



Presbyterian History

A Newsletter of the Committee on History
The Presbyterian Church in Canada

Volume 63, Number 1

Spring 2019

How The Presbyterian Church in Canada Made its Confession

by Peter Bush

2019 is the 25th anniversary of the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada adopting the Confession regarding Aboriginal People. The Confession is the church's apology for its involvement in the Residential School system and its participation in the colonial enterprise. This article seeks to lay out some of the work in the 1990's and the first decade of the 21st century surrounding the Confession's eventual adoption and then some early responses to the Confession. The story is more complicated than the one told here, but this article will provide some of the narrative behind the Confession. I acknowledge that I am a Settler. For twenty-five years I have been writing about Presbyterian involvement in the schools. I was present at the Assembly in 1992 when the Confession was first introduced. All of that means I come to this writing with a point of view.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada operated nine residential or industrial schools prior to 1925. Two schools closed prior to 1925. When Church Union occurred in 1925, five of the remaining schools became the responsibility of The United Church of Canada and two remained the responsibility of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Those schools were Cecilia Jeffrey School operated first at Shoal Lake, Ontario and then moved to Round Lake just outside Kenora, Ontario and Birtle School in Birtle, Manitoba. Given the limited number of schools, The Presbyterian Church

in Canada's role is a footnote to the far larger stories of the Roman Catholic, Anglican and even United Churches. This is not said to in any way minimize the Presbyterians culpability but rather to recognize they are a bit player in the story.

Like the other historic denominations, The Anglican Church of Canada, the Roman Catholic Church entities, and The United Church of Canada, the Presbyterian Church was impacted by the events of the 1960's and the "discovery" of the Indigenous peoples of Canada. For Centennial Year in 1967 the denomination produced a book highlighting the mission and outreach work of the denomination. The first photograph in the book is of the Principal of Cecilia Jeffery School, Colin Wasacase, standing in the playground of the school with the children having fun at recess. Placing such prominence on the schools in the 1960's did not translate into an on-going commitment to Native ministry. Through the 1970's and 1980's staffing both congregations on reserves and inner city missions proved challenging and questions were raised about the efficacy of mission to and with Native peoples.

Aware of the United Church's apology in 1986, a group of Presbyterians working with and among Native peoples both on and off reserve sent an overture the General Assembly of the denomination asking for a change in how native ministry was conducted within the Presbyterian Church. The authors of the overture saw in the fact that Na-

tive people within the United Church had asked for an apology the implication that Native people were seeking apologies from other churches. The overture stated, “the request for an apology from the churches by the native people is an indication that we are being called to move beyond the structures and practices of the past...God is challenging us through our experience to examine our own life as a church and as a culture and to work to redeem them.”¹ While the overture spoke of anger, guilt, frustration and confusion felt by many seeking to do ministry with Native people, there was no mention of residential schools in any of the twenty-three points made about what was not working in church’s work with Native people. The response to this call for a re-evaluation of the work among Native people led to a rethinking of how Native people within the church could take a more active leadership role in Indigenous congregations. No discussion occurred about the possibility of an apology.

In late 1990, Peter Ruddell, General Secretary for the Board of World Mission of the Presbyterian Church, aware of things percolating in other denominations around residential schools went to the Presbyterian Church Archives “to discover what material re: the residential schools is there.”² The residential schools were not front and center in the minds of the denomination’s mission leaders when they thought about work with the Indigenous people of Canada. In 1991 that all changed.

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 as an observer. There he heard about the abuse that had taken place in Residential Schools

operated by various Roman Catholic entities. In looking back at that time Morrison commented, “I was naïve enough to believe that this [abuse] did not happen at the Presbyterian run schools.”³ Over subsequent months Morrison came to realize he was wrong. The Board of World Mission at its annual meeting in 1991 had an initial conversation about Residential Schools and the possibility of an apology or confession from the church. It was believed more work needed to be done on hearing from former students and developing more background.⁴

Two things were done to accomplish this task. First, in July 1991, Ian Morrison; the Rev. Dr. Ray Hodgson, Associate Secretary of Church and Society of the Board of Congregational Life of the Presbyterian Church; and Ms June Stevenson, the editor of the Women’s Missionary

