

THE CANADIAN CHURCHES' APOLOGIES FOR COLONIALISM AND
RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS, 1986-1998

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Between 1986 and 1998, the United Church of Canada, the Anglican Church of Canada, and the Presbyterian Church in Canada each issued apologies or confessions regarding their involvement in colonization and the Residential Schools. With its decentralized structures, the Roman Catholic Church of Canada has not issued an apology as a denomination; however, since 1991, a number of religious orders and diocesan bishops have issued apologies. Using archival sources and some interviews, this paper draws out the ways in which the churches' apologies were shaped by engagement with the Indigenous people to whom the churches were apologizing. The outlined history highlights how the churches sought to advance reconciliation between themselves and Indigenous people through apology.

The involvement of the four so-called "historic churches" in Canada's Indian Residential School system led the churches to seek to reframe their relationships with Indigenous peoples through the ritual of apology. These apologies expressed the churches' regret for their involvement in colonialism in general and their role in the operation of the schools in particular. Using archival sources and some interviews, this paper seeks to draw out the ways in which the churches' apologies were shaped by engagement with the Indigenous people to whom the churches were apologizing. Between 1986 and 1998, three of the historic churches—the United Church of Canada, the Anglican Church of Canada, and the Presbyterian Church in Canada—each issued apologies or confessions regarding their involvement in colonization and the

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schools. With its decentralized structures, the Roman Catholic Church of Canada has not issued an apology as a denomination; however, since 1991, a number of religious orders and diocesan bishops have issued apologies. The outlined history highlights how the churches sought to advance reconciliation between themselves and Indigenous people through apology.¹

While the churches' apologies are part of a long and complex relationship between the settler churches and Indigenous people in Canada, in order to give attention to the processes around the apologies, this paper focuses on the period from 1986 to 1998. It does not discuss how the churches have lived up to the words spoken in the apologies. The discussion progresses chronologically to provide a picture of the quilt that is the churches' corporate experience of apology. While the churches were not in lock step in their processes regarding apology, they were well aware of what was happening in other denominations.²

THE APOLOGIES BEGIN: THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA, 1986

The early 1980s saw a group of First Nations leaders in the United Church of Canada seek to have their voice heard within the structures of the church. The Native Ministries committee of the United Church, made up of Indigenous people, brought a series of recommendations to the Executive of the General Council in March 1985. One of the committee's two spokespersons, Alberta Billy, a member of the Laishwiltach Wa Wai Kai Nation in British Columbia, added a sixth un-written recommendation which, while discussed within the committee, was not planned for presentation to the Council Executive. Billy said, "the United Church of Canada owes the Native Peoples an apology and makes clear that our spiritualism was, in fact, our natural sacredness and not paganism as the missionaries implied."³ The Rev. Stan McKay described the reaction to Billy's words: "That blew the meeting away. No one was prepared."⁴ Even though the motion was out of order because no advance notice had been given, the prepared agenda was set aside for this conversation. The next day, a sub-committee reported back to the Council Executive with a recommendation the United Church consider "an act of apology with respect to the denial of the value of Native Spirituality."⁵

The decision was that such an apology should be the work of the whole church, which meant educating the entire denomination about the ways

the church had suppressed Native spirituality. The Native Ministry committee, now called the Native Council, was tasked with providing discussion material for the church and producing a document entitled "Apology to Native Congregations," which included historical background, a worship ceremony, and study guide. The guide, written and designed by Indigenous people and telling the story of colonization from an Indigenous perspective, was circulated to all congregations and presbyteries in the predominately settler United Church.⁶

The material noted that apology was not just saying one was sorry; it included seeking to "redress injustices." To apologize "means that we must 'act' in such a way that native congregations are given proper recognition, and that a new partnership is established with them." Apologizing was a step in seeking to reframe the relationship between the Indigenous people within the United Church and the Settler Church that had acted in unjust ways. The material anticipated a question those in the Settler community might have: "Why should we apologize for something we did not do?" The answer provided was, "We are reluctant to acknowledge any responsibility we might bear for mistakes [our predecessors] made. We still enjoy the privileges accrued from [those] past injustices towards the Native peoples. The Native peoples alone carry the burdens of these injustices, as they are marginalized and feel powerless in the church and society." Even generations later, the beneficiaries of wrongs done by their ancestors bear a responsibility to heal the relationships their ancestors had damaged.⁷

Given the significance of the apology, it had been agreed that the General Council, with its wide representative nature and commissioners from every presbytery in the country, would be the body to decide if the United Church would apologize. The time set aside to discuss the apology on the evening of 14 August 1986 began with Native elders addressing the General Council on "their experience in the church." Billy again stated, "We think it is time for the United Church to apologize." Having spoken, the elders withdrew from the meeting and gathered in a tipi set up outside the conference hall on the grounds of Laurentian University. The Council then entered a lengthy conversation about how to respond. The Right Rev. Robert Smith, Moderator of the United Church, describes the debate: "The lengthy—lengthy because we had chosen to try to make the decision by consensus rather than Robert's Rules—debate which followed was respectful, and there was never any doubt that it would be passed. In the end only

a couple of commissioners refused consent, at which point I picked up the gavel.”⁸ Having made the decision to apologize, the Council, led by the Moderator, prayed for God’s forgiveness and then went out to where the Native elders had gathered.

