.

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In 2006, a landmark agreement was announced to settle a number of class action lawsuits between the former residential school students, the government of Canada and the four national churches that had been involved in the schools (including the UCCan and its predecessor denominations).

As part of the settlement agreement, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was active (from 2008 to 2015) to educate people and to document the stories and experiences people had with the Indian Residential School system and *to offer wisdom* to all of the people of this land.

The Commission travelled to both large and small centres of this land and listened and absorbed. Private listening times were offered if people wanted that, but most of the TRC events were opened to the public and the public (indigenous and non-indigenous) were *encouraged* to attend. A number of us from this area attended one or more of the days of the TRC's last major event at the Shaw Conference Centre in Edmonton in March 2014.

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The TRC released its final report in December 2015 that included ninety-four Calls To Action; number fifty-nine is addressed to us:

We call upon church parties to the settlement agreement to develop ongoing education strategies to ensure that their respective congregations learn about their church's role in colonization, the history and legacy of residential schools, and why apologies to former residential school students, their families, and communities were necessary.

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Over the past year, we have been doing some responding to Call To Action #59.

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It began around the Church Council table with conversations about looking at hosting a Blanket Exercise in Leduc sometime. A blanket exercise is an interactive experience of the impact of colonial expansion first developed by the religious-based, social justice group, Kairos.

An ad hoc committee was formed.

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This group of interested people came together to figure out the wheres and hows of hosting a blanket exercise and before we were done that first meeting, one event had morphed into four.

Project funding was available as one of the final year legacy acts of Yellowhead Presbytery (before a new governance structure took over in the wider UCCan). We applied and were approved for four grand!

The expansion idea took off when we realised that there were already arrangements made to bring a student drama group (to Leduc) from Strathmore AB to present a play called, **New Blood** on September 21, 2018. St. David's joined in as a co-sponsor, promoter and organizer. Around that time, Red Deer Presbytery (UCCs from Wetaskiwin to Sundre) added another \$1000 to the pot.

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Inspired by the coincidental fact that this first event was happening on the fall equinox, the planning group looked into doing other events at the change of seasons. And a four-part series that we called *Right Relations Through The Seasons* was born!

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On the winter solstice, we made arrangements to screen the Alberta-made documentary, **Elder In The Making** at the church. Because of snowy weather that night, we added an encore screening a week later.

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At the St. David's AGM in February, this congregation approved adding some money from our Ministry projects savings fund toward this series.

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Near the spring equinox, we did end up following through with the original idea, by hosting a **Blanket Exercise**. That evening, we were wonderfully led by an Edmonton-area Métis knowledge-keeper. We were able to make arrangements to hold it in the Civic Centre atrium, which turned out to be a wise move as almost 50 people attended, many from outside our congregation.

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Initially, the summer solstice plans were to do some kind of celebration. We quickly realized that national Indigenous Peoples Day is at that same time of year: which seemed nothing sort of serendipitous.

The planning team thought about an outdoor event on a nearby rural property: display tables for

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indigenous artists, maybe some food, and some kind of music or dancing. The scale of the event would depend on how much of the St. David's and Presbytery money was left. We simply pledged to do the best event we could with what we had.

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But you know what happens when the planning group is filled with *idea* people... the dream needs quickly outstretched our capacities.

And so... different levels of government were approached for grants, local businesses were invited to offer some sponsorship, connections to local indigenous communities were fostered. In the end, we were able to better than quadruple the original budget for the series... much of the excess became available for the final event: allowing for it to be a free public concert.

In the end, music and dancing would be the focus. The City of Leduc, again, became a willing partner and Lede Park, near the Stone Barn, became the location.

You may have seen our bright red posters for this coming Friday: highlighting Celeigh Cardinal as our headliner.



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Yes, our *Right Relations Through The Seasons* series culminates on Friday, but in addition to the entertainment benefits of the show, it is important to acknowledge that this coming Friday (June 21st) - **first and foremost** - is *Indigenous Peoples Day*.

June 21st has been formally recognized in Canada since 1996 as a day to celebrate the cultures and contributions of the Indigenous First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples of this land.

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Tomorrow at 5pm, the City of Leduc will have a flag raising ceremony (at the Civic Centre) as part of our community's first ever proclaimed *Indigenous Land Acknowledgment Day*.

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Our first three RRtS events more explicitly responded to TRC *Call To Action 59: [calling] upon church[es] to develop ongoing education strategies*. The wisdom that those events offered was to better understand our shared past.

The wisdom that will be offered later this week with event #4 is to begin to experience together our

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shared future.

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Most Sundays, I begin our worship services inviting us to *live in right relations with everyone who lives in this land today*. Acknowledging our past is important, but that is only half of the challenge we face: living in right relations now (and moving forward) is essential.

It only makes sense.

