

Central United Church Windsor
Charmain Bailey Foutner
September 26, 2021

Truth & Reconciliation - Orange Shirt Sunday

The Gift in Apology

Land Acknowledgement: While it is a well-traveled land, we [I] would like to respectfully acknowledge that the land on which we gather today is the traditional territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations, comprised of the Ojibwe, the Odawa, and the Potawatomi Peoples. We are grateful to work, learn and live in this area.

ORANGE SHIRT DAY & ORANGE SHIRT SUNDAY

On September 30, people all across Canada will wear orange shirts to remember and honour Indigenous children who attended Residential Schools. Indigenous Ministries and Justice at The United Church of Canada asks you to participate in Orange Shirt Day!

Why orange? Because of Phyllis Jack Webstad from the Stswecem'c Xgat'tem First Nation, who went to St. Joseph Mission Residential School. On her first day of school, Phyllis wore an orange shirt that her grandmother had given her. It was immediately taken away, and that marked the beginning of Phyllis's long separation from her family and community, a separation caused by actions of the church and the federal government. Orange Shirt Day is a time for us all to remember those events, their ongoing impact, and just as importantly, the continuing strength and resilience of Indigenous peoples.

Reflection: As our country is about to celebrate Orange short day on September 30, many United Churches across Canada are observing today, the pain of the aboriginal peoples that were inflicted by the residential school system. This sermon, written by the Rev. James Scott, The United Church of Canada's General Council Officer for Residential Schools, to mark the 20th anniversary of the United Church's 1986 Apology to First Nations Peoples: The Gift In Apology....

The 31st General Council of our United Church, the council became acutely aware that its Aboriginal brothers and sisters felt disenfranchised in many ways. Alberta Billy stood up and expressed the need in her heart for an apology from the United Church for what the church had done to Aboriginal people.

In 1986 then-Moderator Bob Smith offered that apology, acknowledging the church's own legacy of attitudes of cultural and spiritual superiority, our own blindness to the values and gifts of native people and their spirituality, and our own complicity in the destruction of Aboriginal culture.

Two years later, Edith Memnook responded on behalf of the Native community. In the wisdom of the Elders, the apology was received and acknowledged but it would not be accepted until it was lived out in action. The church was being challenged to "walk the talk," to move from acknowledgement to the work of reconciling. A stone cairn was erected on the site of the apology but left unfinished to symbolize that more work on "reconciling" remained to be done.

Real Apologies Are Hard to Give

Most of us know how hard real apologies are to give. I say "real" because, as Muriel Duncan points out in her editorial in the February 2006 Observer, saying "sorry" over the smallest thing has become a commonplace event for most of us, so common that apology is in danger of losing all meaning. But we have a much more difficult time with "real" apologies-those that come from the heart and stretch our capacity to "face the music".

Think of your own life, of a time when you needed to reconcile with someone due to something harmful you did. Do you remember how hard it was? To look someone in the eyes and take full responsibility for the harm we have done. To know that if our apology is to be taken seriously, if we are to rebuild trust, restore relationship, that we need to prove that we mean it.

Real apologies that are sincere and authentic are difficult to give because they accept responsibility and carry a commitment not to continue to harm. So it was an important thing that our church did in 1986, to admit that, "We did not hear you... We imposed our civilization... We tried to make you be like us... We helped destroy the vision that made you what you were."

That's tough to face and tough to admit. In the 1986 Apology, our church went to those who had something against us and admitted our wrong. It was a good start, but as the Elders knew, an apology is only the beginning. It is not reconciliation. The hard work of reconciling lies in the living out of the apology.

Real Apologies Have to Be Lived Out

Have we been faithful to that apology over the decades? Have we taken steps forward on that journey of reconciliation?

I believe that our church has made efforts to give substance to its words. Aboriginal people within the church acknowledged this last summer at the Aboriginal Consultation when they cemented more stones into the cairn to signify that progress has been made.

With each step in our attempt to "walk the talk," however, we see more clearly what will be required to "reconcile." We are only now coming to understand the depth of the harm done, the length of the healing road before us, and how profound a change is required of us.

We have accomplished much in 35 years. But with each step, we can see more clearly the breadth and depth and width of the task that still remains before us.

Real Apologies Can Be Gifts because it is changing the way we see ourselves.

Living out the apology is not just about healing for Aboriginal peoples. It involves our own healing as well. Lila Watson, an Australian Aborigine once said: "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you recognize that your liberation and mine are bound together, we can walk together."

If I could use an analogy to Alcoholics Anonymous, the apology challenges our church to move out of denial and begin its journey **of recovery**. Moving out of denial requires that we face new realities about ourselves. It requires honest self-reflection, humility, and a willingness to change. What are we in recovery from?