Smith joined the elders in the tipi. By waiting in the tipi, the elders created an Indigenous space into which the Moderator of the church would enter only with their permission. The elders had determined the apology would be issued in space where they were “in charge”; yet, it was still church space for the elders who had gathered in the tipi were part of the church community. The leader of the United Church was speaking to persons who were part of the church community. Upon being given permission, Smith entered the tipi, leaving the rest of the Council outside. Smith described to those in the tipi what had occurred following the elders’ departure and then spoke the words of the apology. The heart of the apology can be summed up as “we confused Western ways with the . . . gospel of Christ,” “we imposed our civilization as a condition for accepting the gospel,” and “we tried to make you like us.”⁹ The church had been an agent of colonialism proclaiming a gospel of European ways as the path to salvation for the Native peoples. Colonialism broadly defined was in view and no specific mention was made of residential schools.

In the tipi, Smith misread the final sentence of the apology by saying, “We ask you to forgive us and to walk with us in the Spirit of Christ.” One of the elders stopped him: “Why do you ask us to walk with you, should we not walk together?” To which Smith replied: “That is what the Council wanted me to say, ‘together with us.’” The mistake highlighted a challenge for the church. It was not a matter of Native people joining the church on its journey; it was a matter of the Native and the newcomer within the church walking together. Smith used his *faux pas* as an opportunity to ask the wider church,

What does it mean to walk together? It means something more than talking. It means that we will allow our native sisters and brothers to teach us the truth God has entrusted to them. It means that we will stand with them as they seek in the culture which does not even cherish the values that have marked them as they seek the recognition of their rights.¹⁰

Such a change would necessitate re-thinking much of how the church governed itself and acted in the future.

1988-91: THE CONVERSATION TURNS TO RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

As the Canadian-based Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate prepared to mark the 150th anniversary of their work in Canada, they began a conversation in 1988 that re-examined their relationship with Indigenous people. Among the impetuses to this reflection was the visit of Pope John Paul II to Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories on 29 September 1987, where he said, "Today I have come in order to assure you that the Church stands with you as you strike to enhance your development as native peoples." He issued an invitation to the Native community "to look to your past in order to proclaim your dignity and support your destiny."¹¹ The re-examination involved conversations with Indigenous people in communities where the Oblates ministered. In these conversations, stories about the schools were told, noting how Indigenous language and culture were taken from the students. Nearly eighty percent of the Roman Catholic operated Residential Schools were run by the Oblates.

Two events in 1989-90 changed the conversation about Residential Schools. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) aired the movie *Where the Spirit Lives* in the fall of 1989.¹² The movie depicts the struggles of a girl in an unnamed Indian Residential School on the Canadian prairies. In the fall of the following year, in an interview with Barbara Frum on CBC's "The Journal," Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs Grand Chief Phil Fontaine noted he had experienced cultural abuse in the Residential Schools.¹³ These two events moved the conversation about Residential Schools to the front of any discussions about reframing the relationship between Indigenous people and the churches.

Against this background, in March 1991 the Canadian Council of Catholic Bishops organized a gathering of Bishops and Superiors whose dioceses or orders were connected to Residential Schools. The gathering "was called in an attempt to develop a strategy of honest enquiry into the reality of residential school history in Canada and to move towards possible healing measures that might need to be taken by the church in the light of that reality."¹⁴ Also present were eight Native elders involved in the Catholic Church, observers from the other historic churches, and members of the Aboriginal Rights Coalition, an ecumenical advocacy group. The churches were struggling with how to respond to the Residential School challenge. The gathering was not without controversy as leaders within the Aboriginal

community demanded they too be invited to participate. Their request was not granted.

Against the advice of those believing that the church had not yet done enough listening to Indigenous people's stories of the schools and their hopes and expectations regarding an apology, the Roman Catholic leaders issued a statement. It was partly a statement of regret and partly an action plan acknowledging "the pain, suffering and alienation that so many experienced" in the schools. The bishops felt "their anguish" and wanted to "be part of the healing process." The schools had been part of a larger system and "the root causes of the indignities and injustices suffered by aboriginal peoples in our country" had to be confronted. The action plan portion of the document recommitted the church to respect "the dignity and value" of Native cultures and spiritualities and to "reaffirm the principle of inculturation." The church would also engage with the government to respond to the aspirations of the Native people and to "assume its responsibility for its part in the Indian Residential Schools." Each diocese represented at the gathering would establish, "in collaboration with aboriginal peoples, a process for disclosure, which respects confidentiality, and for healing of the wounds of any sexual abuse that occurred in Residential Schools." These "local forums of dialogue or other avenues for listening," the document stated, "will bring together former students and their families and the religious, clergy and lay staff who were involved in the schools so that they may reflect on their experience and work together towards healing and reconciliation." The document was an interim statement, part of an on-going conversation. Any future apologies would arise from the "local forums" and the conversations they engendered, not from the denomination as a whole.¹⁵

Both leaders of the Roman Catholic entities and leaders of the other Christian denominations present left the three-day gathering aware that Residential Schools were going to be at the centre of any future relationship between the churches and Indigenous peoples. In the spring and summer of 1991, the Oblates, the Anglicans, and the Presbyterians all took steps towards apologies.

MISSIONARY OBLATES OF MARY IMMACULATE, 1991

The largest religious gathering of Indigenous and Métis people in North America, drawing some twenty thousand pilgrims, takes place during the Lac Ste. Anne Pilgrimage in Alberta each summer. At this gathering on 24

July 1991, Fr. Doug Crosby, President of the Oblate Conference of Canada, issued an apology to the Native people of Canada on behalf of the twelve hundred Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate living and ministering in Canada.