Society publication, *Glad Tidings* traveled to Birtle and Kenora to hear from former students. All three worked at the National Church Offices in Toronto. Their visit to Birtle was co-ordinated by the Rev. Richard Sand, minister of First Presbyterian Church, Brandon, who had spent fifteen years serving congregations in Manitoba. Sand, who acted as chauffeur heard the stories told to the group while visiting the Birdtail Dakota Reserve. Morrison noted his reaction to 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.”⁵ The second thing done was appointing a Committee of Reconciliation with Indigenous People to explore the possibility of developing a confession/apology to be presented at the 1992 meeting of the Board.⁶

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The Rev. Ian Morrison***

The Committee of Reconciliation, made up of six people, included two Native people one of whom had attended Residential School. The chairperson of the committee was the Rev. Richard Sand. The committee was, as their archival material indicates, aware of what was taking place in other churches regarding apologies regarding the residential schools.⁷ From the start it was clear the committee's goal was to write a confession of sin. The theological premise behind confession as opposed to apology was that all wrongdoing is first and foremost sin against God. This recognition in no way denied the wrong and hurt done to others, in this case the Indigenous People of Canada, but as a confession of sin it placed the church's wrongdoing in a larger theological context. The committee worked quickly, meeting face to face in October and again in November 1991, the committee met a final time in February 1992 to complete a draft of the confession to present to the Board of World Mission's meeting in March 1992.

The draft confession presented to the Board looked at more than just Residential Schools, placing the schools within the larger colonizing activities of the society, activities and attitudes which the church condoned and at times led. In introducing the confession to the Board, Sand said,

To acknowledge as we are doing, that the voices of Aboriginal peoples invite us to examine our society past and present, would seem to give Aboriginal people a role of prophets, who are speaking of the harm done to them, ask those who have sinned against them to name the patterns of destruction that prevailed in relations between Euro-Canadian and Aboriginal cultures in the past. Having named the patterns there are further steps we are encouraged to take as the people of God, by accepting responsibility for the deep hurt we have caused, confessing this to God and those we have harmed.⁸

The confession was a corporate statement using "we" language throughout – each of the twelve points of the confession began with "we". The word "we" was used thirty-one times throughout.

The sins committed by individuals in the past had become the responsibility of all the people of the church in the present, even though those speaking the words of confession had not been present when the wrongs were done.

The Board of World Mission included members from the Women's Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Within the structures of the church it had been the WMS who had been responsible for the day to day operations of the schools. The WMS members on the Board, brought an amendment to the draft confession which sought to recognize the hard work done in "good faith" by "many" within the denomination who had served "their Aboriginal brothers and sisters". The 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 Board agreed to present the Confession together with a one-page historical statement to the General Assembly in 1992 for the Assembly's adoption. Further recommendations were to be presented suggesting ways in which the Confession might be lived out in the church's relationship with Indigenous peoples.

The 1992 Assembly was ill-prepared to deal with the Confession, many of the commissioners did not know, until they read the report in their briefing books, that the Presbyterian Church had had residential schools. Those who had a vague awareness of the existence of the schools would have been hard pressed to place the two post-1925 schools 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." The sense of many at Assembly was that things were not as bad as the report and Confession made things sound.⁹

The work done by Richard Sand is frequently overlooked by Canadian Presbyterians, which is unfortunate for his committee's work laid the foundation for what was to come.

Two years later, 1994, the Confession was back before the Assembly. Over the previous two years there had been further discussion of the schools both inside and outside the church. The *Presbyterian Record* and *Glad Tidings* had both published articles about the schools, and the secular media had engaged in conversation about the issue. While the content of the Confession remained unchanged, some of the points had been rearranged and others amalgamated so the twelve points had become seven. The report was no longer coming from the Board of World Mission, but, due to some structural re-arrangements within the national offices of the church, from Justice Ministries. It was thus being shepherded through the process by Ray Hodgson who was the author of the now eight-and-a-half-page historical statement and the three-page bibliography which followed. An argument against the confession was raised suggesting one generation cannot apologize for the sins of a previous generation. As well, a concern was voiced that the church would be “legally liable for unspecified damages”. Despite these objections on June 7, 1994, the 120th General Assembly meeting in Toronto adopted the Confession. Chief Eli Mandamin of Iskatewizaa-gegan #39 Independent First Nation (on Shoal Lake), who had been a student at Cecilia Jeffrey Residential School addressed the Assembly the following day:

Today is a significant day, for it is the first day of a new relationship....Yesterday, “After mature deliberation” you acknowledged that this policy [of removing our children from us and placing them in Residential Schools] was wrong and you recognized that lives have been deeply scarred. You have made a commitment to a new future....As a Christian denomination you have taken a step that can lead to the de-

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velopment of a model that all others who are wrestling with this problem can learn from.¹⁰ A new time had begun, but the question remained, how would the church live up to the Confession.