Rev. Scott writes: 'As a United Church member, I am challenged to face my own racism. My parents did not raise me with overtly negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people. But, like many of you, I was raised in a church and in a society that reflected the colonial

attitudes of cultural and spiritual superiority that were common to the day, and remain common for many people today.

As a dominant culture, those attitudes permeated our world so deeply that we didn't even recognize them as racist. They give rise to the kind of statement made to the media recently by a resident of Caledonia who said of the Native protesters: "They say they are not Canadian. If they are *not* Canadian then they are terrorists. If they are Canadian then they are criminals because they are taking land that isn't theirs."

Our racism is often more subtle than that and thus harder to recognize and own. The apology has helped strip away our individual and collective presumptions of the "rightness" of *our culture, our values, our religion*, from a dominant and exclusive theology that sees only one path to God, only one form of worship, only one sacred writing, only one way of imaging the Great Spirit, so that we begin to see the image of God in others. By recognizing our blindness, we can begin to recover our sight, we begin to heal! This is not a guilt trip. This is recovery! And it is a gift!

The Apology is a gift because it is changing the way we see others.

When we open ourselves in apology, we see not only ourselves more clearly but also the other. The other, who has so often been shrouded in stereotype, diminished by assumptions, rendered invisible by distance and estrangement, perhaps even fear. Real apology offers us the opportunity to leave the prison of our own preconceived ideas and become enriched by encounters with those whose ways and wisdom are different from our own.

The 1986 Apology names a different vision of Aboriginal people. "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."

Over 20 years, we have begun to appreciate the gifts of our Native brothers and sisters, their culture and spirituality. They bring gifts of commitment to relationships, to family, and to community. We are beginning to appreciate the groundedness of the smudge, the sacred bundle, and the four directions. We have begun to value the life lessons of the sacred teachings, of the Aboriginal connection to the land and respect for the environment, and for the oneness and interdependence of all creation. We have discovered that the circle is often better than the square or the pyramid or the straight line. And we may yet learn the value of multigenerational thinking.

This is healing! This is recovery! And it is a gift!

Lastly, the Apology Is a Gift Because It Occasions Grace

Taking responsibility is something we are tempted to avoid because we do not want to look bad or because we do not want to face consequences or change. Yet ironically, those who do take responsibility for the harm they have done often find that they engender respect rather than scorn from those they have hurt, the very ones whom they were afraid to face.

This has so often been our experience with First Nations people. Time after time, when church representatives acknowledge the role of the church in the residential school system, and show true remorse and a commitment to walk differently, we are encountered by acts of grace and generosity. Yes, there is often

anger, there is always pain and sorrow, but the overriding experience is one of openness and grace.

Healing does occur, and as we gradually come into right relations with one another, we come into right relations with God. Apology is not the end of the encounter between two peoples but the beginning of a transformed way of being together. And it is in the transformation of our relationship with those we have hurt, that we become whole. Reconciliation is the gift we bring to the altar, if you like.

Conclusion

Full reconciliation may not happen in my lifetime or in yours. But our faithfulness to walk this journey and the faithfulness of our children will determine whether the cairn is ever finished-and more importantly it will determine whether we are able to arrive at the vision held out by Chief Bobby Joseph who said, "We need to reach a place where we can reconcile, and at the end of the day, your children and mine can walk forward together, as equals. There are a lot of people in Aboriginal communities who are still very angry. But I have hope that little by little, heart by heart, we will begin to heal and learn to walk forward together." May it be so. Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

Prayer: Creator God, We look at your world and praise you for the diversity all around us. Thank you for the gift of relationships; our connection with people, animals and the land. Help us, Lord, to see differences and diversity as strengths. Help us to listen and understand; to meet one another with wonder and anticipation.

Help us to love as you love, without expectation.

Reveal to us your way of reconciliation and guide us into right relationships with all living things. Lead us to understand how

Indigenous peoples have been and continue to be profoundly harmed by settler people and institutions. Lead us to repent when we as settlers deny Indigenous peoples respect, dignity and fullness of life. Help us to listen compassionately, to speak humbly and to act justly.

We pray for our own church and its families.. we pray for our shut ins..... we pray for those in our hearts..... We pray for our country and join with the world churches in prayers for... Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Peru....

Help us to seek the peace, justice and reconciliation you desire among all your children. Thank you for your mercy and grace. In Jesus' name, who taught us to pray....
Amen.

Blessing for Wednesday September 30th : Today we wear orange to remember and honour all the Indigenous children who went to Residential Schools.

Today we wear orange and we pray for the Residential School and intergenerational survivors who are still struggling.

Today we wear orange and we are thankful for those who speak the truth, and who work to shine a light on injustice.

Today we wear orange in the name of compassion and the spirit of truth and reconciliation.

Help us, God, to remember and act on this every day. Amen.