

Repeating the Apologies: Fuel for Walking Together Towards Reconciliation
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Let me clear about my biases, I speak as a Settler – on my father’s side it has seven generations since we arrived and on my mother’s side it has been three generations. My reflections on apology are impacted by the humbling honour I have had on three occasions to speak apology at Indian Residential School commemoration events.

CBC’s Cross Country Check-up on Sunday, May 22, 2016 asked, “Does making an apology many years after the wrong make any difference?” Similar questions have been voiced in a number of circles.

“Why do we keep apologizing, doesn’t apologizing over and over again hinder Indigenous people and Settlers from walking together towards the next steps in reconciliation? Doesn’t continual apology cause the relationship to be stuck in the past rather than moving forward? And finally, what is the point of an apology if it does not lead to a new relationship, apologizing by itself is not enough?”

The questions asked invite us to inquire: is the apology culture – both the repeating of apologies and the increasing number groups apologizing – helping or hindering progress towards walking together? These questions challenge the practice of repeating previously made apologies and making new apologies, both of which have been part of commemoration events and gatherings held by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. My attention is focused on the churches’ apologies which have been repeated again and again since they were first issued by various churches between 1986 and 1998. While the Anglican and United churches issued apologies, the Presbyterian church issued a confession. In order to keep things simpler in this paper, they will be generically called apologies.

Unsurprisingly I will be arguing the repetition of the apologies and the widening of the number of groups apologizing is a good thing. Apology is foundational to a new relationship going forward, and checking the relationship’s foundations is a good thing. I offer six suggestions as to why repeated apologies are helpful in walking together towards reconciliation. Three focus on the persons or groups speaking the apology and three focus on the persons or groups receiving the apology.

The United Church in preparing church members for the 1986 Apology to Native Congregations produced a study guide which explored the “theology of apology”. It argued apology as three stages: (a) knowing about the wrong done, recognizing the action as sin; (b) feeling an aversion to, “disliking”, one’s actions be they personal or corporate actions; and (c) willingly choosing to “disown” the sin and seeking to live a different way. Thus apology meant not just saying one was sorry; it included seeking to “redress injustices”.ⁱ This framing is helpful as we think about how the repetition of apology fires reconciliation.

First, saying, “I did wrong”, means I violated a code, a truth, that is important to my self definition. Admitting I have done wrong unsettles my self image as a person who is “good” and with that recognition of my failing, my wrong, comes a humility, an openness to seeing myself in a different light, and by extension the possibility of seeing the other, the one I have hurt in a different light. The arrogant approach of “I am right and you are wrong” is changed for “I am wrong, and you have helped me see the wrong as wrong.” As the Presbyterian Church’s statement says, “It is with deep humility and in great sorrow that we come before God and our Aboriginal brothers and sisters with our confession.”

Repeating the apology reminds the speaker of the wrong done, which reminds the speaker of the humility required to say “I did wrong” – a humility that is essential for Settlers if there is going to be a walking together towards reconciliation.

Second, repeating the apology reminds both the one apologizing and the one hearing the apology of the new nature of the relationship. Not just of the bad, destructive aspects of the relationship but also of the moment when the one apologizing said “I am sorry, I want to be different.” That moment – theologically called repentance, which means to turn the other way – is an important moment of commitment to the new way. A moment to be marked and remembered; it is a moment of motivation to be used in firing next steps. A moment, when the going is hard and individuals feel like giving up, that can be returned to as people say to themselves and others – back there at that moment I made a commitment to live a different way. As the apology is repeated the memory of that moment of repentance energizes the commitment to walking together towards reconciliation.

Third, apology gives the speaker the opportunity to frame how they want to be different. It is not enough to say, “I did wrong, I am sorry” and that is it. Apology leads the one apologizing to committing themselves to a new course of action – with a recounting of what will be different. As the Presbyterian Church statement ended with, “Our Church is called to commit itself to support processes for healing of the wounds inflicted on Aboriginal peoples.” In the repeating of such a phrase, the church is reminding itself of what it is going to be like. Such phrases are lived only as they become part of the internal DNA of the organization, and the repetition starts to shape the organization’s DNA. The repetition creates, as it were, a new neural pathway in the organization so the community starts to act in the new desired way.