The Confession was formally presented by the Rev. George Vais, Moderator of the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada to the Grand Chief Phil Fontaine, Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs on Oct. 8, 1994. The presentation took place at the Oodena at the Forks

in Winnipeg, a location between the Birtle School located west and north of the Forks and Cecilia Jeffrey School which was east of the Forks. Grand Chief Fontaine accepted the apology, but was not prepared to offer forgiveness to the church.

The first lawsuit filed by a former student against the Presbyterian Church arrived in 1998 on the first day of work

for The Rev. Stephen Kendall as the Principal Clerk of the General Assembly. The Principal Clerk is the public face of the church in relation to government and legal matters. The Presbyterian Church through Kendall and Morrison, who was now the General Secretary of the Life and Mission Agency of the Presbyterian Church, the person responsible for the national programming and mission components of the church, remained part of the ecumenical conversations through the next decade. While the Presbyterian Church was facing 132 lawsuits by the fall of 2001, it was never forced to defend itself in court, and was never found financially liable in a court of law. This is said not to paint the Presbyterian Church in a positive light, rather to indicate the mindset of the denomination was not impacted by the experience of sitting on the defendant’s side of a court-room. Further none of the 132 lawsuits was the result of a cross lawsuit filed by the federal government. The

132 lawsuits the Presbyterian Church faced represented 1.5% of all the lawsuits faced by the four historic churches in October 2001.

The Presbyterian Church's position between the arrival of the first lawsuit and the Settlement Agreement of 2002 was driven by two, at times contradictory, goals. First, the church sought to live out the spirit of the Confession in seeking a renewed relationship with the Aboriginal people of Canada. Yet at the same time it sought to limit the financial and legal liability faced by the church. In January 2001 the denomination shut down access to most of archival material in its possession related to the Residential Schools. "During this unique period in our history where the Church is exposed to litigation with respect to Residential Schools....any requests for access to any and all material related to Residential Schools are to be cleared by the Archivist and the Principal Clerk. We will want to know the purpose for the access request." Among the materials to which access would not be given were: "Correspondence files, Quarterly reports, Minutes, Staff reports, Internal reports."¹¹ In preventing access to archival material, the Presbyterian Church chose limiting liability over the openness implicit in the Confession.

When the Anglicans announced they would be entering bi-lateral negotiations with the Government of Canada the four-party ecumenical coalition which had been negotiating with the Government of Canada collapsed. Gerry Kelly, a negotiator for the Catholic Roman entities, suggested to Stephen Kendall given the small size of the Presbyterian stake it would make sense for the Presbyterians to enter their own bilateral conversation with the Government of Canada. That is what happened and the Presbyterian Church-Canada agreement was signed in 2002. The financial liability for the Presbyterians was set at \$2.1 million which was taken from the denomination's cash reserves. There was no attempt to raise the funds through a national fund-raising campaign. The 2002 agreement was rolled into the final Settlement Agreement of May 2006 which covered all four historic churches, setting a limit on the liability each denomination would face. A part of the agreement

was a commitment by The Presbyterian Church in Canada to establish a Healing and Reconciliation Fund. The Fund established in 2006 encouraged Presbyterians to contribute towards healing and reconciliation work between Native and non-Native peoples. Grants from the Fund continue to support healing and reconciliation work in congregations across the country.

This article started in the middle of a story and ends before the story is done. The article is incomplete because it is not possible to know where the work of healing and reconciliation will lead in the future, for it is impossible to predict what role the Confession will have in the life of the church twenty-five years from now when the Confession marks its 50th anniversary.

¹ *Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, (A&P)*, 1987, 461.

² Peter Ruddell to John Allen and Ray Hodgson, Dec. 3, 1990, National Native Ministry Committee, Board of World Mission, 1999-1003 Box 1, File 12, Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives (PCCA).

³ Notes provided to the author by Ian Morrison at an interview in January 2012.

⁴ Peter Ruddell to Richard Sand, July 22, 1991, Reconciliation Committee Files, 2005-1062, PCCA.

⁵ Notes from Ian Morrison, Jan. 2012.

⁶ Ruddell to Sand, July 22, 1991.

