Sorry.

Why Our Church Apologized.

Maggie McLeod, Stan McKay,
Bill Phipps & Carolyn Pogue

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One surprising year, the United Church of Canada people did just that. The church has members in Newfoundland, Yukon and everywhere in between. The people who attend have Asian, Indigenous, African and European ancestry – Canadians are from everywhere!

This is the story of why the United Church people apologized for the suffering caused by Indian Residential Schools.

Wood Lake

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GOLD

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Dedication

For the Children of Yesterday,
Today, and Tomorrow

THE AUTHORS

Stanley McKay was born on Fisher River Reserve, a Cree community. He attended Birtle Indian Residential School, then went to Teachers College to become a teacher. Later he went to the University of Winnipeg to obtain a degree in Theology and worked with the United Church of Canada. He was Moderator from 1992 to 1994. He is married, with three grown children and enjoys fishing in the creek with his three grandchildren.

Maggie McLeod is a Cree woman from the Treaty 4 area (Peepeekisis First Nation) She grew up in Saskatchewan, then moved to Saugeen Ojibwa Territory (Ontario) where she raised daughters Nancy and Natasha. The United Church of Canada has been important in Maggie's life. She is an intergenerational survivor of the residential school system. Maggie's father Wilfred Dieter attended File Hills Residential School and his parents, Fred Dieter and Marybelle Cote, attended Regina Industrial School. Maggie loves to spend time with her grandchildren Whitney, Isaac, Cayson, and Jack, and take long walks with her camera.

Bill Phipps grew up in Toronto, Ontario. He became a lawyer, teacher, minister and served the United Church in Toronto, Edmonton and Calgary. He was Moderator from 1997 to 2000. He loves canoeing, the Blue Jays, hiking, and reading. He's active in Climate Justice, Right Relations, Calgary Peace Prize. He enjoys playing catch with his children and grandchildren who live in Yellowknife, Winnipeg and Toronto. www.billphipps.ca

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The staff at Wood Lake Publishing, who know how to fast dance.

Sometimes it is not so hard to say *sorry*. Sometimes it is very hard. What matters most is meaning it when you say it.

You likely know what it's like to say *sorry* and mean it. You likely remember a time when someone said *sorry* to you. You might remember hearing news that a car manufacturer or a food producer said *sorry* about a big mistake. Maybe you've heard about a church saying *sorry* as well.

One surprising year, the United Church of Canada people did just that. The church has members in Newfoundland, Yukon, and everywhere in between. It's a Canadian church and the people who attend have Asian, Indigenous, African and European ancestry – Canadians are from everywhere! The United Church is one church made up of many congregations. Possibly there is a United Church of Canada in your own community.

This is the story of why the United Church people apologized.

The Early Connections

Soon after Confederation in 1867, the Canadian government had an idea of how to build up our country. They wanted Canada to stretch from sea to sea to sea, and they wanted to fill the land with settlers. They hoped to have a nation of people who would make farms, start ranches, dig mines, and build factories. The government people thought it would be a good thing to encourage everyone to be the same; that is, like them. They wanted Canadians to speak only English or French. They wanted everyone to honour the Queen of England. The government people wanted all people to dress, think, and worship God as they did, and enjoy the same sports, music, and art.

But the Indigenous peoples who lived in Canada didn't fit with those descriptions. They dressed differently. Women did not lace themselves into corsets or wear stiff leather

Whitewood, Saskatchewan, circa 1940, UCCA, 93.049P/116

Norway House, Manitoba, circa 1910, UCCA, 93.049P/1261N

shoes. Men did not work in offices or factories. Indigenous peoples enjoyed foods from the land that were different. They had spiritual traditions that honoured Creator God and their connection to land and to all life. They spoke many different languages, rather than English or French.

The government saw these differences as a problem to solve. They wrote treaties. A treaty is an agreement between nations. Indigenous peoples who signed the treaties believed that they were peace agreements between nations that would benefit everyone. The government believed that the treaties gave them special power over Indigenous people. From the beginning, these different understandings about treaties caused many problems about how to live together.

The government forced Indigenous peoples in much of Canada to live on reserves. The government created laws that gave themselves many advantages. One law prevented Indigenous people from voting in Canadian government elections. One law divided "Status Indian" from "Métis" and gave different rules for each. Laws controlled how Indigenous people farmed, sold produce, or made a living. One law made it a crime for people to leave reserves without permission. These laws were eventually changed. But one law lasted a long time. It caused huge problems. It concerned children.

