

Minute for Reconciliation - Marion's Story

Apology at the Gitxsan Feast Hall

I was privileged to represent the United Church at a Settlement Feast in Hazelton B.C. where 450 people attended in order to welcome 25 Gitxsan survivors of the Edmonton Residential School back into their community. These survivors had suffered abuse in the residential school and being there proved to be both a painful and a blessed experience for me. How could the church I love have been involved in this ill conceived system?

It was a deeply moving ceremony where as each survivor came forward they were invited to speak and then the Clan Mothers sang to them, put a Clan insignia vest on them and led them to an honoured place at the table of their Clan. For some it was the first time they had returned to the Hazelton area since they were put on the train to Edmonton as young as six years of age. For others it was a sign that even though they had lived in the community these past years, they were now part of the community in a new way.

We had heard testimony regarding the physical and sexual abuse which occurred in that school. We had also heard about other indignities such as rancid food, confinement, separation of siblings and even forced grave digging. Imagine young boys forced to dig the graves for the Aboriginal children who had died in the nearby TB Hospital. We know the tragic consequences of the removal of children from family and community. Language and culture were suppressed and that loss is great. We must understand our involvement in the colonization and underlying racism that was prevalent in the establishment of the residential schools system. And we cannot close our eyes to the racism toward Aboriginals that continues today.

Quoting from the 1998 United Church Apology I said, "To those individuals who were physically, sexually, and mentally abused as students of the Indian Residential Schools in which The United Church of Canada was involved, I offer you our most sincere apology. You did nothing wrong. You were and are the victims of evil acts that cannot under any circumstances be justified or excused."

To the Gitxsan nation I also offered words of apology. "You have a rich culture which has existed since time immemorial. You have a language and a justice system. This culture, this language and the traditions of the feast hall were not respected by the newcomers to this land. The gifts which the Gitxsan nation had to offer were suppressed in the colonization of this land. The removal of children from families and communities, the punishment exacted for speaking Gitxsanimax in residential schools and the disruption of Gitxsan spirituality and tradition are wrongs which cannot be excused. For our role in this attack on the Gitxsan nation we offer our profound apology. We also offer our commitment to seeking new ways of walking with respect and honour for the Gitxsan language, spirituality and culture. "

Attending TRC Hearings and events sponsored by Reconciliation Canada are ways we can show our Aboriginal neighbours that we do accept responsibility and want to walk with them in respect and honour.

Marion Best Former United Church of Canada Moderator 1994-1997