

**ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA**

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St. Mary's University  
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**“Feeling The Winds of God-Charting A New Course”**

Remarks by

**COMMISSIONER MARIE WILSON**

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

June 11, 2010

Your Grace, members of the Anglican Church leadership and family, and most especially, to any and all residential school Survivors in the room....

Let me begin by honouring you, and thanking you for the invitation to be here among you this past couple of days.

I also want to honour the Mi'kmaw people whose traditional homeland this is, and thank them, as the original stewards of this land.

I bring greetings from my fellow Commissioners, our Chair Justice Murray Sinclair of Manitoba, and my Commissioner colleague, Chief Wilton Littlechild of Alberta. We have pledged to work as a team, and so, they are here with me also in spirit.

I also bring you greetings from my family, and my home church. Both have sent me into this work with their support and blessings.

I have just come from Sydney, and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. I told them there that I

had so much Scottish blood in me that I was practically Presbyterian!

I was actually raised in the United Church of Canada, where I still worship.

I am married into the Dene Nation of the Northwest Territories, where I have spent most of the past 35 years, and so I have spent much time in ceremonies within the Roman Catholic Church that is prominent in most Dene communities.

I carry an Eagle feather as offered to me by a Mohawk elder and spiritual leader.

And I have recently been given a spirit name in a traditional Cree ceremony...

But I want you to know that after witnessing your unanimous acceptance of the resolutions brought forward by the indigenous circle of your church, and knowing the importance and potential of those resolutions in the world... I am just about ready to become adopted by the Anglicans!

As a Commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it is a great privilege to visit the various aboriginal homelands in Canada, and learn about the powerful Creation stories that exist in each of those cultures. Last year at a gathering in New Brunswick, and again this week in Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Island, I have heard about "GLOOSCAP"...one of the most important figures in Mi'kmaw mythology. Here is what I read in a little booklet I was given:

*"Given his power by the Great Spirit, Kluscap....was creator and teacher of the Mi'kmaw people. Kluscap created*

*Mi'kma'ki...the traditional name of this territory...and all its animals, giving them their shape and size. He also taught the Mi'kmaq to hunt, fish, cultivate and travel by the stars. ....When Kluscap's work was done—when he had finished creating and teaching the Mi'kmaq people—he hosted a great feast...Then he left the people, stepping into his canoe made of stone, and paddled out to sea. As he left he told them that those who lived kind and just lives would live forever beside him. No one knows where he went, but he travelled up a peaceful river where he waits until the day he returns to the people.”*

How do you hear that story? Does any of it sound familiar? I could also tell you similar stories from the Dene people, where I live, including stories of the great flood.

I mention these things because I think the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is in part an invitation for us to begin to recognize that which we could not, or would not see in the past...

....the many things that are universally sacred, in all cultures...

....beginning with the sacred bond between parent and child.

As you know, I am invited here as one of the Commissioners of Canada's first ever Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

An important part of our mandate is to help educate all

Canadians about the long history, and troubled legacy of

Indian Residential Schools.

The night before I left to come East, my little grandson Tydzeh asked to sleep overnight with me. He is so proud of the fact that he has finally, just recently, got over diapers. He is learning to talk more and more every day, but he still gets frustrated when he can't make himself understood. Later this month, little Tydzeh will be four years old.

I'm telling you this because I want you to take a minute to think about the little people in your life. And now think about this...What would you do if they came and took that little child away from you?

Probably just like you, I find that both heart-wrenching and impossible to imagine.

But we have to imagine it...if we are ever going to both understand, and *feel* the truth about residential schools. We have to imagine it, because that is what's at the heart of this story.

Legal contracts between the federal government and several of the national churches... including yours... put the churches on the front lines of operating the residential schools, under a national policy specifically designed for the

aboriginal children of this country, whether First Nations, Inuit, or Métis.

The stated purpose was to assimilate and Christianize the aboriginal children...“to remove the Indian from the child”. How? By removing the child from the negative influence of their heathen parents.

Some of the little ones taken away were only three or four years old...the youngest I have heard of was two.

They were kept in isolated school residences, usually many miles from their homes, for months and sometimes years at a time.

Communication with family was restricted, limited or non-existent, and sometimes denied as punishment.

In the early years of the schools, parents who tried to keep their children or take them back could be sent to jail.

Laws were passed to prevent public gatherings and protest...and they lost their right to vote.

(They didn't get that right back until 1960.)

