



About 500 attended the event.



“Young Thunder” led music for a Round Dance.

Remembering the Children tour recalls hurt caused by residential schools policy –

Saskatoon event held March 9, 2008 at Western Development Museum

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

Photos by Tim Yaworski

On Sunday, March 9, 2008, about 500 people attended the Saskatoon portion of a national “*Remembering the Children*” tour of Aboriginal and church leaders held as a promotion and preparation for a much-anticipated Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Establishment of the commission is one element of an Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement reached between the government, churches and Aboriginal organizations in 2006. Once it is established, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will spend five years promoting public education and awareness about the Indian Residential School system and its legacy, as well as providing former students, families and communities with an opportunity to share their experiences.

Aboriginal leaders joined church leaders from the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, and United Church denominations in the “*Remembering the Children*” tour, which also included stops in Ottawa (March 2), Vancouver (March 7) and Winnipeg (March 10).

Rev. Dr. Jan Bigland-Pritchard of the Prairie Centre for Ecumenism, which hosted the Saskatoon stop March 9, opened the event with words of greeting, and Elders Ethel and Hector Ahenekeew led the gathering in prayer.

Hector Ahenekeew described how he had been asked to arrive early at the Western Development Museum venue to lead a traditional smudging ceremony. “When my dad was young and starting school this was looked down upon,” he said of the ceremony. “How things have changed. To see the bishops come up for smudging, it was really something. I want to thank them for smudging and not looking down on it.”



Ethel & Hector Ahenekeew



Alison Uitti

Alison Uitti performed a song entitled “We Are All Treaty People,” which she wrote after learning about the history of what has happened to Aboriginal peoples in this country.

Bigland-Pritchard noted that as participants entered the building, someone was distributing a note calling the whole truth and reconciliation process into question. Such skepticism is perhaps understandable, she said, but added that organizers were optimistic that the Remembering the Children event would renew hope in the reconciliation process.

Bigland-Pritchard encouraged participants to take away resources and reading material available at the event, including a 423-page book “From Truth to Reconciliation” published by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.



Speakers at the *Remembering the Children* Tour in Saskatoon.

David MacDonald, the United Church's Special Advisor on residential schools, and one of the organizers of the event, said that originally Saskatoon was not one of the stops planned on the cross-country Remembering the Children tour, but organizers heard overwhelming requests that Saskatchewan be included.

David MacDonald invited all survivors of Residential Schools attending the gathering to stand and be acknowledged. "When we say we are 'Remembering the Children', we are remembering you and all those who attended with you, and to truly respect and honour your experience."

Councillor Pat Lorje of the city of Saskatoon brought words of welcome. "It's important as we go on this venture of healing and honoring the children, it's important that we remember that we are all of us treaty people."

Chief Lawrence Joseph of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations welcomed the tour to Treaty 6 territory on behalf of 122,000 registered status Indian people, and on behalf of all First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples

Church and state must work together, Joseph asserted. "We ask for your prayers that we will get something out of this and we will come out with truth and reconciliation in the loving way that the creator has willed for us."

During the Remembering the Children tour, Aboriginal and church leaders spoke poignantly about the history and the legacy of the Indian Residential Schools, and of policies of assimilation.



Chief Lawrence Joseph

Between 1857 and 1969, thousands of First Nations, Métis and Inuit children were removed from their homes and families and taken to Indian Residential Schools. The schools established across Canada by the federal government were staffed and administered by church organizations, including Roman Catholic dioceses and religious orders, Anglican, Presbyterian and United Churches. Children attending the schools were forced to relinquish their language and culture, and family ties were broken, sometimes forever. In the process, many endured physical, emotional or sexual abuse.

Chief Lawrence Joseph said that he has seen first hand the devastation caused by the Residential Schools. "The devastation that occurred behind those so called institutions is still alive and well today," Joseph said, describing how the intergenerational effects can still be seen in addictions, in dependency, in the children on the street, and in the prisons.

When media outlets covering First Nations issues “tell us it’s got nothing to do with treaties, it’s got nothing to do with residential schools, well think again. That intergenerational pain and suffering that is caused by the things that happened here in Canada are still alive and well today.”

Chief Joseph said that when news of the tour and of the Truth and Reconciliation process came out, members of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations were at first reluctant to participate, in light of so many past failures, broken promises and let downs. However, he said he has discovered sincerity in the words of church leaders. “I was truly impressed by the speeches that were given and I pray to God that the speeches that were given will not be just words.”

Joseph called for a process of reconciliation that includes the righting of wrongs, and resources being put to rebuild lives that have been ruined, and to rebuild First Nations communities suffering third world conditions. “We’re not asking for pity. We’re asking for acknowledgment and understanding.” He called for living up to the true spirit of the treaties, which pledged that people would walk together so that all would thrive.

Rev. Mark MacDonald, National Indigenous Anglican Bishop, related the residential school experiences of a friend, taken from family and home as a child, and he described some of the conditions she endured. “But the real pain came later, when she realized she has no home to go to ... not only were they taken from their home, but they were forced to live in such a way that it made it impossible for many of them to return home,” he said.

Church involvement in the residential schools was not a momentary lapse, Rev. Mark MacDonald said. “It was a denial of who we were. It was a denial of our deepest commitments, of our fondest hopes, and of the promises we made to the people of the land when we as church entered into this area.”

He said the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its process “is first and foremost to find a way to welcome the survivors home” and also a way for those institutions that took part to “return home” to their deepest ideals. “We have to acknowledge that the strength of our future is totally dependent upon remembering these children.”

Ted Quwezance, executive director of the National Residential School Survivors' Society, related his own experience, encouraging his listeners to think of a beloved child or grandchild as they heard his story of being taken away from his grandparents. “That’s all I had was my grandparents, and the government of Canada, Indian Affairs, came and dragged me away from my grandpa and they told my grandpa ‘if you don’t let this little boy go, you’ll be going to jail.’”

Sexually abused from the age of five to the age of 11 by those in positions of trust, he told of the devastation of eventually revealing his experiences to his family, to his wife and five daughters. He also related the trauma of going through disclosure in court, and

of being called a liar. "I'm still here. And many many survivors across the country are still here."

He said the legacy of the Residential Schools continues to haunt our society. "A lot of people were institutionalized when they were little boys and little girls, and they graduated into the correctional centres, into the penitentiaries. That's why they're there today," Quwezance said.

"We are now in a process of reconciliation," he said, noting that will be a different process for each individual. However, he expressed hope that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission would assist in healing, and help in raising public awareness about what happened in this country.

Although it may not be perfect, the 2006 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement has now been reached, and common experience payments are going into the hands of survivors, Quwezance said. Elders are investing money in their grandchildren and children, "and many of our survivors have spent that money really well. They have injected those dollars into their local economies and benefited cities in and around this country."

However, money will not bring about healing, he stressed, calling for a true process of reconciliation. "A million dollars will never take the pain or the memory away," he said, describing the hurt of hearing statements about "there go the Indians again, getting more money."



Ted Quwezance

Ensuring that the truth about the Residential Schools be told is an important part of the agreement, Quwezance said. "What has happened to us as little boys and little girls in those residential schools is one of the best kept secrets in this country," he said. "I personally ask each and every one to follow, to read the information. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission will be coming and we have to tell our stories."

Church representatives each described their denomination's involvement in the Residential School system, and shared apologies and words of regret with the gathering (*see related article below*).

Speakers representing different church organizations included Rev. Dr. Hans Kouwenberg, Moderator of the 133rd General Assembly, The Presbyterian Church in Canada; Rev. Dr. David Giuliano, 39th Moderator of The United Church of Canada; Most Rev. Fred Hiltz, Primate, the Anglican Church of Canada; Most Rev. Albert LeGatt, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon; Most Rev. Sylvain Lavoie, OMI, Archbishop of Keewatin-Le Pas, and Sr. Rita Bisson, PM.

The Saskatoon event included a performance by the choirs of Mayfair United and St. Andrew's Presbyterian churches, and by the drumming group "Young Thunder" who led the gathering in a Round Dance following a supper held to conclude the evening.

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Participants in Remembering the Children Tour in Saskatoon March 9, 2008 call for a government apology for Indian Residential Schools policy

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

SASKATOON - It's time for the government of Canada to apologize for the Indian Residential Schools, said several participants in a cross-country "Remembering the Children" tour of Aboriginal and church leaders.

The tour stopped in Saskatoon March 9, 2008 as part of its one-week, four-city program to highlight the need to move forward with the national Truth and Reconciliation Commission, one of the planks in a Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement ratified in May 2006.

Church organizations that staffed and administered the schools – including the national Anglican, Presbyterian and United Churches, as well as a number of Roman Catholic congregations and dioceses – have issued apologies, speakers explained to some 500 people attending the Saskatoon event. However, the government of Canada, which launched the Indian Residential Schools as the tool of a national assimilation policy, has never formally apologized.

