
David MacDonald

A Call to the Churches: “You shall be called the repairer of the breach” (excerpts)

On a late Sunday in August 2007, I sat in a downtown church in Halifax where the Minister read from Isaiah 58:12: “you shall be called the repairer of the breach.”¹ The words spoke to authentic acts of compassion and justice. As the words of Isaiah state, we are being called to be repairers of the breach. These words describe the actions of one who seeks to overcome injustice and establish renewed and right relations with those who have been rejected.

Building Right Relations

In 1987, leaders of Canadian churches proclaimed a new covenant, which was issued on the fifth anniversary of the adoption of the new Canadian constitution and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. It spoke specifically to the constitutional recognition and protection of Aboriginal self-government in

Canada.² This covenant was subsequently reaffirmed in March 2007. Behind the covenant lie many challenging and difficult years as the churches struggled to come to terms with their colonialist past. In particular, the last decade has been an agonizing one for the churches in discovering the degree to which they had participated in a ruthless program of assimilation of Aboriginal children. Stories have been told of acts of cruelty and disrespect, which are totally at odds with the stated attitude and practices of these very same faith communities. Increasingly, church members are recognizing that attitudes and acts, which were not just a part of these schools but also deeply resident in all aspects of Canadian society, run counter to what the churches themselves believe and declare.

Indian residential schools are among the most shocking and shameful realities in Canadian history. While the earliest schools predate the country of Canada itself, their full intent, impact, and reality virtually came into existence as Canada was being created. We are faced with a considerable historical dilemma. More than a hundred of these schools existed for over a century in all parts of the country, yet many people have great difficulty believing they actually existed. From the vantage point of today, one is forced to ask: *How did this happen? What was in the minds of government officials and church leaders?* There is no easy answer. While much has been written during the last several decades to describe the punishment and hardship experienced by successive generations of vulnerable children, much less has been written to explain in detail the reasoning of government and church personnel in promoting and supporting

these initiatives. At the time of first contact, it would appear that the early European visitors, explorers, and traders saw the long-time resident Indigenous peoples as valuable allies in learning more about their new surroundings; certainly, they benefited from the special knowledge and skills these people possessed. There are many accounts of the friendships and intimate relations that developed. The early decades were indeed ones of exploration as well as exploitation. But by and large, they happened in the context of mutual respect and a relationship of reciprocity. The notion or the need for *reconciliation* would never have crossed anyone's mind. How far we have travelled from those earliest days.

In retrospect, it seems clear that a critical line was crossed at some point which resulted in a disastrous change in that relationship. Aboriginal people were no longer seen as equals, no longer accepted as compatriots in the adventure of knowing and benefiting from this land; instead, they were treated as wards of the state and the relationship descended into one of adversity, violence, oppression, and exploitation. Familiarity and friendship turned to fear and disrespect. As increasing numbers of European immigrants saw opportunities for a new homeland with the possibility of enormous amounts of land, their agents and officials realized they now had to solve the so-called Indian problem. This at first subtle and then increasingly profound shift in attitude and intent has proven to be one of the blackest marks on Canada's history.

Today, many people are frustrated in their attempt to make sense of Indian residential schools, land claims struggles,

protests, and blockades as well as a host of Third World conditions that exist for so many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people throughout this country. For some, the easiest explanation is to blame the victims.

We will make little progress toward resolving social, economic, educational, community, and political issues unless we understand how all this happened in the first place. Reconciliation is not even a remote possibility without some basic understanding and insight. Do we really want to know how all this happened and are we really committed to doing something about it? These are not easy questions. It is disappointing and disturbing how often we are willing to resign ourselves to what is. Without much understanding, we can come to conclusions that comfort us in our conviction that little can be done. It must also be admitted that through a combination of fear for some and special benefit for others, doing nothing sometimes seems the only answer.

I believe, however, that if reconciliation is both our goal as well as our intended course of action, then we cannot be satisfied with our state of ignorance and inactivity. We have a significant job to do. We must begin by knowing what our real history is, what it means, and what it tells us about what we must do now. Thomas R. Berger, in his book *A Long and Terrible Shadow: White Values, Native Rights in the Americas Since 1492*, suggests the attitude to Aboriginal people was finally set by the end of the War of 1812.