I know about the legacy of the schools from 25 years of reporting on northern and aboriginal issues in various roles at CBC-Radio Canada and other media outlets.

I also know about it from my experience as the wife of a former student.

For years my husband could not talk about his school experiences, especially those that included abuse.

Instead, he, like so many others we have heard from, denied that anything happened to them.

- They denied it because they were ashamed;
- Because they thought it only happened to them;
- Because they thought it was their fault;
- Because they believed what they were told... that they were bad.
- Because when they tried to tell someone as a child, they got further punished.
- Because they thought no one would believe them.

As TRC Commissioners we are hearing from many former students, generally known as “Survivors”.

Here are some of the things we’ve heard:

Why could they not accept us for who we are?

Why did they have to make us feel inferior, guilty and dirty?

Why did they make us feel ashamed of our own parents, and our own ways?

Why did they tell us to stand over here and pray...and then when we closed our eyes they stole our land.

In Alice Blondin-Perrin's recent book about her school experiences, here's what she says:

...I lost my native language for the rest of my life....I became ashamed of who I was and ashamed of being an Indian.”

More and more we hear about the residential schools as ‘a dark chapter in our history’. I don't think we should understate it....

It was almost our entire history as a country, with some schools in place before Canada formed in 1867, and the last schools closed only in 1996.... That's one long chapter!

The key thing is that it is our shared history. It belongs to all of us.

And this is what it was about:

- Public policy targeting the original peoples of our country...sanctioned by the major churches of the day...based on the perceived superiority of one race of people over another

Some schools and some periods were harsher than others.

And many *good* things did also come out of the schools:

kind and devoted teachers, outstanding sports teams, and lifelong friendships and love lives.

But at great cost...

The schools also left behind...the so-called intergenerational impacts.

Again, here is what Alice Blondin-Perrin says about that:

“I was hurt and humiliated many times without the ability to properly explain myself to anyone. My voice was silent. My thoughts and feelings were hurt many times resulting with hatred...which I never exposed but kept it inside of me feeling rage but unable to express it to anyone....

...The dynamics of abuse were left to the parents and the villages as a whole to take care of, with no strategic planning or proper communications, or any idea of what to do about the dysfunctions. All the Dene settlements were ill-equipped to handle English Dene children like me. The language



barrier for the kids and parents was just the first of the problems.

The long-term impacts are still here today: mental problems, jealousy, possessiveness, emotional turmoil, low self-esteem, violence, corporal punishment, sexual assaults, and the pervasive loss of spirituality. Even Catholicism is waning in many communities. The stigma of everything that happened to us remains in our minds forever and in many cases is visited upon the next generation....”

As we know, Canada now admits the residential school policy was wrong.....Two years ago, in a formal Apology on June 11, 2008, Canada said it was sorry for all these things, including various forms of abuse that many students experienced while at the schools.

This includes a still-unknown number of dead and missing children estimated in the thousands...those who never made it home.

The Government’s Apology came more than a decade after the first Apologies from the Churches...

And after a decade of growing lawsuits from former students in the 1980’s and 90’s.

These eventually led to the largest class action out-of-court settlement in Canadian history.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or TRC, was created as just one element of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement.

This is one of the things that makes the Canadian TRC unique in the world of Truth Commissions:

- not established by government; independent
- mandate developed by all the Parties to the agreement...the plaintiffs, and defendants
- accountable to the Parties (federal government; Catholic, Anglican, United and Presbyterian churches; Survivors, AFN, ITK)
- only Commission specifically focused on systemic harms done to children...of specific ethnic background.

The TRC is a profound opportunity for Canada to come to know itself in a new way, to redefine itself, in respectful relations with *all* the founding nations officially recognized in the highest law in our land; the Constitution of Canada.

That law, the Constitution, says we have three founding nations: the French; the English; *and* the Aboriginal peoples of Canada; specifically, First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

This is Canada's chance to breathe new life into the spirit of what our very highest law says...

...a chance to see the Treaties signed between the founding nations of our country as sacred covenants, intended to bind us together in relationships of respectful co-existence.

In a true spirit of Reconciliation, we can come to understand that we are *all* Treaty people.

Our Truth and Reconciliation Commission has several specific parts to its Mandate:

1. It has to Research and compile the full truth about what happened at the schools, and the lasting impacts they have had on those who experienced them, as students, teachers, workers, and on their families and communities... and on our country as a whole.