"The government of this country, the Prime Minister of this country, has got to stand up and take responsibility and apologize to survivors," said Ted Quewezance, executive director of the National Residential School Survivors' Society.

His call was echoed by Chief Lawrence Joseph of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, and by Rev. Fred Hiltz, Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada.



“What’s happened in the last 10 to 15 years is that all the major churches that were involved as agents of that policy of assimilation have stepped up to the plate and confessed our failures,” said Hiltz. “The challenge we now want to put to the government is that it is time for you to step up to the plate to make an apology to the First Nations, Inuit and Métis people.”

Leaders address a news conference.

Quewezance noted that the churches have taken responsibility, and in organizing the “Remembering the Children” tour are also working to raise awareness. The words of regret spoken by church leaders on the national tour that began in Ottawa March 2 ring true, Quewezance said. “I got very very emotional as each one got up in the national capital of this country, saying the wrongs that were done to little boys and girls across this country. The sincerity is there,” he said.

Quewezance also urged the government to get going with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which has not yet been established. Raising awareness about the legacy of the Indian Residential Schools and providing a forum for former students, families and communities to share their stories will be an important part of the healing process, Quewezance said. “We have to tell our stories for the simple reason that our stories must never be forgotten: so that our grandchildren and the general public can get educated about what really happened in those schools.”

Quewezance also called on church leaders and their congregations to continue walking on the healing journey. “I know some people in different congregations do not want to hear about this. But it’s something we’ve got to talk about, it’s part of our history,” he said.

Rev. Dr. David Giuliano, moderator of the United Church of Canada, said he has been shocked to realize how few Canadians know about or understand the Indian Residential School system. The main purpose of this tour is to call non-Aboriginal Canadians to an awareness of the schools and of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he said.

“But it’s not enough for the truth to be told. There have to be people who are willing to listen and to be transformed by what they hear,” Giuliano stressed.



Church leaders pledged to work for reconciliation.

There are some 80,000 former students of Indian Residential Schools still alive in Canada, Giuliano said. “It is so important to remember those who are not living as we enter into this process of truth and reconciliation; those who did not get to hear an apology from their church or their government; to remember those who did not get to tell their truth to a commission.”

Representatives of the four church communities participating in the tour spoke about the history of church-run Residential Schools in Saskatchewan: eight operated by Roman Catholic religious organizations, including the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate

and different women’s religious orders; five run by the Anglican Church of Canada; and two operated by the Presbyterian Church, which were transferred to the United Church of Canada when it was formed in 1925.

Saskatoon Bishop Albert LeGatt summarized the history of Catholic involvement in Indian Residential Schools, which involved some 50 Catholic organizations and entities across Canada.

“I wish to express my deep regret and deep sadness over the loss of culture and language and spiritual values experienced by many who attended these residential schools,” LeGatt said, “and for the sense of hurt and loss this brought about. And I am especially saddened by hearing about individual cases of abuse: physical and sexual.”



Bishop Albert LeGatt

LeGatt also noted that many priests, brothers and sisters served with devotion, working to educate children within a system that was flawed from the outset. “My hope is that we will find together, in listening to each other, in dialogue and in renewed efforts to build relationship, a way to reconciliation and healing.”

Rev. Sylvain Lavoie, OMI, Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Keewatin-Le Pas also apologized for the loss of culture, language, parenting skills and family life that happened through the Residential Schools.

“For the wrong doing, the physical abuse, the sexual abuse committed by any of the personnel who staffed the schools and for the harm this caused the children and their families. I am deeply sorry. I apologize. I ask forgiveness,” Lavoie said.



Archbishop Lavoie

However, Lavoie also acknowledged that many members of religious organizations did their best to provide care within that flawed system. “Such persons helped many, at least in our diocese, to have a positive experience at residential schools.”

Sr. Rita Bisson, PM, then detailed some of the healing initiatives being undertaken by the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary.

“The Anglican Church of Canada was complicit in a program that took children far from homes and their families, from their traditions and their culture ... all in the interest of trying to remake them in our image,” Hiltz said of his church’s involvement.

In addition, there were cases of physical, emotional and sexual abuse against children in the schools, he said. “We know that many of these children were scarred for life. Many went missing. Many died. Many have taken their stories and experience in silence to the grave; and many have survived their horrendous experiences,” said Hiltz. “In remembering the children, the Anglican Church of Canada has so much for which to be sorry.”

Giuliano also shared portions of the United Church of Canada’s apologies to First Nations peoples, a general apology in 1988 and another in 1998 related to Indian Residential Schools.

After repeating the apologies of their churches, both Hiltz and Giuliano detailed concrete healing programs that have been launched and supported by their church communities.

Rev. Dr. Hans Kouwenberg, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, described the experience of looking at the photos of children in the residential schools contained in the church archives. He described beautiful young faces and reflected upon the trauma so many experienced.

“I have difficulty in thinking about how the church that I love cooperated in efforts to assimilate First Nations, Métis and Inuit children to the white, Euro-Canadian society,” Kouwenberg said. And it is especially hard to comprehend because as a Christian I have been taught, like the indigenous people of the land, to view my relationships with others as sacred, as gifts from God.”



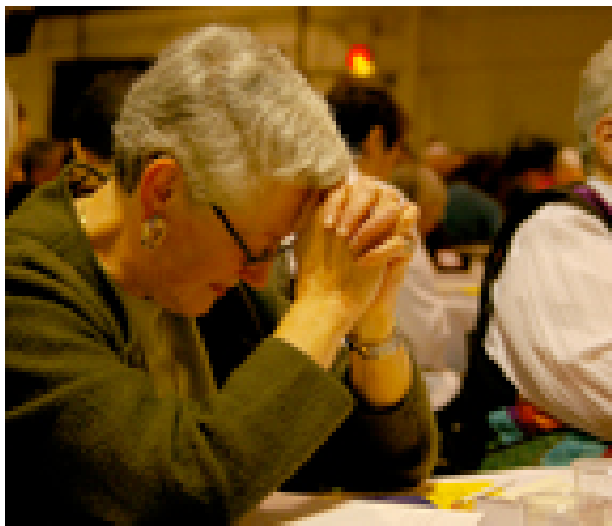
Rev. Dr. Hans Kouwenberg

He then quoted from the apology issued by the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1994. “For our church we ask forgiveness.... It is our hope that those we have wronged with a hurt too deep for telling, will accept what we have to say. With God’s guidance our church will seek opportunities to walk with Aboriginal peoples to find healing and wholeness together as God’s people.”

He also detailed some of the concrete steps being taken within the Presbyterian church community to live up to that promise to walk together with First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples.

In interviews after the event, several local participants reflected on the messages presented as part of the “Remembering the Children” tour.

Verna Vandale, Parish Life Director at Our Lady of Guadalupe Roman Catholic Parish in Saskatoon said the event is another step on the road to healing for former students. Reflecting on her own experience in Residential School, she said that some of the leader messages were extremely powerful and heartfelt, while others were a bit disappointing in their lukewarm tone.



“Because of the crowd, I have a sense that more and more people are listening. There wouldn’t have been as many attending if they weren’t,” she said. “In that listening they are validating our experience. I find a lot of hope in that.”

The existence of Our Lady of Guadalupe parish, which combines First Nations spirituality and the Catholic faith in serving a congregation of both aboriginal and non-aboriginal parishioners, is another powerful sign of hope, she said. “We are a parish that’s working towards healing, both in our culture and in our faith.”

A moment of reflection and prayer.

Being able to let go of the hurt and heal the brokenness caused by the Residential School experience requires a sense of being heard, she said of the Truth and Reconciliation process. “Healing is needed so we are able to let go of a lot of these issues. We won’t ever forget them, but we can let them go,” she said. “I’m not healed, but I’m healing.”

Our Lady of Guadalupe member Gayle Weenie, another local person attending the event, noted that a face to face encounter is always more powerful than a public attention. “What about going to the children and saying I’m sorry. That’s what’s going to count,” she said. “But it is a step in the right direction.”

Rev. Amanda Currie of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, said that she was particularly moved when all survivors of Residential Schools were invited to stand. "Their courage and their strength had an impact on those who were here."

When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission finally starts its work, it will be important that people truly hear what is said, Currie added. "We all need to be listening, to be part of the circle – to actually be with the people who have suffered and are continuing to suffer by what we have done."

A challenge close to home will be for her own St. Andrew's Presbyterian congregation to continue forging connections with First Nations neighbours, including those at nearby Saskatoon Native Circle Ministry, Rev. Currie said.

Saskatoon Native Circle is a frontline ministry in the core neighbourhood of the city, said Presbyterian minister Rev. Stewart Folster, a member of the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation.

Efforts towards healing must include concrete action to build aboriginal people up to the level of the rest of society, he stressed. "There is no way the Canadian government, the Canadian society can ever repay the billion dollars worth of resources in land that my people have lost. My people should be the richest people in the world today, and they're homeless. They're living through addiction and poverty, abuse and dysfunction."



The event concluded with a Round Dance.