Crosby, who had been present during the Oblate 1988 reflections, began the apology by locating his words within Oblate history: the Oblates' presence in Canada for 150 years; the history of the Americas; 1992 as the 500th Anniversary of Columbus's arrival; and criticisms of and revelations regarding the Residential Schools. The apology's meta-narrative was, "We apologize for the part we played in the cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious imperialism that was part of the mentality with which the peoples of Europe first met the aboriginal peoples and which consistently has lurked behind the way the Native peoples of Canada have been treated by civil governments and by the churches." The Oblates had been participants in the colonizing actions and attitudes of the European newcomers, actions and attitudes that were not just a part of the past but were a present day reality.¹⁶ Colonialism created the schools and the Oblates apologized for three things related to the schools. First, "we apologize for the existence of the schools themselves, recognizing that the biggest abuse was not what happened in the schools, but that the schools themselves happened." The schools were wrong because their existence required the violation of "the primal bond inherent within families" and the children in the schools had been "usurped from their natural communities." Improving the schools would not have fixed the system as the schools themselves were wrong. Second, "we wish to apologize in a very particular way for the instances of physical and sexual abuse that occurred in those schools. . . . We deeply, and very specifically, apologize to every victim of such abuse and we seek help in searching for means to bring about healing." Abuse happened in the schools and the Oblates were at pains to state publicly that such abuse took place. The abuse was possible because the schools existed; again, their very existence was central to the problem. Third, "we wish to apologize as well for our past dismissal of many of the riches of native religious tradition." The schools participated in this rejection of Native traditions by seeking to assimilate the students into the dominant culture: "The Residential Schools were an attempt to assimilate aboriginal peoples and we played an important role in the unfolding of this design. For this we sincerely apologize." No attempt was made to minimize the role the Oblates played in the assimilation project.¹⁷

An apology, Crosby stated, carries with it “the promise of conversion to a new way of acting.” To that end, the Oblates pledged themselves to four things. First, they would work in every way possible so that “the full story of the Indian Residential Schools may be written” in order that “an effective healing process might take place.” Second, they wanted to “proclaim as inviolable the natural rights of Indian families, parents and children, so that never again will Indian communities and Indian parents see their children forcibly removed from them by other authorities.” This was a promise to never do again what had been done. The third action would be to denounce “imperialism in all its forms,” which included the pledge “to work with Native peoples in their efforts to recover their lands, their language, their sacred traditions, and their rightful pride.” Imperialism was to be resisted and the damages flowing from it undone. Finally, a commitment was made to work towards a renewed covenant between Oblates and Native peoples. This promise was made with recognition “that the road beyond past hurt may be long and steep but we pledge ourselves anew to journey with Native peoples on that road.” The Oblates provided a road map by which to evaluate their commitment to the apology.¹⁸

In large part because it caught many off guard, the apology was not well received. Few people knew what Crosby was going to say before he spoke. The pilgrims were unprepared for Crosby’s words and former students described being re-traumatized by Crosby’s statements. Retired school staff read about the apology in the media and felt betrayed by the leadership of their order. In the face of severe criticism from both within the Oblate community and the wider Indigenous community, Crosby issued a second apology. He did not back down from the content of the first statement but rather apologized for the lack of consultation and for failing to provide advance notice of what he was going to say.¹⁹ The Oblate experience in 1991 became a cautionary tale for other churches considering apologies.

THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA, 1993

In May 1990, the National Executive Council of the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada adopted a recommendation to name 1992 as “A Year of Reconciliation with Aboriginal Peoples.” This decision arose from a long process of seeking to walk “side-by-side,” a widely used metaphor, with the Indigenous communities within the church. While the conversations deepened the connection between Natives and non-Natives in the Anglican

Church and raised the awareness of non-Native church leaders to the justice claims of Native peoples, there was little official talk about Residential Schools. However, the events of 1991 moved the focus of reconciliation to the Residential Schools.

Some Anglicans attended the gathering of Roman Catholic bishops and superiors in March 1991 as observers. In May 1991, the Anglican Church's National Council of the General Synod, the church's executive body, spent time listening to the stories of former students. The council adopted a set of principles to guide the church in responding to the growing chorus of voices from former students, including, "Aboriginal people must name how the issue needs to be described/defined" and "Aboriginal people must decide what a useful/appropriate response from the Church would be. They should give direction to the response."²⁰

These principles gave Aboriginal people the lead role in determining the shape and scope of the church's response to the Residential Schools, but this approach had its critics who argued, "it would be unfair to ask native people to take responsibility for cleaning up a mess they had no part in making. The residential schools were imposed on native people by the dominant society, and the main issue is for the church to come to understand that the system was wrong. That's not the native people's job."²¹ To that end, in the Fall of 1991, the National Council named a committee of twelve made up equally of Native and non-Native persons to be responsible for responding pastorally and practically to the Residential School issue.

Bishop John Hannen of the Caledonia diocese in British Columbia, who had been adopted as Nisga'a, was invited by the Cariboo Tribal Council to be present at a Residential School gathering in Vancouver in June 1991. For four days, he and others heard stories of the schools. Hannen described what he heard as "surprising and difficult," saying, "I feel hurt and shame when I hear people tell their stories." Hannen issued an apology for the church's contribution "to cultural oppression, to people's pain and to the deteriorating of individuals and communities, whether through insensitivity, arrogance or the sins of some of its clergy, teachers or other workers." Hannen had spoken on his own, not claiming he was issuing an apology on behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada. However, as a bishop, his words would have been known in the church.²²

The Anglican Church's Residential Schools Working Group met frequently between the fall of 1991 and March 1993. Reading the Working

Group's minutes makes obvious that the non-Native members of the committee were on a significant learning curve regarding the realities of the schools and the long term impact in the lives of Native communities. At its March 1993 meeting, the group explored how Bishops could be helpful in modeling healing and reconciliation. Archbishop Douglas Hambidge, Bishop of Westminster and Metropolitan for British Columbia, was sitting in on the meeting. He was a close friend of Bishop Hannen and was aware of the apology Hannen had issued in 1991.²³ Hambidge suggested it was time for an apology from the Anglican Church on the issue of Residential Schools.

Hambidge was essentially asking the Working Group in general, and its Indigenous members in particular, "do you believe the church is ready to apologize? Has the church shown it understands the wrong it has done so an apology will be heard as authentic?" The Indigenous members of the group indicated they had seen signs of understanding among their non-Native colleagues on the committee and in the wider church; therefore, an apology was the appropriate next step. The shift in the relationship is noteworthy; the colonizer was asking the permission of the colonized and the colonized were being allowed to evaluate the colonizer.

The Primate of the Anglican Church, Michael Peers, was asked to make such a statement. The working group had three criteria for the context and form of the apology: it needed to grow out of the awareness that the listening group was a community; the Primate needed speak to that group directly; and it had to have his personal stamp on it, seen as being from him.²⁴ A week long Native Convocation of the Anglican Church was scheduled to take place in Minaki, Ontario in August 1993 and the working group believed this to be an appropriate time for the Primate to speak; placing his words in the larger context of the church would support the development of a healthy relationship with the Native people.²⁵

In reporting its work to the National Executive Council, the Residential School Working Group bluntly stated the reason for an apology to Aboriginal people: "for the violence done to them as individuals, as cultures and as societies through the residential schools administered by the Anglican Church."²⁶ The Primate was to consult with both Indigenous people and church staff in preparing the apology. The consultation included writing to the diocesan bishops across the country. Peers noted,

An apology cannot be a one-time thing. It may need to be made

on many occasions and in many circumstances. . . . We are at the beginning of a process that could take a long time and which is apt to be painful to all. But it is clearly the way towards reconciliation, and holds the promise of new life for the whole Church.²⁷

The apology was a step in the process of reconciliation. For those who wanted a defense of the schools, along with a recognition of the wrong done, Peers suggested,

As you read it, please keep in mind that this is an apology, not an apologia. . . . Among the speakers [at the Convocation], there were indeed some, though they were a minority, who said good things of the schools and of the people who worked there. I acknowledge that, but it is not in an apology that this is publicly acknowledged.²⁸

An apology was for saying sorry, not for offering excuses or attempting to downplay the damage done.

The apology, which Michael Peers had prepared beforehand, contained twenty-nine sentences, sixteen of which began with "I" and another four used "I" as the subject of the sentence. This was a personal apology. Even though prepared ahead of time, the apology had an immediacy of growing out of the time in Minaki listening to the stories of residential schools. Peers, and by extension the church, was sorry for participating in a system that took children from parents and for seeking to remake Native people in the image of European culture; they were sorry that "so many were abused physically, sexually, culturally, and emotionally." While speaking to that specific moment at the gathering in Minaki, the apology was given with an awareness of a larger context of the Anglican Church of Canada. Peers said, "On behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada, I present our apology." Not everyone in the church was at the same stage of understanding or regret. Some fully supported the apology as they knew the stories of the schools. The apology was also on behalf of those "who do not know these stories" and it was even an apology on behalf of those "who cannot accept that these things were done in our name." In naming these distinct groups, Peers acknowledged the differences within the church and his responsibility to exercise leadership in bringing this apology. This was not the final word; it was "a beginning," not the end.²⁹

Like Smith and Crosby, Peers had spoken from a position of leadership

to people within the church. Even though Crosby spoke to a large crowd, it was a gathering of religious pilgrims. For both Peers and Smith, the ritual of apology was immediate, spoken in small group community settings as is evident in the “I” language so prominent in Peers’ apology.

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA, 1994

As an observer, the Rev. Ian Morrison, Associate Secretary for Canadian Ministries with the Presbyterian Church, attended the March 1991 gathering in Saskatoon hosted by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. Looking back at that time, Morrison commented, “I was naïve enough to believe that this [abuse] did not happen at the Presbyterian run schools.”³⁰ Over subsequent months, Morrison came to realize he was wrong. A team from the National Church Offices in Toronto visited the Birdtail Dakota Reserve in Manitoba to hear from survivors. Morrison described the impact of hearing the stories: “I realized at that time that a model of education that had been adopted and sponsored by my church had led to one of the most horrendous events in Canadian history. From this time forward I knew that my life would never be the same.”³¹

A Committee of Reconciliation with Aboriginal People was appointed by the Board of World Mission to explore the possibility of developing a confession/apology.³² The committee, made up of six people, included two Indigenous people, one of whom had attended Residential School. From the beginning, the committee’s goal was to write a confession of sin rather than an apology.³³ The theological premise was that all wrongdoing is first and foremost sin against God and therefore must be confessed. While not denying the wrong done to the Aboriginal People of Canada, as a confession of sin, the church’s wrongdoing was placed in a theological context. The corporate nature of the confession was driven home by the use of the word “we” thirty-one times. The sins committed by individuals in the past had become the responsibility of all in the present-day church, even if those speaking the words had not been present when the wrongs were done.

Unlike the United and Anglican Churches, the leadership of the Presbyterian Church was seeking to have the words of the Confession adopted by the General Assembly, which meant commissioners would be asked to vote in favour of the exact wording of the text. The United Church General Council had agreed to apologize and Smith had taken phrases used by speakers in the conversation to frame the apology; the commissioners

had not seen the exact wording of the apology before he spoke in the tipi. While Peers had consulted about what he was going to say on behalf of the Anglican Church, the words were, in the end, his own without having been agreed to by a body in the church. Given the approach being used by the Presbyterian Church, there was debate about the content of the confession.

The Women's Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, which had been responsible for the day-to-day operations of the schools, sought to have the hard work done in "good faith" by "many" within the denomination who had served "their Aboriginal brothers and sisters" recognized. Their amended paragraph ended with, "We acknowledge their devotion and commend them for their work." Despite arguments that this amended section was not consistent with a confession of sin and lessened the impact of the document, the amended paragraph remained in place. The amended confession, together with a brief one page historical statement, was presented to the General Assembly in 1992.³⁴

The 1992 Assembly was ill-prepared to deal with the confession, with many commissioners not knowing, until they read the confession, that the Presbyterian Church had had residential schools let alone being able to place the two schools operated by the church after 1925 on a map. The confession was sent back to the Board "for a more balanced presentation of the Church's mission and ministry to native peoples."³⁵

Two years later, the confession was back before the Assembly. Again, the commissioners were asked to adopt a statement of contrition. In the intervening years, discussion of the schools had taken place both outside and inside the church. The secular media had engaged the issue, and Presbyterian-based publications, *The Presbyterian Record* and *Glad Tidings*, had published articles about the schools. The content of the confession remained unchanged, but this time it came with an eight-and-a-half-page historical statement and a three-page bibliography. It was hoped that an evidentiary approach would sway commissioners' votes. This time, there were few voices calling for the confession to be defeated and, on 7 June 1994, the General Assembly adopted the confession.³⁶

The confession stated that the church was aware of its "own sin and shortcomings" and came before God and Aboriginal people "with deep humility and in great sorrow." The church had co-operated with the government in policies of assimilation, including banning "some important spiritual practices." As part of the process of assimilation, "with the encouragement

and assistance of the Government of Canada, The Presbyterian Church in Canada agreed to take the children of Aboriginal peoples from their own homes and place them in Residential Schools.” The church had used “disciplinary practices which were foreign to Aboriginal peoples,” which created “a setting of obedience and acquiescence” in which “there was opportunity for sexual abuse.” The church had listened to the stories told by survivors and had fit them into a narrative where cultural abuse opened the way to sexual abuse. These actions had left students “deeply scarred by the effects of the mission and ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.” The church as a whole was responsible, even if the actions that caused the scarring had taken place in the past, for “what we have heard we acknowledge.” The stories told were accepted as true.³⁷

However, the adoption of the confession by the Assembly was not the presentation of the confession to Indigenous people. Some four months after the Assembly adopted the confession, the Moderator of the General Assembly, the Rev. George Vais, formally presented the confession to Grand Chief Phil Fontaine, Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs. The presentation, which occurred on 8 October 1994 at the Oodena at the Forks in Winnipeg, Manitoba, used a mixture of Christian and traditional Native spirituality. Grand Chief Fontaine accepted the apology but was not prepared to offer forgiveness to the church.³⁸ As distinct from the other churches that had issued apologies, the Presbyterian Church chose a public space in which to formally present the confession. The Oodena is Aboriginal space, not church space. In presenting the confession to Grand Chief Fontaine, the Presbyterians were taking the presentation outside the faith community and making it to a public figure from the Native community. While using the church language of confession, the Presbyterians presented the confession in a more public way than did the other churches.

ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESES APOLOGIZE

As already noted, the Roman Catholic Church is decentralized with dioceses and their bishops are autonomous. The various Canadian dioceses have had varying approaches on the question of issuing apologies. This paper is interested in the three apologies spoken by Canadian Catholic bishops during the 1990s. These statements grew out of the ongoing conversation about the Residential Schools and the relationship between Native people and non-Native people within the Roman Catholic Church and the wider

Canadian society.

In sermons preached at Mi'kmaq congregations St. Catherine's Church, Indian Brook, Nova Scotia on 6 December 1992 and at Sacred Heart Church, Millbrook Reservation, Nova Scotia on 14 February 1993, Archbishop Austin Burke, Archbishop of Halifax, spoke of Residential Schools and issued an apology. Burke had heard the stories of survivors and he spoke directly to them: "You tell the stories of the Residential School. You were not allowed to speak your language, to wear your clothes, or to play your musical instruments." The reference to Residential School is in the singular because any former students who heard Burke's words would have attended the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School, the only Residential School in the three Maritime Provinces. He went on to say, "We can see now that this was wrong." Burke then spoke directly to the hurt the schools had caused: "I cannot change the past. I cannot erase the damage that has been done. I can express my own sorrow, and the sorrow of your brothers and sisters in our church of Halifax, for your suffering. I apologize for whatever pain the church itself may have been responsible for causing in the Residential School." While affirming the need to work together with the Mi'kmaq to develop models of pastoral leadership that made sense for that community, Burke recognized he had only words to offer in response to the actions of the past. He could not change the past.³⁹

Burke offered his words within the context of the church community. He was in church speaking to people gathered in church. His words arose from the relationship he had with his hearers as their bishop. By speaking apology in the midst of a sermon, Burke was placing a high value on the pastoral impact of the ritual of apology. The words were centred in his calling to be a pastor to hurting people.

The two apologies of Bishop Reynald Rouleau, OMI, Bishop of Churchill-Hudson Bay, are instructive. In July 1993, Bishop Rouleau attended a reunion of the former students of Sir Joseph Bernier Day School and Turquetil Hall, a residence for the school, in Chesterfield Inlet, Nunavut. Rouleau sought to apologize at the reunion, but his words were not well received. In frustration, he asked Inuit leaders what they wanted to hear in an apology and so began a dialogue in which the Inuit community and Rouleau talked and reflected, debated and listened.⁴⁰ Out of that process came a second apology which Rouleau presented to the former students on 18 January 1996.

Rouleau's growing understanding of the impact of the schools was indicated a number of times in the three-page statement. The theme of isolation dominated the middle sections of the apology, providing a way to acknowledge the good work of staff in the broader context of what was wrong with the Residential School system: "Even the kindness of many dedicated staff who served the school and the hostel could not make up for the fact that you were isolated from your families and friends."⁴¹ Framed this way, former staff could see that, no matter how good they were at their jobs, they were unable to replace family and friends in the lives of students. The isolation created vulnerability, which provided the opportunity for abuse, including sexual abuse. Rouleau said, "As Bishop of this diocese I am ashamed and outraged that this happened to you. I apologize with all my heart for the role that members of the church took in all of that."⁴² Further, the isolation created an atmosphere of silence, silence about what was happening in the schools and silence in relationships between parents and children, among friends, and between spouses. Rouleau thanked students who had come forward to speak of what had happened in the school and residence.

Having received bad reviews of his first performance, Bishop Rouleau was prepared to enter into an alternative process in his attempt to try again. The audience was asked for its input into the apology. Rouleau was also very aware of a second audience—the former staff—and found a way to underscore the shortcomings of the school and recognize the work of the staff. In thanking those who had been willing to tell their stories, Rouleau acknowledged their double presence as both those who heard his words and helped him write his words.

At Alkali Lake, BC on 15 June 1998, Bishop Gerald Wiesner, Bishop of Prince George and an Oblate, presented an apology to a gathering of Indigenous people. The date is worth noting, coming before the settlement agreement and in the midst of the growing lawsuits. The location is also significant; just as Bishop Rouleau's apology was presented in non-church, Indigenous space, so was Bishop Wiesner's. He carried the apology to the Indigenous community and entered the uncertain ground of unfamiliar territory where he was guest.⁴³

The statement places the schools in the context of the time and acknowledges that they were places of isolation and vulnerability for students. Here, Wiesner treads ground walked by Rouleau. The cultural identity of students was "regarded with suspicion and at times hostility." Speaking

directly to former students, Wiesner said: "As a Catholic Bishop, I am ashamed of the violations that were actually committed by Catholic people in a school that taught Catholic values and beliefs. Such misconduct was completely contrary to the Church's teaching or respect for the inherent dignity of human persons and is a source of grief in the Catholic community." Wiesner's shame was over the failure of the church to be what the church was called to be; as a bishop within the church, he felt this failing personally. The apology does not ask for forgiveness but instead asks that, as they follow "aboriginal spiritual traditions" whose preference was for "restorative justice and reconciliation," former students work together with the church "to find a way of healing not only for yourselves, but for the whole community and for the Church."⁴⁴

THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA, 1998

The Blackwater Case, titled for the first named plaintiff Willie Blackwater, began in 1996 when students of the Alberni Indian Residential School filed suit against the United Church and the Government of Canada; they were seeking compensation for the abuses committed against them by a boys' dormitory supervisor. The case was to dominate the United Church's thinking about Residential Schools for nearly a decade. The supervisor had been found guilty and the question was what vicarious liability would be attributed to the church and what would be the government's responsibility.⁴⁵ In response to the suit being filed, St. Andrew's United Church in Port Alberni entered into a process of listening to the stories of former students of the Alberni School. The congregation, with input from First Nations people, drafted their own apology which they presented at a great banquet in May 1997 to which former students and their relatives were invited. The following description is worth quoting at length,

The apology was delivered at Maht Mahs, a large hall on the Shewish People's land, at an evening-long ceremony organized with the advice, guidance and collaboration of First Nations people. The apology ceremony included: the opening prayer by a Nuu-Chah-Nulth Elder; a reading out loud of the text of the apology by the church's minister; the presentation of the framed statements of apology to all the Chiefs; and presentations of gifts from the congregation (blankets, hand-woven shawls, a tree, and money dedicated to the preservation of their language). A dinner

was served, prepared by the congregation, and speeches, singing and the spontaneous sharing of stories and feelings took place.⁴⁶

“Tears flowed. Speeches ensued. Many Native elders said they did not believe they would ever see the day,” for the congregation issued the apology in Indigenous space following the practices and advice of First Nations leaders. The Settlers were the ones who were unsettled, in unfamiliar territory, needing the help of others to negotiate appropriate cultural behaviour.⁴⁷

St. Andrew’s congregation sent a formal petition to the General Council asking that it issue an apology on Residential Schools, noting the 1986 Apology did not explicitly mention Residential Schools. Meeting in August 1997, the Council chose instead to issue a statement of regret along with a commitment to entering into a “journey of repentance.” This was not the outcome for which the Alberni congregation was hoping. The Council members who feared that an apology would impact the courts as they decided financial liability in future lawsuits won the day.⁴⁸

The courts found both church and government liable. The United Church chose to appeal the decision, which proved a controversial move. When the General Council Executive met in October 1998, it heard severe criticism of the decision to appeal from the grassroots of the church. Further, nearly a third of the Executive had traveled to Port Alberni in September 1998 to talk to members of the St. Andrew’s congregation and former students of the school. Moderator Bill Phipps reported that this group “would not be denied” in its demand that the Executive of the General Council issue an apology regarding the United Church’s involvement in residential schools.⁴⁹

Thus, on 27 October 1998, the Moderator of the United Church of Canada, the Right Rev. Bill Phipps, issued an “Apology to Former Students of United Church Indian Residential Schools, and to Their Families and Communities.” He presented the apology standing in the chapel at the United Church’s national offices in Toronto. A few former students had been hastily gathered. None of the careful planning and staging of the 1986 apology was present. More important was the apology’s timing; it was needed now.

The apology grew out of ongoing conversation, but the exact wording was not approved by Executive. The words came out of Phipps listening to the conversation. The first three sentences contain the words “you have shared” in speaking of the stories told by former students, their pain, and

their strength and wisdom. The schools are described as a “cruel and ill-conceived system of assimilation”; the physical, sexual, and mental abuse experienced by the students were “evil acts that cannot under any circumstances be justified or excused”; and the whole school system is a “horrendous period in Canadian history.” Two audiences were in view. The first was the former students to whom the statement was addressed who “have wanted to hear [these words] for a very long time.” The second was United Church members of the Settler community who would not understand the need for an apology. To these people, Phipps said, “the truth is, we are the bearers of many blessings from our ancestors, and therefore, we must also bear their burdens.” Phipps apologized twice for the pain and suffering students experienced and the abuse they received. While asking for God’s forgiveness, the document does not ask for forgiveness from the Native people. Instead, it asks former students to hear these words as sincere and invites them to be witness to how the United Church would live out “our apology in our actions in the future.”⁵⁰ The invitation was for Native and Settler peoples to remain in conversation and relationship, thus building on the call in the 1986 apology “to walk together.” This time, however, the Native people were being asked to hold the Settlers to account on how they lived out the apology.

CONCLUSION

Each in their own way throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, the four historic churches developed apologies or confessions of sin regarding Indigenous people. These statements arose out of listening to the stories of school survivors and the children and grandchildren of survivors. That engagement shaped both the words of the apologies and the ways in which the apologies were delivered. Through the churches’ acknowledgment of the harm they did to Indigenous people, a path has been opened to a renewed relationship. In 1996, the Royal Commission of Aboriginal People stated,

Of all the non-governmental institutions in Canadian society, religious institutions have perhaps the greatest potential to foster awareness and understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This potential exists even though the Christian churches’ historical role was often that of supporting the dominant society and contributing to the marginalization of Aboriginal people. Religious institutions can make a unique

contribution today and in the future.⁵¹

Part of that unique contribution has been the apologies issued by the Canadian Churches.

ENDNOTES

1. A number of scholars have studied aspects of the churches' apologies. Susan Alter, "Apologizing for Serious Wrongdoing: Social, Psychological and Legal Considerations," Law Commission of Canada (1999), and Janet Bavelas, "An Analysis of Formal Apologies by Canadian Churches to First Nations," Centre for Studies in Religion and Society (Occasional Paper No. 1, University of Victoria, July 2004), explore the language of the apologies. Alain Paul Durocher, "Between the Right to Forget and the Duty to Remember: The Politics of Memory in Canada's Public Church Apologies" (PhD diss, Graduate Theological Union, 2002), and Jeremy Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Pasts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2011) explore the apologies philosophically and theologically. James R. Miller, "Reconciliation with Residential School Survivors: A Progress Report," *Aboriginal Policy Research Series Volume 7: A History of Treaties and Policies* (Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, 2013), 133-46, locates the churches' apologies in a larger historical context of apologies regarding Residential Schools.
2. See Richard Sand's Background File, Committee of Reconciliation with Aboriginal Peoples, 2011-1021 Boxes 1 and 2, PCCA. These files are one of the best collections of documents for piecing together the various overlapping strands of "apology" activity taking place across the four churches in the summer and fall of 1991.
3. Executive meeting, 19-22 March 1985, Minutes of the Executive and Sub-Executive, General Council, United Church of Canada (UCC), p. 122, #82-001, Box 35, File 1, United Church of Canada Archives (UCCA).
4. Stanley McKay and Janet Silman, "A First Nations Movement in a Canadian Church," in *The Reconciliation of Peoples: Challenge to the Churches*, ed. Gregory Baum and Harold Wells (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997), 174.
5. Exec. meeting, 19-22 March 1985, Minutes of the Executive and

- Sub-Executive, General Council, UCC, p. 134, #82-001, Box 35, File 1, UCCA.
6. "Apology to Native Congregations," #94.161C, Box 5, File 9, UCCA.
 7. "Apology to Native Congregations," UCCA.
 8. Robert Smith, e-mail message to author, 30 May 2012.
 9. "Apology to First Nations Peoples," General Conference 1986, UCC, accessed 23 May 2016, <http://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/1986-1998-aboriginal-apologies.pdf>.
 10. Notes dated 15 August 1986, Apology 1986, Bill Phipps File, 2002.046C Box 1, File 7, UCCA.
 11. Website, accessed 24 May 2016, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1987/september/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19870920_indigeni-fort-simpson.html.
 12. "Where the Spirit Lives," written by Keith Ross Leckie and directed by Bruce Pittman, Screen Door, 1989.
 13. Phil Fontaine's disclosure of abuse at the Fort Alexander Residential School has been widely recognized as one of the most significant events in raising the profile of the Residential School issue.
 14. National Steering Committee on Residential Schools, "Some Observations on the Residential School Experience and Its Implications for the Church in Canada," Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, September 1992, 1.
 15. National Steering Committee on Residential Schools, "Some Observations," 2-6.
 16. "An Apology to the First Nations of Canada by the Oblate Conference of Canada," The Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate, accessed 20 May 2016, http://www.cccb.ca/site/images/stories/pdf/oblate_apology_english.pdf.
 17. "An Apology to the First Nations of Canada," Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate.
 18. "An Apology to the First Nations of Canada," Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate.