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This earth, our home, has limits... of space, of resources, we have delicate ecological balances to maintain. The only wise path forward is to be constantly living in deeper harmony with each other and the land, sea, and air that we share.

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This is not merely an indigenous-settler issue.

It is biblical!

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The Genesis storyteller imagined that - from the very beginning - human beings were created to be caretakers of God's garden. (Gn2:15)

The apostle Paul invited the early Christians in Rome to *live peaceably with all*. (Rm12:18)

Jesus agreed with the Levitical scribes that a high commandment of God was to *love your neighbour as yourself*. (Lv19:18)

The same chapter of Leviticus also instructs the Hebrew people to avoid the pitfalls of extreme views of nationalism: *The [foreigner] who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself*. (Lv19:34)

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Fifty years ago, this coming Thursday, Apollo 11's Eagle lander settled down on the dusty surface of the moon and human eyes looked upon this land from the land of a different celestial body for the first time ever.

That was only six months after astronaut William Anders (aboard Apollo 8) snapped an historic colour picture of the earth as the spacecraft orbited the moon.



Earthrise paints at least 1000 words of wisdom for us... We inhabit a small, fragile, beautiful world. From the relatively short distance of only 384,400 km away, none of our disputes over property are visible; in fact other than seashores, there are no borders at all.

I mean, we always knew this. But that iconic Apollo 8 photo made it real.

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The old testament book of Proverbs gives us a wonderful metaphoric insight into the nature of God. Personified as a prophet woman, God's wisdom speaks out: *To you, O people, I call, and my*

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cry is to all that live... learn prudence, acquire intelligence.

Wisdom speaks to **all who live**.

Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate. Later in the book of Proverbs, we are told: *[Respect] for God is the beginning of wisdom.*

When Jesus promoted a *love of neighbour* as a great commandment, he said that it was inseparable from a *love of God* (Mk12:30-31).

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If we love God, we cannot ignore the call to love others beyond ourselves... not to ignore ourselves, but (as Leviticus says) to see them and us as equals).

It is - literally - a *christian calling* to live in right relations with all whom we share this earth.

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Today, I am holding the talking stick that was gifted to this congregation by the people taking part in this month's Treaty Walk for common ground as they came through Leduc two weeks ago.

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The talking stick is a conversation tool that allows for listening and patience to be present.

It serves a similar purpose to a rule of order in most parliamentary procedures, where the presider (or chairperson) recognizes only one speaker at a time. The rules of order further dictate that, as long as the same discussion is taking place, once you speak, you can't jump up again; you only get to speak once to any given motion.

Of course, under parliamentary procedures, there are points of order or certain priority motions that can interrupt speakers mid-speech, but in my experience (mostly at wider church meetings and watching the house of commons on CPAC), these are abused (more often than not) in attempts to impatiently jump the queue.

Point of order, madam chairperson.

State your point of order.

I disagree with what he just said...

If you're lucky, the chairperson will jump right in and say:

Thank you, but that's not a point of order.

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When a group discussion employs a talking stick, each person can add spoken words to the conversation, but only when it is their turn to hold the stick.

Sometimes, it is passed around in an orderly predictable pattern (go around the room); other times, you might be able to request the stick when you have something you want to say.

But in all cases, it is **very disrespectful and inappropriate** to interrupt someone **while** they are speaking. If what they say inspires a new thought (you feel compelled to share), you need to be patient... until it is your turn... a skill that can be hard for some of us to learn.

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A talking stick style of conversation discourages toe-to-toe, in-your-face arguments. It can level the playing field between introverts and extroverts; the quick-minded and more reflective thinkers both have to (get to) wait.

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It has been my experience in talking circles that what I wind up saying is often very different than what I thought I might say when the stick was ten people away from me... if I choose to say anything at all.

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When we practice the discipline of listening, we can also develop a good discipline for talking.

We learn to value our time to speak.

We may even be less likely to just repeat what someone has already said: because we appreciate the opportunity to add something to the conversation.

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Under such a discipline of listening and speaking, things (sometimes) get left unsaid. And that can be a good thing.

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The bulk of the new testament gospel narratives are devoted to sharing teaching moments of Jesus: stories he told, debates he had, living parables that he acted out.

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Even so, as Jesus neared the end of his life, he admitted that he had more to say.

But, Jesus trusted that the valuable messages would find their way to his followers. They would always have divine inspiration and guidance. *The Spirit will guide you into all the truth.*

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This coming Friday will draw the *Right Relations Through The Seasons* series to a close, but that will not be the end of opportunities for learning.

Concluding St. David's right relations project will not mean that we have fully answered Call To Action #59.

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There will always be (and rightly **will** be) *many more things to say.*

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That also means that there will be much more to hear.

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Let us pray:

Great Creator,

open my eyes that I may see;

open my ears that I may hear;

open my mouth that I may speak;

open my heart that I may feel.

Spirit Divine illumine me with your truth.

Amen.

#10MV "Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom"