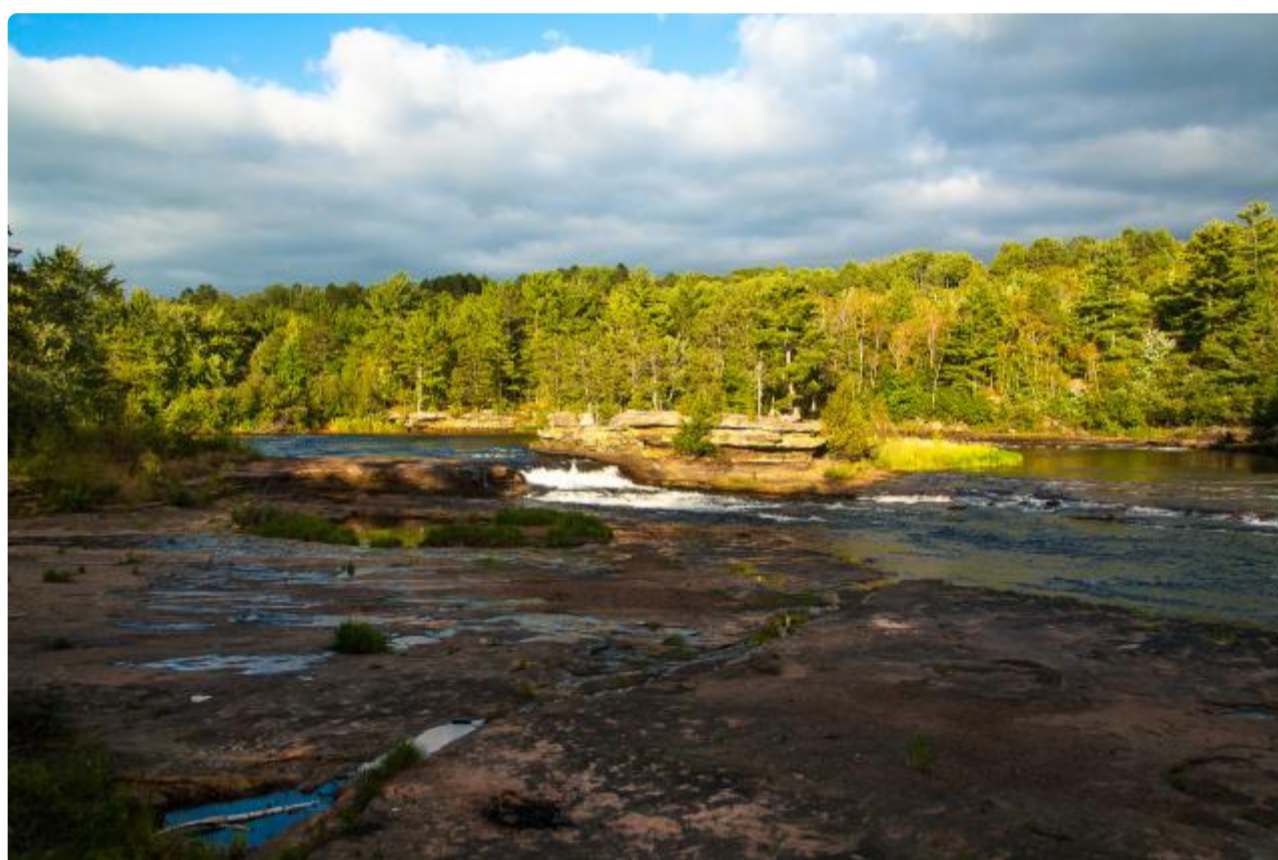




Learning to Dance Together toward Reconciliation

Acknowledgement of Territory Statements are just a beginning in the work toward Right Relations.



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It's Sunday morning, and one-by-one folks set aside their coffee cups and settle into their customary places, in their customary pews. The sanctuary is bright and airy, and an atmosphere of good-humoured fellowship bubbles throughout. People are genuinely pleased to see each other again, and even visitors are soon drawn in.