19. At the Truth and Reconciliation event held in Edmonton in April 2014, Father Ken Forster on behalf of the Oblates in Canada reaffirmed the apology of 1991. Accessed 20 May 2016, <http://www.wcr.ab.ca/This-Week/Stories/entryid/5324>.
20. National Steering Committee on Residential Schools, "Some Observations, 16-17.
21. "Healing and Reconciliation: The Church Faces the Legacy of Residential Schools," Press Release—General Synod Communications, 27 May 1992, Residential Schools Working Group, File 6, Anglican Church General Synod Archives.
22. Douglas Todd, "Bishop Apologizes for Schools," Vancouver Sun, in Richard Sand's Background File, 2011-1021, Box 1, File 2, Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives.
23. Bishop Hambidge was the godfather to Bishop Hannen's daughter.
24. Durocher, "Between the Right," 168. Durocher gives all his informants, including church leaders, pseudonyms.
25. Minutes of Residential School Working Group, 25-28 March 1993, Anglican Church General Synod Archives, GS97, File 3.
26. Report to National Executive Council, RSWG, May 1993, RSWG, File 4, Anglican Church General Synod Archives.
27. Michael Peers to Archbishops and Bishops of the Anglican Church of Canada, 30 June 1993, Anglican Church General Synod Archives, General Synod 97-08, File 11.
28. Peers to Diocesan Bishops of the Anglican Church of Canada, 6 August 1993, Anglican Church General Synod Archives, General Synod 97-08, File 11.
29. "Apology to Native People: A Message from the Primate Archbishop Michael Peers, to the National Native Convocation, Minaki, Ontario, Friday, August 6, 1993," Anglican Church of Canada. The apology has been issued in at least seven languages including Inuktitut, Inuvialuktun, Ewichin, and Maliseet.
30. Notes provided to the author by Ian Morrison at an interview on 15 January 2012.

31. Notes from Ian Morrison.
32. Ruddell to Sand, 22 July 1991. Richard Sand's Background File, Committee of Reconciliation with Aboriginal Peoples, 2011-1021 Box 1, File 1, PCCA.
33. Richard Sand's Background File, Committee of Reconciliation, 2011-1021 Box 1, File 2, PCCA.
34. Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1992, 40, 51-52, 73, 562-65.
35. The author was a commissioner at the 1992 Assembly and witnessed the debate about the confession. When the confession was sent back to the Board for further work, I was among those who dissented from that decision believing that the time had come to speak; the time for study was over. My experience at the 1992 Assembly, however, sent me home wanting to tell the church the story of the schools. Since then I have written historical pieces at both popular and academic levels about the Presbyterian Church's involvement with the schools.
36. Acts and Proceedings, Presbyterian Church, 1994, 29, 365-77.
37. Acts and Proceedings, 376-77.
38. See presbyterian.ca/healing/more/, accessed on 23 May 2016.
39. Archbishop Austin Burke, Homily at St. Catherine's Church, Indian Brook, NS, 6 December 1991 and Homily at Sacred Heart Church, Millbrook Reservation, NS, 14 February 1992, accessed 12 July 2012, cccb.ca/site/eng/component/3207-catholic-statement-of-regret-on-the-former-residential-schools.
40. The back story to this apology comes from an interview with Gerry Kelly in March 2012, and I thank him for putting me on to this. Kelly functioned as a facilitator in some of the conversations between the Inuit community and Rouleau.
41. Kelly, interview.
42. Kelly, interview.
43. Bishop Gerald Wiesner, Bishop of Prince George, "Statement," Alkali Lake, BC, 15 June 1998. Correspondence from Wiesner to author.
44. Wiesner, "Statement."

45. For more on the legal case itself see Jim Miller, "The Alberni Residential School Case: Blackwater v. Plint," *Indigenous Law Bulletin*, 2001, accessed 28 June 2012, <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/ILB/2001?73.html>.
46. Alter, "Apologizing for Serious Wrongdoing," Law Commission of Canada (1999), 29.
47. Editorial, "What They Thought Was Best," *Touchstone* 16, no. 2 (May 1998): 5-6. See Paulette Regan's discussion of another apology feast, "An Apology Feast in Hazelton: A Settler's 'Unsettling' Experience," in Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 193-212.
48. Editorial, "What They Thought Was Best," 5-6.
49. Bill Phipps, telephone interview with author, June 2012.
50. Bill Phipps, "Apology to Former Students of United Church Indian Residential Schools, and to Their Families and Communities," 27 October 1998, UCC, accessed 23 May 2016, <http://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/resources/1986-1998-aboriginal-apologies.pdf>.
51. *Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, Vol. 5, Renewal: A Twenty-Year Commitment* (Ottawa: The Government of Canada, 1996), 87.