⁷ Richard Sand's Background File, Committee of Reconciliation with Aboriginal Peoples, 2011-1021 Box 1, File 2, PCCA. This file is 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.

⁸ Richard Sand, Notes from Board of World Mission meeting, Committee of Reconciliation with Aboriginal Peoples, 2011-1021 Box 1, File 1, PCCA.

⁹ 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..

¹⁰ A&P, 1994, 40-42, excerpts of Chief Mandamin's speech to the Assembly.

¹¹ Principal Clerk/Assembly Office, Residential School Files, Church-Canada Working Group, 2001, 2001-1016 Box 1, File 7, PCCA. For the sake of transparency, this decision of the Assembly Office blocked a couple of research projects I was working on in 2001 and 2002.

Historical Vignette

The Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 was in full swing when the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, June 3-12, 1919. The Assembly, the first after the ending of World War I in November 1918, had focused on the war and those who served as chaplains – another focus was the Forward Movement campaign which sought to raise money to support mission and ministry. But on the morning of June 11th (the second last day of Assembly) the Board of Social Service introduced a resolution regarding the Strike. The allotted time was quickly used up and the conversation rolled into the evening session which was extended twice, finally adjourning after 11 pm. A of eight persons worked overnight and returned to the Assembly on the morning of June 12, 1919 with a 1,200-word resolution which was adopted. The resolution was subsequently published and distributed as a pamphlet. Part of the resolution is published here.

The General Assembly recognizes that the prevailing unrest is a sign of the vital effort of the nation to adjust itself to new and changing conditions. It also recognizes that this unrest is a belated protest against injustices that have been tolerated in our social system – the alienation of our natural resources, the tying up of land for the unearned increment in value, profiteering, especially during the war, the public indifference toward the conditions in which many of our people live and toward the wrongs they suffer, and they call earnestly for extensive reforms of the abuses complained of...

The General Assembly draws attention to the fact that selfish and vulgar parade of wealth, at a time when all our resources are required to meet the needs of the world, is one of the chief causes of discontent, and calls on our people for the self-sacrifice and earnest service...

The General Assembly draws the church's attention to this truth that service to the point of sacrifice was the ruling principle of the life of Jesus Christ, and that He requires His followers similarly to invest their lives in the service of their fellows. This principle has received new emphasis in the war, and must now be applied to every department of our social life.

Industry, which includes both capital and labor, exists primarily for service. In order to serve, it must pay, but the object of its existence is service. All parties in industry have their obligations to meet as well as their rights to secure, and the emphasis of the hour should be on the service rather than on its reward.

...

The General Assembly would remind the management of our industries of their obligation to promote in every way open to them the welfare and the interests of those who serve with them. The Assembly warmly commends movements now afoot in many of our industries towards the following ends:

- *Toward giving the workers a voice in determining the conditions under which their work is to be done, and a proper share in the control of industry;*
- *Toward giving the workers an equitable share in the wealth jointly produced;*
- *Toward co-operating with the State and with the workers themselves in providing insurance against unemployment, accident and illness, and in providing pensions for the old age and widowed mothers;*
- *Toward securing for workers such hours of labour as will afford leisure for self-improvement and for service to their families and the community;*
- *Toward providing in every office and factory those comforts and conveniences that will safeguard the health and brighten the lives of employees while at their work*

...

The General Assembly affirms the sacredness of human personality, and would point out that such conditions of work must be secured as will afford to each worker the opportunity of the highest personal development.

History Award Winners 2018

Annually the Committee on History of the General Assembly awards books in three categories: Congregational History; Personal Memoir; and Academic History. The 2018 Award winners are reviewed below.

200 Years of Grace: Richmond Hill Presbyterian Church, 1817-2017

A first history of the church in Richmond Hill was published in 1980, a second history including the previous book and adding material from 1980 to 2007 was published in 2007. The present book re-prints the previous work and adds the history of the last decade.

This slim, 50 page volume, focuses on the property of the Richmond Hill congregation: church building, cemetery, manse, and additional property called Kirk Taigh. The list of ministers and other personnel appear in the book's appendix. This may seem odd, but I am writing this review the week Statistics Canada released projections of 9,000 church buildings in Canada closing in the next decade. *200 Years of Grace* reminds readers church buildings have a physical presence, silently bearing witness to the gospel, the architecture stating "this is a church" shapes the surrounding community. The book invites reflection on questions of space and place in congregational life. Available from Richmond Hill Pres.Church.