Treaties and Residential Schools

Treaty agreements included a promise by government to provide education for Indigenous children. The schools were meant to make the children be like the settler people. Some were day schools. One hundred and thirty were residential schools. This meant that children had to leave their parents, their homes, and their pets for ten months of each year and live at the school. Over the generations, about 150,000 children attended these schools.

Norway House, Manitoba, between 1916 and 1921,
UCCA, 93.049P/1269N

Norway House, Manitoba, circa 1950, UCCA, 93.049P/1243

The government asked the Anglican, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and Methodist churches to run the schools. (In 1925, the United Church of Canada took over the responsibility for Methodist and some Presbyterian schools.) The Roman Catholics ran 79 schools, the Presbyterians ran two, the Anglicans ran 36, and the United Church ran 16. The last United Church residential school closed in 1969. The last residential school in Canada closed in 1996.

The government wanted the Indigenous children to be taught so that they would forget their own languages, stories, dances, and songs. They wanted the children to forget their understanding of how God was present within them and within their communities. In essence, they wanted the children to forget their identities. At that time, the church people believed that assimilation was a good thing and that they were helping Indigenous peoples "move into the future."

The government gave money to the churches to hire teachers and buy food, school desks, clothing, and so on. Church people also sent money to the schools. But usually there wasn't enough money to run the schools properly. Students often had to farm or garden to raise their food. They were often hungry. School shoes and clothes often didn't fit properly or were not warm enough.

Some teachers and supervisors were kind; they wanted the best for the students. Some were mean. Some wrote official letters to the government saying that the residential schools were a bad idea. The letters told stories of neglect and abuse. Unfortunately the letter writers were not believed, and some were even fired from their jobs.

For generations, Indigenous children were forced to leave their families to attend residential schools. Some travelled great distances by ship, truck, or railway. Some Indigenous children died at the schools; nearly 6000 never went home again. Although some went on to live happy lives, many felt

Brandon, Manitoba, 1902, UCCA, 93.049P/1363bS

Red Deer, Alberta, 1919, UCCA, 93.049P/855N

ashamed, angry, or sad for many years. Experiences of childhood last a lifetime.

Most Canadians did not know about these schools because the schools were located in places far removed from larger towns and cities. Canadians did not understand or didn't know what was going on. Not many people thought about how wrong it was to take children away from their parents, grandparents, and communities.

Over the years, non-Native church people began to catch glimpses of what had been lost by not honouring the culture and wisdom of Indigenous peoples. They also began to understand how racism was not something happening just in other countries; it was also right here in Canada. Along with other churches, the United Church took part in environmental and social justice actions. For example church people stood against the proposed Mackenzie Valley pipeline because they learned from the Dene that the pipeline would be dangerous to Earth and to the communities along the pipeline route. Through relationships like this, non-Native church people began to work with and learn from Indigenous peoples, both inside and outside church.

Growing Awareness and the *Sorry* Feeling

By 1986, United Church people were ready to say *sorry* for not listening before. The United Church of Canada leader, Moderator Reverend Bob Smith, said these words at a national church meeting in Sudbury, Ontario:

"Long before my people journeyed to this land your people were here, and you received from your Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that

was deep, and rich, and to be treasured.

We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you of the good news of Jesus Christ we were closed to the value of your spirituality.

We confused Western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ. We imposed our civilization as a condition for accepting the gospel.

We tried to make you be like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were. As a result you, and we, are poorer, and the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred, and we are not what we are meant by God to be.

We ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the Spirit of Christ so that our peoples may be blessed and God's creation healed."

When Reverend Smith said those words to Elder Edith Memnook, she hugged him and said, "Thank you. I've waited my whole life to hear those words." Yet she did not say, "We forgive you." She and the Elders wanted to know more about what the church meant by sorry. She wanted to know if non-Native church people would repent, which means to turn away from what is harmful and turn toward what is good. Elder Memnook said that she and other Indigenous peoples in our churches would help us. This began a very exciting time to be in the United Church.

From *Sorry* to Right Relations

Non-Native church people went to workshops to learn about Native spirituality. They began listening. They learned about the effects of residential schools. They read books. They

watched videos and films about living in right relationships with people, Earth, and all beings. They sat in circles, listening to one another and working together to make things right. They raised money for the church Healing Fund. Indigenous communities use this very important fund to reclaim culture and language that were lost during their years at residential schools.

