

THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE REGARDING AN APOLOGY FOR RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS AND COLONIZATION

To the Venerable, the 149th General Assembly:

In 2023, the National Indigenous Ministries Council (NIMC) put forward a recommendation to the General Assembly that The Presbyterian Church in Canada draft a renewed apology for its role in colonization and in the operation of residential schools. The recommendation was approved, (A&P 2023, p. 29) and following is the report of the special committee that was constituted to take on the task of drafting the apology.

The committee was comprised of members appointed by the NIMC (Dylon Nippi, Yvonne Bearbull, Stewart Folster and John Carr), the Life and Mission Agency (Amanda Currie, Karen Dimock and Christian Persaud) and the Assembly Council (Martha Fergusson and William Ball). The Moderator of the 2023 General Assembly, Mary Fontaine, joined by correspondence. Justice Ministries staff (Allyson Carr and Katharine Sisk) provided committee support.

The special committee met five times: four virtual meetings and one two-day in-person meeting in Saskatoon. Each meeting was opened and closed prayerfully, with regard for the intensity of the work and the traumatic impact the schools had and continue to have on families and communities. The in-person meeting also opened with smudging, ceremony and a Sharing Circle, recognizing the importance of honouring traditional Indigenous spiritual practices as part of the work of coming to, and drafting, an apology.

LANDSCAPE TODAY: WHY AN APOLOGY IS NEEDED

The discussion and the content of the apology was framed within the context of the following questions. Why an apology now? Why do we need it? What is distinct about an apology? What is different about what is being done now, and what was done with the 1994 Confession 30 years ago? The group noted that an apology must be set in the context of accountability. In answering these questions over the course of its work, the committee discussed the ongoing, traumatic impacts of residential schools on Survivors and intergenerational Survivors. It heard and acknowledged that neither the words “apology” nor “sorry” appeared in the 1994 Confession the church made regarding colonization and residential schools and so agreed that this was not so much a renewed apology as it is an apology – that is one of the distinctions between the 1994 Confession and the apology presented below, 30 years later. It noted that when the Confession was approved by the General Assembly in 1994, many people even within the church were not ready to hear it and the church has been slow to embody the sorrow and work for change it confessed then. The 1994 Confession did set the church on a path of reconciliation but in learning to walk that path, the church has learned much about, and understands more deeply now, the harm it caused. This apology comes out of the church’s learning and is a response to that learning. We cannot but be deeply sorry when we understand the harm we caused. It was noted that this work is needed for future generations but for Indigenous members of the group in particular, it comes with an especially heavy personal cost.

The special committee also heard that many Indigenous communities who were directly impacted by residential schools operated by The Presbyterian Church in Canada did not know of the 1994 Confession or had not heard it, so the committee noted that the church needed to find ways to ensure that those toward whom the apology is directed are able to hear it. The special committee also heard and acknowledged how the apology could reopen wounds in communities and for Survivors and intergenerational Survivors, and so it was noted that the apology, when it is delivered, would have to be done carefully, and in ways that respect communities’ needs for safety and healing.

The special committee heard the need for urgency amid the crises facing Indigenous peoples today; the loss of Elders and children, language, families and communities torn apart. Members of the group asked, how do you put a heavy heart into words? The special committee examined elements of apology including admitting wrongdoing, reparation, commitments going forward and ongoing change. Members named the critical importance of follow-up steps, including the need to have an intentional and concrete plan for the apology to be shared with those who were hurt by the schools.

Over the course of its meetings and through correspondence the special committee worked on the content of the apology, which was largely drafted at its in-person meeting in mid-March and then was revised. The special committee will need more time to do the important work of giving current guidance for the denomination toward reconciliation efforts, which the 2023 General Assembly requested, including guidance on how best to ensure the apology is delivered in the places it needs to be.

The text of the apology the special committee has drafted and is presented below:

THE APOLOGY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA FOR ITS COMPLICITY IN COLONIZATION AND THE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SYSTEM

Introduction

We, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, humbly offer this apology to the generations of Indigenous people and communities harmed by the residential schools and day schools we operated.

We originally made a Confession in 1994 for our role in operating residential schools and colonization but we have realized the inadequacy of that Confession. We apologize for our slowness and the apathy of our response. We are deeply sorry.

We acknowledge the families whose children were taken to schools without telling their families where the children were being taken and who never returned, who remain lost today. We acknowledge with grief the many unmarked graves that have been found and will be found, including at schools that we ran. We remember the children who never made it home.

We apologize for the impact of the genocide of colonization, forced assimilation and racism to which we actively contributed.