2. We are asked to document and write a Report on that history...both the **written records** from the government and the churches, and new **oral history** to be recorded and written from the voices of those who attended or worked at the schools and their families.

3. We are asked to support **Community Events** across the country and to organize **Seven** major **National Events**....

These are intended to:

- create opportunities to educate Canadian society about this part of its history,
- to consider the lessons to be learned from it, and
- to inspire meaningful reconciliation for individuals, families, communities, and between and among the aboriginal nations and the non-aboriginal citizens of our country.

The first of the National Events will be next week in Winnipeg (June 16-19).

Next June, the second event will be in Inuvik, NWT.

The third event, in fall of 2011, will be here in the Maritimes.

All National Events are open to the public.

The success of each one will depend in very large part to the active participation and support of all the Parties to the Agreement, and on the essential, ever-growing circle of participation from *all* Canadians...

4. We are asked to oversee the distribution of a 20-million-dollar **Commemoration fund**, and to establish a **National Research Centre**, so that the history of the schools, and the memory of those who went, and sometimes died there, will never be forgotten by our country.

We have a huge job ahead of us, and we need everyone in this room to pay attention, to become involved, and to help us reach out to involve others.

One of the most common questions we get, especially from non-Aboriginal Canadians, is ‘What can We Do?’ ‘How Can We Help?’

- We know there is strong leadership in this Church that is already committed, and doing great work. We encourage you to turn to them...Esther, Larry, Mark, Henriette, for information, ideas, and resources.
- We know there is strong leadership in Aboriginal communities right across the country. Get to know that leadership if you don't already, to explore together what

Reconciliation might look like where you live, for today and the future.

- Accept you may not get forgiveness...in spite of your heartfelt apology as a church....Forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing.
- Be patient. Don't tire of the story...and keep telling it to others. You are all, in your own worlds, people of influence.
- Stay in touch with our work at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Get involved as much as you can. Our new improved website is simplified, to make it more user friendly...

[www.trc.ca](http://www.trc.ca)

- Support our eventual recommendations. Make this imperative for our country.
- Gear up for the long haul. Reconciliation will not come overnight.

Last night your Lutheran sister made a point of saying she would avoid the temptation of making remarks based on your maritime theme...

I had a different reaction.

First of all, seeing all those cute sail boats waiting so patiently in their little centre-piece dry docks on your tables out there, it seemed a little unfair not to put them to some further purpose and work them into my remarks!

Secondly, I thought, well the Anglicans can't be that different from the Presbyterians after all! Because their theme was "*Sailing Into The Future*". Yours is "*Feeling the Winds of God- Charting a New Course*".

Most importantly, though, I want to refer to your theme because it... like the Presbyterian theme... reminds me of one of my earliest moments as a Commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

It was last August in Kamloops British Columbia.

I was sitting in an outdoor sharing circle...

...School Survivors, school workers, and church leadership all together...listening to each other...some for the first time...in a new way.

It was a penetrating, hot day.

At one point a beautiful, cooling wind blew through the circle.

Everyone felt it. Everyone noticed.

After a moment, an aboriginal elder spoke up. Here's what she had to say:

'In our traditional ways, we don't have a building called Church. Our sacred place is all of this...it is all of Creation....

...That wind blowing through our circle now is the work of the Creator...sending its Spirit to us on the Wind... to make its presence known as it works amongst us.'

Her message was just as your theme suggests.

We need good winds to move us forward.

So may your sails be filled with those strong and gentle winds of Spirit.

Last evening your Primate Fred Hiltz said so clearly and powerfully that we face "a world that is in need of healing and hope and action".

Your theme is also about that...

It is about change...about moving from one place...and one way of being... to another.



We are *all* on that journey, together.

May it take us from that humble place of Truth...to that hopeful place of Reconciliation, recognizing it as a gift of Spirit.

And as we chart that new course, may our country be guided by, and take its bearings from, a new and truer kind of compass...

...a compass of Respect and right relations, between all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples...

The TRC will continue to work with you to navigate this new course

...For the sake of the child taken...

...And the parent left behind...

And for all our relations,

As the Dene and Inuit people say where my family lives...

Mahsi Cho...and Quanna.

As my Ojibwe and Cree TRC brothers say... Meegwetch... and Hy Hy.

As I have learned to say this week from the Mi'kmaq people here...Welalin.

As I learned in school...Merci beaucoup.

And as I learned in my own childhood home, with my own parents who got to raise me...Thank you very much. Thanks be...