There would be no wars fought to exterminate the Indians.
The White population regarded the Indian culture and way

of life as primitive and anomalous. Insofar as they thought about it at all, Canadians were inclined to believe that the Indians had to be taught the arts of civilization and the duties of citizenship. As the Indians moved from what J. R. Miller calls “alliance to irrelevance,” the British and their Canadian successors responded with a change of attitude from respect and gratitude to pity and contempt.³

This fateful shift may not have appeared ominous at the time but, in retrospect, it has been a disaster for us all. The better part of the last two hundred years has cast Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations into preconceived notions of who we are, what we are about, how we see one another, and therefore how we should treat one another. We know only too well the deeply entrenched stereotypes of native people in this country. They are parallel to ones that exist among Aboriginal folk. Harold Cardinal wrote the following almost forty years ago in *The Unjust Society*:

An Indian, who probably wasn't joking at all, once said, “The biggest of all Indian problems is the white man.” Who can understand the white man? What makes him tick? How does he think and why does he think the way he does? Why does he talk so much? Why does he say one thing and do the opposite? Most important of all, how do you deal with him? As Indians, we have to learn to deal with the white man. Obviously, he is here to stay. Sometimes it seems a hopeless task. The white man spends half of his time and billions of dollars in pursuit of self-understanding. How can a mere Indian expect to come up with the answer?⁴

Our modern era has set the stage to revisit our shared history of the last five hundred years. There is no doubt that some time in the twentieth century, the lowest ebb was reached in the relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Certainly,

until the Second World War, there was an absolute and unbreachable wall between these two cultures. While it would be false to say that either side was monolithic, an overview of the situation would say this was the ultimate in two solitudes. However, beginning in the late 1940s, as the first serious questioning occurred on the wisdom of residential schools and the failure generally of any policy which dealt with native people, a dawning began to occur.

In 1964, an unlikely request from the Minister of Indian Affairs to the University of British Columbia was made “to undertake in conjunction with scholars in other universities, a study of the social, educational and economic situation of the Indians of Canada and to offer recommendations where it appeared that benefits could be gained.”⁵ This report, named after the chair, H.B. Hawthorn, articulated for the first time the recognition that First Nations people were “citizens plus.” Alan Cairns explains Hawthorn’s use of this term:

The Hawthorn ‘citizens plus’ suggestion, originally directed only to the status Indian population, but capable of extension to the Inuit and the Metis, was an earlier attempt to accommodate the apartness of Aboriginal peoples from, and their togetherness with the non-Aboriginal majority. The ‘plus’ dimension spoke to Aboriginality; the ‘citizens’ addressed togetherness in a way intended to underline our moral obligations to each other.⁶

At this same time, the National Indian Brotherhood, which would eventually become the Assembly of First Nations, was founded. In 1969, the federal government’s *White Paper* on Indian policy⁷ ignited a storm of protest that significantly increased Aboriginal determination and solidarity. This was also

the year that the churches officially withdrew from participation in Indian residential schools.

Other highlights from the last half century are undoubtedly the 1982 *Constitution Act*, particularly section 35 and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, as well as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1991–1996) and countless subsequent decisions of the Supreme Court. Indeed, it should be said that the most consistent progress in the past quarter century has not been a result of legislative leadership but, rather, the impact of the new constitution itself and its acknowledgement through the courts. With respect to Indian residential schools, the most recent developments were the series of class action lawsuits, the Supreme Court decision (*Blackwater v. Plint*, 2005⁸) and, ultimately, the negotiations toward the *Agreement in Principle*⁹ in 2005.

Now we have begun to implement the *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement*. The Prime Minister has promised an apology and a truth and reconciliation commission will be created. What other actions might effectively acknowledge a new resolve to create right relations? A historic public ceremony signalling recognition and repentance, involving both civic and church leaders, would certainly be appropriate. The Governor General, Prime Minister, and other government officials, along with the primates, moderators, presidents, and archbishops of Canadian faith communities should participate. As honoured guests there should be the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations and the leaders of all the national Aboriginal organizations. Acts of contrition and the

presentation of symbolic gifts are needed. The new covenant, earlier referred to, could be expanded and endorsed by all. Concrete information and explanatory material for the media and the general public will be very important.

Overall, the churches have been given a tremendous gift and opportunity. The *Agreement* represents an opening to initiate many actions toward right relations. The next decade should be a period of working toward a new relationship that actively anticipates the next seven generations. Resonating themes might be chosen to stress our common humanity and our deep connection to the earth and to one another. We now have the opportunity to learn our true history, to repent, to apologize, to heal, to reconcile, and to restore right relations. There can be no reconciliation without right relations, and no right relationship without reconciliation. All of this sets the stage for a significant public engagement. In other words, it may become possible for the first time in several hundred years to engage in a meaningful process of truth-telling and reconciliation. But it will not be easy. There are many ways in which the process can be derailed; apathy and low expectations could lead to a situation where very little will change.

