

Response of the Churches to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

Ottawa – June 2, 2015

The Anglican Church of Canada, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Roman Catholic Entities Parties to the Settlement Agreement, The United Church of Canada and the Jesuits of English Canada make the following statement in response to the findings and Calls to Action issued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

It is with gratitude and humility that we are here today to speak together as representatives of churches that participated in the operation of Indian Residential Schools. We are grateful to the Commissioners and staff of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada for the commitment with which they have carried out their mandate, and we are humbled in the knowledge that we continue to share a responsibility to ensure that the task of reconciliation does not end today.

Beginning in the 19th century and continuing until the late 1960's, our churches were partners with the Government of Canada in running Indian Residential Schools. Notwithstanding the good intent and care of many who worked in the Schools, it is clear that Indian Residential Schools, in policy and in practice, were an assault on Indigenous families, culture, language and spiritual traditions, and that great harm was done. We continue to acknowledge and regret our part in that legacy.

Those harmed were children, vulnerable, far from their families and communities. The sexual, physical, and emotional abuse they suffered is well-documented.

Over the past six years we have, along with the Commission, listened to the experiences of those former students, who are no longer children. They are adults, some very old, who tell heart-breaking stories. We have heard them speak of wounds so deep that healing could not happen, and of damage visited upon their own children. We have also heard them witness to their resilience, and that of their communities, which has made possible many healing journeys. We have heard of friendships formed in the Residential Schools in which students supported one another, sometimes for the rest of their lives. Perhaps most humbling of all, we have heard survivors speak

with enormous grace and generosity of teachers and others whose kindness offered some respite from the pain and humiliation that so deeply marked the overall experience of the schools.

We are grateful to the survivors, whose courageous witness has touched the heart of the life of our churches. There have been apologies from our churches, yet we know that our apologies are not enough. And so we are grateful as well to the Commissioners of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for their findings and for their clarity about our continuing responsibilities.

We acknowledge and welcome the specific calls to action that offer direction to the churches in our continuing commitment to reconciliation. In particular, we are committed to respect Indigenous spiritual traditions in their own right. As individual churches and in shared interfaith and ecumenical initiatives – for example through Kairos, through interfaith groups, and through the Canadian Council of Churches – we will continue to foster learning about and awareness of the reality and legacy of the residential schools, the negative impact of such past teachings as the Doctrine of Discovery, and the new ways forward found in places, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We will continue our commitment to financial support for community-controlled initiatives in healing, language and cultural revitalization, education and relationship-building, and self-determination.

We welcome the Commissioners' call to the parties to the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement for a new Covenant of Reconciliation that would renew and expand our shared commitment to the continuing work of reconciliation, and invite others into that work, including new Canadians, who, while they were not part of the historic injustice, are now part of a country in which understanding and addressing that injustice is a national priority for all Canadians.

We also welcome wider Calls to Action that include our members as citizens and residents of Canada. There is a crucial need for the kinds of public and governmental initiatives that the Commissioners identify, including the establishment of a National Council of Reconciliation that would continue to hold this work before parliament and the Canadian people.

We recognize the need for equity in access to education and health care, and the critical need for new and culturally-appropriate ways of ensuring the welfare of children who are at risk.

And we enthusiastically support the call for teaching about the history and legacy of the residential schools in all Canadian schools, and commit ourselves to ensuring that the teaching ministry of our churches also acknowledges these realities.

Above all, we welcome the Commissioners' Calls to Action as providing the basis for a wide and transformative conversation among Canadians about the better future we intend to foster, not just for Indigenous peoples, but for all of us who long to live in a society grounded in right relationships and equity. We will continue to share in the work of healing and reconciliation, respectfully following the leadership of Indigenous communities and leaders, and to offer leadership among non-Indigenous Canadians where that is appropriate.

May the Creator guide us as we continue in the work of healing, justice, and right relations for the generations it will take to address that harm "and guide this country on a new and different path".

(Remembering the Children prayer, 2008)

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