A Brief History ...

History reveals that colonial governments had little or no regard for the rights and values of indigenous peoples. This was reflected in Canada by a long history of government policies aimed at assimilation of First Peoples. Under the guise of "solving the Indian problem", government laws attempted to eradicate the spirituality and cultures that had sustained indigenous peoples of this land over thousands of years.

As infectious diseases decimated populations of First Peoples, their freedoms were replaced by dependence on government handouts on reserves, often on less than desirable pieces of land. They became wards of the governments, and their children were forcibly removed to residential schools, often great distances away. Children were punished for speaking their own languages, discouraged from associating with family members, and abused in appalling ways. In their desire to proselytize, churches were accomplices with governments in the destruction of meaningful life of First Peoples. Four Christian churches administered and aided assimilation in these schools over 140 years from the 1850s to 1996, when the last residential school closed.

Starting in the 1980s, in their attempts at reconciliation, Canadian churches began to offer apologies to First Nations and to look for ways to live out those apologies. As a part of these actions, Aboriginal Neighbours was founded by an act of the Anglican Synod of British Columbia, welcoming Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members. The group has grown to include the Victoria Presbytery of the United Church of Canada and the Vancouver Island Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). We are not a closed group and welcome people who share a desire to build relationships and trust between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

Apologies will be fulfilled only when Aboriginal people are treated equally, in every sense of the word.

Mission Statement

Aboriginal Neighbours is an ecumenical organization initiated by the Anglican Diocese of British Columbia. As its name implies, the organization was formed out of its members' concerns for the First Peoples and the future of aboriginal children. Present partners in Aboriginal Neighbours include the Anglican Diocese of British Columbia; the United Church of Canada, Victoria Presbytery; and Vancouver Island Monthly Meeting of the Canadian Friends Service Committee (Quakers). Membership is drawn from Vancouver Island and includes Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, many of whom have considerable background working in these areas in British Columbia and elsewhere.

Through our program we undertake to:

- build bridges of respect and understanding between cultures through education and interaction;
- initiate and facilitate outreach with First Peoples in their traditional lands and in cities;
- support the First Peoples of British Columbia and Canada in their efforts to obtain justice through recognition of their aboriginal and treaty rights;
- encourage clergy and laity to develop effective means of keeping church members informed of churches' continued support and encouragement of aboriginal peoples;
- assist church members to initiate and become involved in local discussion of these issues;
- remind all people of the need for corporate and individual prayer for these initiatives; and
- keep abreast of political events and situations that affect First Peoples, wherever they may live.

Sharing Our Mission Statement:

- Telling stories
- Engaging in a process toward healing and reconciliation
- Providing resource people for congregation and community events
- Facilitating workshops
- Attendance at conferences, cultural events, and treaty-related events such as hearings and open tables
- Liaison with aboriginal peoples
- Sharing available resources: book lists, videos, printer materials, reference

~~For more information, contact Lynne Crawshaw, chair, at lynnecrawshaw@yahoo.ca~~

Today, after the experience of cultural oppression and economic dependency in recent centuries, Aboriginal peoples are struggling to decolonize themselves and regain recognition of their historic rights in Canada. These Aboriginal rights are recognized in both international law and the historic documents of this country.

We maintain, however, that the rights of Aboriginal peoples are not simply a legal or political issue, but first and foremost, a moral issue touching the very soul and heart of Canada.

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