All of us will be offered the opportunity to envision and collaborate on an agenda that could begin to restore the balance and harmony that has been so badly and willfully damaged. Reconciliation is not automatic. It must be a shared journey based on mutual respect and a convivial belief in arriving at a very different and much better place. One aspect of that could

be some measure of forgiveness from those who have been so seriously wounded. But, as my colleague James Scott pointed out in his presentation to the Calgary conference on Truth and Reconciliation, “Forgiveness is something that can be sought but never demanded. The request for forgiveness returns a measure of control to the wounded party. Will you forgive me?”¹⁰

How should we go about building a reconciliation process and agenda? Who are the ones who will be the most willing to help and participate? A First Nations person once said to me, “You should know that Aboriginal relations are fundamentally personal.” I would echo that and say that the experience of reconciliation is absolutely personal. Therefore, personal contacts will be critical to building the safe and trusting relationships that can lead to reconciliation. There will need to be a preparatory stage for all parties. We will need to seriously re-examine our real history. We will be forced to question assumptions and dubious truths, which we have mostly accepted without question or concern. How can we begin to learn about one another? Can we begin the journey of walking in each other’s shoes or moccasins? There will need to be some serious study and some initial steps of actually meeting one another as persons. We can hopefully work with others who have a similar experience and are also preparing for their own engagement.

We should not assume this will happen automatically. My experience is that it happens best when there is a common task and all parties have a shared investment in its success. This should not be a situation where one group is doing something

for the other. There must be a real sense of partnership and mutuality. As we all work at common tasks and toward common goals, a sense of trusting and knowing the other becomes much easier. And we do share common ground. It is acutely obvious that concerns for the environment and the health of the natural world are widely and commonly shared. We should look for early opportunities to share in the joint task of healing and respecting the earth. Another more celebratory common endeavour would be participating in community activities such as sports and other games and preparing community feasts. It would be important to plan for events covering a variety of disciplines, such as sports, music, art, drama, and storytelling.

A second stage could be community building bees to build houses and community centres. Churches, temples, and mosques in towns and cities could become special places of hospitality and friendship for Aboriginal people who have relocated from traditional homelands to the less familiar urban areas. Could we not create ecumenical friendship centres where bridges of hope and purpose can be created? Parallel to these activities should be the preparation of resource materials and how-to manuals. What are the protocols and the customs that we should be aware of? There needs to be a realization that there is, in fact, significant diversity across the communities that make up the parties involved in reconciliation. We should not avoid this diversity but celebrate it.

There should also be national programs that identify leadership and rally popular support. Could there be some joint programming among the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network

(APTN), Vision TV, CPAC, and CBC Television? What about a revival of successful past programming, such as the humorous but evocative CBC Radio program *Dead Dog Café*? Could there also be some dynamic Internet activity that would allow young people to participate in a way that speaks to them? It will be important to have a national support system for training, resources, and networking. When there is a shared sense that all across the country people are working together in many different ways to accomplish a great task, there will be a cause for hope and great encouragement. Overall, we will need a compelling national vision of what our adventure of truth exploration and genuine and dynamic reconciliation might look like.

Our Work has Just Begun

The past twenty years or more have seen members of the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, and United churches struggling with the dawning reality of the historic truth of Indian residential schools. It has been a difficult and painful recognition. But in that period and preceding the *Settlement Agreement* some positive steps have been taken. All of these faith communities have struggled with and come forward with apologies as well as the establishment of initial healing funds dedicated to reaching out to those most seriously hurt. In addition, from initial defensive responses to lawsuits and allegations of criminal injury, there have been increasing attempts to resolve victim injuries through out-of-court mediation and dispute resolution. In many instances, both state and church have provided compensation. Educational materials and the designation of particular events such as the National Day of Healing and Reconciliation have also occurred.

Finally, in the process leading up to the *Agreement in Principle*, an inclusive round table process working on a full public process and a community-based approach to truth-sharing and reconciliation was developed.

The new covenant of the Christian churches signed in 1987 and reaffirmed in 2007 should be the platform for these same churches and other faith communities who choose to enter into a covenant of truth-sharing, healing, and reconciliation as the beginning of their commitment to fully live out the *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement*. The historic churches who participated in Indian residential schools might hold a national service of *Apology and Repentance*. They could be part of a large, national event involving leaders of both church and state. It would announce to the Canadian public that an era of new and just purpose was being inaugurated. It would invite all citizens to actively support it.

Canada has a profound challenge and an enormous opportunity. Faith communities have an opportunity to contribute to a renewal of our respect for one another and the earth. Aboriginal peoples who have lived close to this land for millennia have a deep knowledge of the land and all its inhabitants. The wisdom of Aboriginal knowledge is one of the special gifts they may share, but the gift will only have value and meaning for Canadians at large if it is received with genuine respect for the cultures, languages and spirituality of the givers. We are being invited on a particular journey. Our destination may be less important than the experience of how we travel together.

There is particular value in examining our gifts for one another. In addition, there is a particular need to enter into acts of solidarity. Issues of justice are very much at the heart of recognizing and living out the historic treaties. Several years ago, David Arnot, Treaty Commissioner for Saskatchewan, suggested in his report that when it comes to treaties *we are all treaty people*. Most of us think that treaties refer only to status Indians, but he suggested that treaties, in fact, include all of us. How we live out those treaties is a measure of the whole quality of life of our country and all its peoples. The sooner we accept our compact with one another, the easier it will be to act in the best interests of all. Overall, ours is a task of recovering the best of what we have to offer and sharing willingly with one another. It is also the critical work of engaging in acts that build trust and the positive realization that, in our engagement, this is not a zero-sum game but an encounter with win-win possibilities. The challenge that I have set out for all of us on the road to reconciliation and forgiveness is one that people of faith should particularly understand for it is based on beliefs that we all share: at the heart of all profound spiritual truth is the call to reach out to all who have suffered unjustly and through no fault of their own. While the initial part of our response is fully acknowledging our complicity in those injustices, the greater task, I believe, will be engaging in genuine acts of healing, restoration, and reconciliation.

It is of critical importance that future generations see our generation as one that responded positively and bravely to this call to be active “repairers of the breach.” We do not have all, or even many, of the answers. We will have to humbly await

the lead taken by our Aboriginal sisters and brothers. Many are Survivors or descendants of Survivors who, we hope, will welcome us as companions on this journey.

Notes

- 1 Isaiah 58:12 RSV.
- 2 A New Covenant: Towards the Constitutional Recognition and Protection of Aboriginal Self-Government in Canada. A Pastoral Statement by the Leaders of the Christian Churches on Aboriginal Rights and the Canadian Constitution, originally signed February 5, 1987, reaffirmed March 9, 2007.
- 3 Berger, Thomas R. (1991:64). *A Long and Terrible Shadow: White Values, Native Rights in the Americas since 1492*. Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd.
- 4 Cardinal, Harold (1969:74). *The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada's Indians*. Edmonton, AB: M.G. Hurtig Ltd., Publishers.
- 5 Hawthorn, H.B. (ed.) (1966:v). *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada: A Report on Economic, Political, Educational Needs and Policies in Two Volumes*. Ottawa, ON: Indian Affairs Branch.
- 6 Cairns, Alan C. (2001:9-10). *Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- 7 Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (1969). Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy, (The White Paper, 1969). Presented to the First Session of the Twenty-eighth Parliament by the Honourable Jean Chrétien, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. Retrieved 14 December 2007 from: http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pr/lib/phi/histlws/cp1969a_e.html
- 8 *Blackwater v. Plint*, [2005] 3 S.C.R. 3, 2005 SCC. Retrieved 14 December 2007 from: <http://csc.lexum.umontreal.ca/en/2005/2005scc58/2005scc58.pdf>
- 9 Agreement in Principle, November 20, 2005. The parties to the agreement are Canada, the Assembly of First Nations, the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, the Presbyterian Church of Canada, the United Church of Canada, and the Roman Catholic Entities. Retrieved 27 September 2007 from: http://www.irsr-rqpi.gc.ca/english/pdf/AIP_English.pdf
- 10 Scott, James V. (2007:4). The Importance of Apology in Healing and Reconciliation. Calgary T&R Conference Presentation, University of Calgary – June 14-17, 2007.

Biography

David MacDonald grew up in Prince Edward Island. He is a graduate of Prince of Wales College in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, and Dalhousie University and Pine Hill Divinity Hall in Halifax, Nova Scotia. David also holds several honorary degrees in law and divinity. Ordained as a United Church minister in 1961, he served as pastor in Alberton, PEI from 1962 to 1965. He is a former Member of Parliament and has served in Cabinet as Secretary of State, Minister of Communications, and Minister responsible for the Status of Women. David's commitment to social justice drew him into a variety of human rights issues within Canada as well as abroad internationally. In the 1980s he worked as logistics coordinator for the Papal Visit, Canadian Emergency Coordinator/African Famine, and later as Canada's ambassador to Ethiopia and Sudan. He led the World Council of Churches delegation to the Special Session of the United Nations on Disarmament and served as chair of the Global Network on Food Security. From 1995 to 2005, he taught at Concordia University in Quebec and, since December 1998, served as special advisor to the United Church of Canada's General Council Steering Group on Residential Schools.

Writing this paper, David remembered being introduced to Mi'kmaq culture at summer camp and, later, to Ojibway people at Lake Temagami in northern Ontario. When First Nations were granted the federal vote in 1962, he cast his ballot in the chief's house on Bear Island. While these encounters broadened his horizons, it was not until he became involved with Mi'kmaq people on Prince Edward Island that he began to truly understand how personal relationships can alter deeply entrenched attitudes that inhibit trust, respect, and goodwill among people with very different cultures and life experiences. David believes that a process of real reconciliation will require dealing directly with the major issues that have caused a rupture in the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.