Many Survivors and intergenerational Survivors have shared very personal and traumatic experiences in the context of Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings and within the congregations, committees and governing bodies of the church. We acknowledge the strength and courage of Survivors for sharing your experiences in the schools and the heavy burdens you, your families and communities still bear. We acknowledge the pain and difficulty of sharing and reliving the truth of your lived experience.

We acknowledge that the church's apology itself, as well as the presence of church representatives making the apology, may be triggering, evoking trauma for some by surfacing memories of devastating experiences in residential schools.

Apology

We acknowledge that Indigenous children suffered at residential schools. The Presbyterian Church in Canada ran Ahousaht Residential School in British Columbia, Alberni Residential School in British Columbia, Birtle Residential School in Manitoba, Cecilia Jeffrey Residential School in Shoal Lake, Ontario, Cecilia Jeffrey Residential School in Kenora, Ontario, Crowstand Residential School in Saskatchewan, File Hills Residential School in Saskatchewan, Muscowpetung (later known as "Lakesend") Residential School in Saskatchewan, Portage la Prairie Residential School in Manitoba, Regina Industrial School in Saskatchewan, Round Lake Residential School in Saskatchewan and Stoney Plain Residential School in Alberta.

We apologize for taking children from their homes, parents, grandparents and communities.

We apologize for traumatizing parents and communities and taking away their rights to protect their children.

We honour and respect the languages of the land and apologize for punishing Indigenous students for speaking their traditional languages.

We apologize for attempting to eliminate Indigenous identity and Cultural and Spiritual traditions.

We apologize for the abuse Indigenous children suffered, including physical, sexual, psychological, emotional and Spiritual abuses.

We apologize for the weaponization of food that happened in the schools and for non-consensual experiments with food, nutrition and medical procedures that were conducted on children.

We apologize for the lost lives, for children who died while at residential schools – from disease, neglect, suicide, attempts to run away and from violence by teachers, staff and volunteers.

We apologize that the schools created an isolated and unsafe environment where violence was condoned and students learned violence. We regret, and are deeply sorry, that we provided conditions where students could abuse other students.

We acknowledge and apologize for the resulting loss of bloodlines, of ancestors and of people who would not grow to become Elders, the huge loss of culture and future for nations this meant.

We apologize that when children died their parents were not always informed, they were not always returned to their communities and their burial sites were sometimes unmarked or the markers were not maintained and the record of names was not kept.

We apologize for the church's attitude of white superiority, for its assimilating policies and practices, for the racism of treating Indigenous people as less than human and for the ongoing intergenerational effects of our complicity with colonization and the schools that continue to negatively impact families and communities.

We acknowledge that this systemic racism continues to impact Indigenous people, including through: insecure housing; poverty; forced dependence on social assistance; experiencing lateral and domestic violence, in particular toward Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQ people as named in the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. We acknowledge this has led to hopelessness, mental health crises and the tragedy of suicide, barriers to completing education and to accessing health care. We acknowledge this has led to the breakdown of family bonds that results in children taken into foster care, gang involvement, exploitation, addictions and incarceration.

We are sorry for how long it has taken for The Presbyterian Church in Canada to begin to understand the depth of harm we have caused, and we still have much to learn.

For our complicity in colonization and the residential school system, we are deeply, deeply sorry.

We therefore offer five fundamental commitments:

We will continue to listen and learn from Indigenous people, leaders, Elders and Knowledge Keepers, welcoming and engaging voices from both within and beyond The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

We will continue the work of reconciliation, responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action and the work of reparation that we have begun.

We will respect traditional Indigenous spiritual practices.

We will listen to and tell the truth about the past.

We will work to support Indigenous led healing and wellness initiatives and be in solidarity with Indigenous people and communities.

Recommendation SCA-001 adopted/defeated/amended

That the above apology of The Presbyterian Church in Canada for its complicity in colonization and in operating residential schools be adopted.

Recommendation SCA-002 adopted/defeated/amended

That the above apology be translated into at least the following languages: Dakota, Ojibwe, Sauteaux, Plains Cree, nuučaanuł (Southern Wakishan), Central Nuu-chahnulth, Korean and French.

Recommendation SCA-003 adopted/defeated/amended

That all courts of the church be encouraged to study the apology, deepen their understanding of the need for reconciliation and decolonization and seek out resources to continue learning how best to live out the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action, especially those aimed at churches, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and the church's repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery.

Resources are available for free download at presbyterian.ca/justice/social-action/indigenous-justice.

Recommendation SCA-004

That the Special Committee continue its work over the following year to develop additional guidance for the denomination toward the life-giving need for reconciliation, including how best to animate the apology and report back to the General Assembly in 2025.