My Journey by John R. Cameron

John Cameron grew up in the Maritimes and served congregations in the Maritimes, serving as Moderator of the 1991 (117th) General Assembly. The book is a collection of stories from Cameron's life, some are purely about ministry others show how ministry and family life overlap and intertwine. The stories exposing the work-life balance are the most interesting for they allow us to see a gifted and wise pastor walking this challenging balance. Like all good preachers some of the stories do not list a moral at the end, we are expected to reflect on the story to see the wisdom hidden in the narrative. In this way Cameron credits his readers to be intelligent, reflective readers, and for that he deserves credit.

Available from the Kirk of St. James, Charlottetown, PEI.

The Regina Indian Industrial School (1891-1910): Historical Overview and Chronological Narrative

by Douglas Stewart

The Regina Indian Industrial School was a school operated by The Presbyterian Church in Canada during a time when the Government of Canada had decided that it would focus on offering skills training to middle school and high school aged Indigenous children. A collection of large schools were built, including the one at Regina. The Government changed its mind about the approach and starting in 1910 began to close the Industrial Schools. Stewart's history of the school consists three parts. A narrative outlining life in the school and the staff who operated the school. Second, a chronology of the school's history which allows the reader to see how the various influences which impacted the school impinged on each other. Finally, in a collection of appendices Stewart has collected the names of the students who died in the school, which is shockingly high number. The school's cemetery has been identified and is now a provincial heritage site. In two other appendices are gathered the names of the school's graduates and names of student who attended but did not graduate. Stewart is to be thanked for the painstaking work involved in gathering these lists for at least two reasons. The lists are important to family members who had loved ones who attended the school. Second, the care Stewart has taken in constructing these lists bears witness to the value of the students represented by the names. This work reminds us of the inestimable value of persons to God. This important addition to our understanding of Canadian Presbyterian involvement with Residential Schools can be ordered from First Church, Regina.

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BOOKS

(In a continuing effort to clear the backlog of books on the shelves, here are a list of books received which will not be reviewed in *Presbyterian History*, but which may be of interest to readers.)

MaryAnn McKibben Dana, *God, Improv, and the Art of Living*, (Eerdmans, 2018), 220 pgs. What can Christians and church leaders learn from improv? The answer: A great deal.

Anna Carter Florence, *Rehearsing Scripture: Discovering God's Word in Community*, (Eerdmans, 2018), 203 pgs.

Justo L. Gonzalez, *A Brief History of Sunday: From the New Testament to the New Creation*, (Eerdmans, 2017), 166 pgs. Part of the growing writing about Sabbath by an important theological thinker.

Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission*, (Eerdmans, 2015), 341 pgs.

David H. Hopper, *Divine Transcendence and The Culture of Change*, (Eerdmans, 2011), 262 pgs.

Emmanuel Katongole, *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa*, (Eerdmans, 2017), 294 pgs. An important addition to the conversation about Africa and African Christianity.

Jane Samson, *Race and Redemption: British Missionaries Encounter Pacific Peoples, 1797-1920*, (Eerdmans, 2017), 274 pgs. Samson teaches at the University of Alberta.

Liz Theoharis, *Always with Us?: What Jesus Really Said about the Poor* (Prophetic Christianity Series), (Eerdmans, 2017), 185 pgs. A powerful plea for the church to address poverty as being central to its mission.

T. Jack Thompson, *Light on Darkness?: Missionary Photography of Africa in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, (Eerdmans, 2012), 286 pgs. Insightful analysis of missionary photographs.

Steve Turner, *The Gospel According to The Beatles*, (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2006), 254 pgs.

Steve Walton, Paul R. Trebilco, David W. J. Gill, eds., *The Urban World and the First Christians*, (Eerdmans, 2017), 388 pgs.

David Wenham, *From Good News to Gospels: What Did the First Christians Say about Jesus?*, (Eerdmans, 2018), 124 pgs. Short introduction to the development of the gospels by a leading scholar on early Christianity.

Glauca Vasconcelos Wilkey, ed., *Worship and Culture: Foreign Country or Homeland?*, (Eerdmans, 2014), 441 pgs. Part of the growing body of work arguing that worship should remind Christians that they are citizens of an alternative kingdom.

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PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY – ISSN 0827-9713

¹ *Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, (A&P)*, 1987, 461.

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