
ANGLICAN NEWS SERVICE

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Agreement allows Church to serve society, Anglican Primate says

Toronto (Dec. 18, 2002) – An agreement between the Anglican Church and the federal government over liability for Indian Residential Schools will allow the church to continue to serve society and to forge new bonds with native people, the Anglican Primate says.

In a letter to church members posted on the Anglican Church of Canada's Web site, Archbishop Michael Peers says he is "profoundly encouraged" by the way Canadian Anglicans and Anglican dioceses have responded to the agreement.

Under the terms of the agreement, all 30 Anglican dioceses must ratify and agree to contribute \$25 million to a settlement fund over a five-year period.

The agreement effectively ends the Anglican Church's involvement in costly litigation that was threatening the future of its national organization.

The text of Archbishop Peers' letter follows:

Dear Friends,

The past few weeks have marked a watershed in the life of the Anglican Church of Canada. Beginning with the announcement of an agreement with the Government of Canada as to how validated claims of sexual and physical abuse in Indian Residential Schools would be apportioned, we are now in a period of discernment and decision together. In each diocese, a process is, or will be, in place to decide the diocesan response to our national responsibility.

Let me offer some background and interpretation for this time of discernment and decision in dioceses and congregations, and for your own reflection as an Anglican and a member of Christ's body.

From 1820 to 1969, the Anglican Church of Canada was involved in residential schools. In 1911, the first contracts were signed between the Government of Canada and a number of dioceses. In 1921, the Missionary Society of the Church in Canada began to assume those contracts. In the words of the Bishop of Keewatin, a person with experience of the schools decades ago and a partner in dialogue with many former students, this was not a good system with a few bad people in it, but a deeply flawed system with many good people in it. In 1969 we abandoned participation in the schools, and began to forge a new relationship with aboriginal Canadians that would be rooted in justice, solidarity, and mutuality.

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More than twenty years later, former students of the schools began to come forward, alleging abuse at the hands of those in authority in the schools. Those allegations have prompted our church to come to terms with two painful realities. First, our partnership with the government in seeking the assimilation of aboriginal Canadians was itself a profound error. Second, some within the schools used their power to take advantage of the vulnerability of children.

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, defines “remorse” as the discovery that we do not control the telling of our stories – that we play unflattering and sometimes destructive roles in the stories of others. In the stories of aboriginal Canadians, we hear that our actions were not noble and our impact was not life-giving.

Remorse is hard for us. We did not intend to collaborate in undermining the well being of children. We did not intend to foster a climate in which predators could assault the vulnerable. We did not intend to contribute to a rift between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians. Yet we did all those things.

In 1969, we embraced another way of understanding and telling the story of our relationship with indigenous peoples. Together with them, we began to look for a better way. In the past decades, signs of that better way have begun to emerge. For example, the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples identifies a unique and vital contribution that churches can make: “Of all the non-governmental institutions in Canadian society, religious institutions have perhaps the greatest potential to foster awareness and understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.”

In November, the Anglican Church of Canada and the Government of Canada reached an agreement on a settlement of validated claims of sexual and physical abuse in schools administered by the Anglican Church. We are asking each diocese to consider the proposed agreement, and to make a financial commitment to the settlement fund. The proposed settlement with the Government of Canada allows us to proceed with integrity along “a better way.” We have not evaded our responsibility within the legal structures and systems that our nation has established to deal with such claims. We have acknowledged both our part in the damage that was done and the many good and generous people who – in a deeply flawed arrangement – acted humanely. We are involved in significant explorations with the indigenous constituencies of the Anglican Church of Canada as to how we can, together, live up to the potential identified in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

It was “our people” -- people who share with us a faith, a church, and a tradition -- who suffered in the residential schools. In the Anglican Church of Canada, there are whole dioceses in which the majority of our members are aboriginal Canadians. As we continue the hard work of fashioning a church that brings us all together for mission, we can bear witness to the possibility of reconciliation in a nation in which the divide between aboriginal persons and communities and the dominant culture seems to widen with each passing year.

This settlement is not about “getting out of” anything. It is instead a way of getting more deeply *into* the healing and reconciliation by which we can both strengthen our own common life and extend that life into mission in our society.

I am profoundly encouraged by the way in which dioceses and their members have begun to address the challenge before us. Several dioceses have already ratified the agreement, and the others have a clear process in mind for coming to a decision. At least four of the dioceses that have ratified the agreement had no formal relationship with any of the schools, and therefore no legal liability.

That we recognize both a common “moral liability” and a common vocation to ministry and mission in our society, whether or not we are directly and legally affected by the schools issue, is surely one of the strengths of this Anglican Church of Canada.

In the months and years ahead, I believe we can use that strength to serve our society and all its members. Because we bear witness not only to the deep flaws of our past, but also to the deep need for healing and reconciliation in our present, we are poised to contribute to a crucial process of discernment for a Canadian society in search of a humane future. Because we are entering more deeply into the spirit of partnership between aboriginal and non-aboriginal persons and communities within our church, we are poised to contribute to the emergence of a similar sense of partnership within Canadian society as a whole.

For reasons of our common life, and for reasons of our common mission within Canadian society, I profoundly hope that we will all be able not only to support and contribute to this settlement, but also to celebrate the possibilities it opens up for us all.

Yours faithfully,

Michael G. Peers
Archbishop and Primate