In 1992, the elected church leader was Moderator Reverend Stan McKay, from Fisher River Cree Nation, Manitoba. He had attended a residential school, and he had been a teacher before becoming a minister. He knew that text books and literature did not contain the whole truth of Canadian history. He helped the United Church learn a bigger history.

Willie Blackwater was sent as a child to the Port Alberni Indian Residential School on Vancouver Island. In 1994, he said, "Canada needs to know what happened in the school." It takes courage to speak out and let others know that something is wrong. Willie's bravery led him to tell stories of how frightened he was as a child because of the abuses he experienced, and how that affected him even as a grown-up. Willie went to court. He wanted a judge and jury to know about these stories. Newspapers wrote articles about his testimony. Radio and television reporters spread the story. Then other brave former students began to come forward to tell their stories too. The stories were very hard to tell and very hard to hear.

People across Canada were shocked. What would it be like to have our children taken away? Did our government really do this? Were the churches really involved? Were the stories true? Were the schools so terrible? Did students actually die at these schools?

Sometimes when we hear a scary story, we want to cover our ears. If a story makes us feel guilty, we might become angry. If we think that the truth of that story will cause us to lose something precious, we might say that the storyteller

Red Deer, Alberta, circa 1900, UCCA, 93.049P/839

Chilliwack, British Columbia, circa 1920, UCCA, 93.049P/419

is lying. But sometimes, when stories are hard to hear, we just feel sad and want to listen.

When churches started hearing all the stories about kids being hurt, hungry, or beaten, people felt sad about all of those things. No one wanted to believe that United Church people had helped run schools that hurt families and children. But we had to believe it because it was true. Church people remembered how Jesus taught that the truth will set us free, and we wanted freedom from sadness, guilt, and anger.

The United Church people believed that they especially needed to say sorry for hurt caused by these schools. In 1998, the elected church leader, Moderator Reverend Bill Phipps, delivered these words:

"On behalf of the United Church of Canada, I apologize for the pain and suffering that our involvement in the Indian Residential School system has caused. We are aware of some of the damage caused by this cruel system of assimilation. We are truly and most humbly sorry. We are sorry that some students were abused in these schools ... We know that many within our church will still not understand why each of us must bear the scar, the blame, for this horrendous period in Canadian history. But the truth is, we are the bearers of many blessings from our ancestors, and therefore, we must also bear their burdens ..."

Since then, whenever they are invited, Moderators, former Moderators, and other church leaders visit communities to listen, learn, and offer the Apology in the hopes of building the type of relationship God wants for us.

That is why the United Church people said sorry. That is why other churches have said sorry too. We are part of a long history of misdeeds that hurt many of the people whose ancestors welcomed settlers to this land. Church people want

to live in right relationship now. This means living with respect, wisdom, love, humility, truth, honesty, and courage.

By 2007, there were more and more law suits by former residential school students against the government and the churches. How could the government and the churches settle these? The court brought together Indigenous people, church and government representatives, and lawyers to find a solution. They reached "The Settlement Agreement." This laid out a plan to create a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Commission's tasks were to make sure that Canadians could learn the true history of our country and to find ways to reconcile. To reconcile means to make peace or to bring back together again.

In 2008, the government of Canada invited Inuit, Métis, and First Nation leaders to Ottawa. On June 11, in front of everyone in the House of Commons (in fact, in front of all Canada), on behalf of the government, the prime minister also said *sorry*. Many church people were present to witness this historic event.

From 2009 until 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission travelled all around Canada. Chief Willie Littlechild, Dr. Marie Wilson, and Justice Murray Sinclair served as commissioners. Their job was to listen to stories about what happened in the residential schools. They listened to thousands of former students, teachers, and workers. The United Church of Canada helped to support this important work so that everyone would know the true history of our land.

In 2012, Aboriginal ministries in the United Church asked that the church crest be changed. The new crest has the colours of the medicine wheel and includes the Mohawk phrase *Akwe Nia'Tetewá:neren* (aw gway nyah day day waw nay renh), which means "all my relations." These changes help to show that the church respects Indigenous peoples.

Saying sorry is one step in the healing journey for Canada. This is an exciting time for our country. The next step is up to each of us. We are all in this together.

Some Things to Think About

What do you do when someone apologizes to you?

•

How can you tell when an apology is real?

•

What did Jesus say about *sorry*?

•

What do you do after you say *sorry*?

•

How do you celebrate National Aboriginal Day in your community?

Appendix 1

A letter from Stan McKay, teacher, ordained minister, former Moderator of the United Church of Canada, and former Residential School student.