Turning from the speaker of apology to the recipients of apology, we see that repeated apology fires walking together towards reconciliation.

Fourth, repeating the apologies is not just a reminder to the speaker of the promise to be better people. Repeating the apology gives permission to the hearers to hold the speaker to account for the promises made. The apology becomes a kind of covenant between the speaker and the hearer in which the speaker says to the hearer, “This is the new way I want to live. And I am giving you permission to hold me to account that I will live by the new pattern.”

The United Church has developed the practice when their Moderator visits an Indigenous community and there speaks words of apology, a plaque with the two United

Church apologies is given to the community to hang in a place the community deems appropriate. The United Church Moderator giving the plaque invites the community to read the apologies and reflect on whether the United Church is living up to its words, its promises, its covenant.

Fifth, the hearing of apology with one's own ears, seeing the apology presented with one's own eyes is a different experience than reading or even hearing about the apology. Two stories illustrate this point. In 2013 I had the opportunity to speak apology at a commemoration event at the Cecilia Jeffrey school site at Round Lake just outside Kenora, Ontario. As I was preparing to leave, a couple in their 40s came to me and she said, "When my mother received her Experience Payment a copy of the Presbyterian Church's apology was included. It meant a great deal to read those words. But hearing you speak them today, has meant so much more to us. Thank you." Hearing the words spoken offers a reality to the apology that merely reading the words does not carry.

If this is true for the individual, how much more is it so for communities? A variety of sources have suggested the apologies be spoken in every First Nations community in the country. Not only would this mean that the words of apology would be spoken in the midst of the communities from which the children were taken, it would also mean that even the most remote communities would be recognized as worthy of having the words spoken there.

As Paulette Regan suggests the speakers of apology are unsettled in remote communities, "The Hazelton feast hall in Gitksan territory is a long way from the urban office towers where we can safely feel distanced from the victims of our benevolent peacemaking."ⁱⁱ

Sixth, the repetition of the apologies creates an environment where apology becomes an accepted practice, a step in the process of reconciliation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theologian and part of the *Valkaryie* plot to assassinate Hitler, argued German Christians, opposed to the Nazi regime, were called to confess the sins of the nation including the Holocaust, even though those confessing the sins of genocide had not participated in any actions against the Jews. Confessing the sins of the nation, Bonhoeffer argued, would create an environment in which Germans who were participating in the genocide might reflect on their actions and change those actions. By taking up the posture of apology, the Confessing Church members might create a context in which others would also confess their wrong doing and change their actions. The posture Bonhoeffer advocated had no impact in Nazi Germany.

However, in Canada, the fact the churches have apologized and have repeated those apologies has created a culture of apology. In an environment where apology is recognized as central to the reconciliation journey and where others have apologized, new apologies are more likely to arise.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action return the churches to their apologies at a number of points.

Call to Action 59 states, "We call upon church parties to the Settlement Agreement to develop ongoing education strategies to ensure that their respective congregations learn about the church's role in colonization, the history and legacy of residential

schools, and why apologies to residential school students, their families, and communities were necessary.” In explaining why the apologies were necessary the content and uses of the apologies would be discussed.

Call to Action 48 asks the churches to develop plans of how their work will be shaped by the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, such a conversation begins with reflecting on the ways in which the churches violated the rights of Indigenous Peoples which brings the apologies back into focus.

By way of conclusion I note the way in which trees are shaped by the prevailing winds. In the same way the repeated words of apology shape both the speaker and the hearer bending them so that they lean towards reconciliation.

ⁱ “Apology to Native Congregations”, United Church of Canada, 1985.

ⁱⁱ Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, (UBC Press), p. 211.