My name is Stan McKay and I am a Cree person. Growing up on the Fisher River Reserve, along the western shore of Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba, our family made our own living 65 years ago. My mother had a garden, she milked a cow, and we had a few chickens for eggs. She sewed our clothes, and our neighbor made beaded moosehide slippers and mitts for us to wear. We had no road into our village, but there was a small store where we could buy flour, salt, tea, and oil for our lamps. My father was often away from home fishing, hunting, and trapping. He built the small log houses we lived in. We lived near my grandparents and we had many relatives living nearby.

I walked two kilometres to a school that my parents had also attended. It was near a mission church that became a part of the United Church of Canada. I knew my grandmother and grandfather had spent their entire childhood in a residential school but they never talked about it. When I finished grade eight in the Fisher River School, I was told I had to go to a residential school, which was 500 kilometres away. I was there for five years. It was a time of great loneliness and I had some very painful experiences.

Even after spending most of her childhood in a residential school, my grandmother was an active member of the United Church, and she encouraged me to become a minister. Her name was Louise and she taught me about being respectful of all people. She and other members of my family helped me survive the residential school experience, but healing is a lifelong journey.

I became a school teacher after I left the residential school and I taught for three years in Cree Indian day schools in northern Manitoba. Then I returned to spend six years in university, and in 1971 I became a United Church minister. I returned to work in Cree United churches in Manitoba, including seven years in my birthplace at Fisher River. In 1991 friends asked that I let my name stand in nomination for the position of Moderator of the United Church of Canada. I was elected as Moderator in August of 1992.

I learned that many of the United Church congregations did not know about Indigenous peoples and did not understand how we feel inside. Many people wanted to change us to be like them, but we have our own stories and ways of prayer.

My dream for children today is that you may learn to care for each other and understand that we are all related to each other. The United Church crest now has “All My Relations” printed on it, which means that we are related to each other and to all of creation. There is great joy in sharing life with thanksgiving and I wish you would dance on the earth in large circles that include everyone.

Appendix 2

Apology to Former Students of United Church Indian Residential Schools, and to their Families and Communities.

As Moderator of The United Church of Canada, I wish to speak the words that many people have wanted to hear for a very long time. On behalf of The United Church of Canada, I apologize for the pain and suffering that our church's involvement in the Indian Residential School system has caused. We are aware of some of the damage that this cruel and ill-conceived system of assimilation has perpetrated on Canada's First Nations peoples. For this we are truly and most humbly sorry.

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.

We know that many within our church will still not understand why each of us must bear the scar, the blame, for this horrendous period in Canadian history. But the truth is, we are the bearers of many blessings from our ancestors, and therefore, we must also bear their burdens.

Our burdens include dishonouring the depths of the struggles of First Nations peoples and the richness of your gifts. We seek God's forgiveness and healing grace as we take steps toward building respectful, compassionate, and loving relationships with First Nations peoples.

We are in the midst of a long and painful journey as we reflect on the cries that we did not or would not hear, and how we have behaved as a church. As we travel this difficult

road of repentance, reconciliation, and healing, we commit ourselves to work toward ensuring that we will never again use our power as a church to hurt others with attitudes of racial and spiritual superiority.

We pray that you will hear the sincerity of our words today and that you will witness the living out of our apology in our actions in the future.

The Right Rev. Bill Phipps
Moderator of The United Church of Canada
October 1998

Appendix 3

United Church-run Schools

Appendix 4

Project of Heart

Schools and church schools throughout Canada are using the Project of Heart curriculum to help this generation learn about the history of Canada.

Project of Heart is an educational tool kit designed to engage students in a deeper exploration of indigenous traditions in Canada and the history of Indian residential schools. It is a journey for understanding through the heart and spirit as well as through facts and dates.

Project of Heart was started by Sylvia Smith, a teacher in Ottawa, Ontario. She wanted to commemorate the lives of the thousands of Indigenous children who died as a result of the residential school experience. Elders from First Nation, Metis, and Inuit communities become regular participants in classroom presentations and discussions. Some classes also invite church representatives to share their knowledge of how and why the churches helped to run the schools and to talk about the Apologies.

To learn more about the project, videos and a list of recommended resources, please visit:

www.projectofheart.ca

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Wood Lake is proud of its long association with the United Church of Canada. It has provided publication and learning resources to hundreds of United Churches and has partnered with UCC in the publication of the *More Voices* hymnal.