Gradually a calm attentiveness pervades the gathering, and the worship service commences. Having been welcomed, everyone is then invited to join in repeating the **Acknowledgement of Territory**, as the words appear on the display screens. After a few years of weekly reciting the Acknowledgement, most of the congregation has unconsciously committed the phrases to memory.

The question of territorial usurpation has particular resonance for this church, as the building is physically located on the very boundary of what was the local First Nation's original reserve. Not more than a couple of blocks away stood the original Methodist mission to the Anishinaabe who

gradually filtered into this region after the War of 1812. That mission had not only been the first church in the area, but also the first school in this corner of Southwestern Ontario.

But that mission has long-since vanished under a network of railway tracks, dockyards, and industrial sites. The rapid expansion of the petrochemical industry progressively contracted the boundaries of the reserve into an ever diminished acreage. The exigencies of the Second World War resulted in the forcible government expropriation of vast tracts of reserve land, supposedly just for the duration of hostilities.

So yes, this congregation well understands all that has gone before, and the importance of now attempting to form new linkages with the First Nation. The work of the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission** has been frequently referenced, as have the proceedings of the **National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls**. There is certainly no lack of concern on the part of the congregation as a whole. But, where do we go from here?

Territorial acknowledgements are a first step in a long process, and not an end in themselves. Consider the way in which we teach the Christian faith to children, commencing in simple and manageable steps. Progressively we provide more and more details, and then at an appropriate stage we asked the individual to make a personal commitment.

Surely, the same must be true when it comes to developing Right Relations in dominant society congregations. By and large we're talking about well-intentioned folks, who are so accustomed to living out of their "white privilege" that they don't even realize they hold it. If the process that begins with Territorial Acknowledgement doesn't lead to further concrete steps, there's a real danger for it to wind-up as a sort of "cheap absolution."

How will we make sure that doesn't happen?

Unfortunately, the operative notion within many dominant society congregations is to the effect of: "it was preceding generations who committed the injustices, why should we have assume the cost of reconciling the differences?" This instinctive misapprehension of the seeming "unfairness" of their plight, is in fact the most easily recognizable symptom of inherent "white privilege."

That's not to suggest for a moment that the entire problem rests solely within the purview of the dominant society. Indeed, if this situation is ever to be completely rectified, both Indigenous and dominant society communities have to be prepared to make some genuine moves toward each other. Reconciliation is a dance that requires a partner, and so far there certainly appears to have been plenty of "wall flowers" in Canada.

Clearly there's a role for The United Church of Canada collectively to assume in moving this process forward. But, it's going to require a delicate balance of approach, for too slow a movement will result in apathy; while pushing too rigorously could result in a condescending "push back." Many within dominant society really haven't any appreciation of the contemporary reality for Indigenous people, and likely couldn't recognize them within the fabric of society in anything other than stereotypic ways.

The initiative of our colleagues in the **Uniting Church of Australia**, with their "Acknowledgement of Country" plaques, might potentially offer us a next step. Presentation of a plaque by the denomination might be made as an indication that the congregation had undertaken a meaningful reconciliation process with the local Indigenous community. The choice of wording would offer an insight into their intentions, in both English/French, and the language of the particular First Nation.

But, this is still only a possible next step. Subsequent steps should ultimately lead to some sort of ongoing commitment by the congregation to enter into a mutually reciprocal agreement with local First Nations or urban Indigenous communities. Along the way this would hopefully lead to further steps such as (purely as an illustration and not intended as an all-inclusive list):

- how might this congregation meaningfully share its resources (human, physical, spiritual, philosophically, financial);
- what might they do to promote a greater Indigenous recognition and appreciation in the local settler community;
- what sort of local stereotypes might they actively work toward permanently dismissing;
- and ongoing reflection concerning an evolving vision for the future reconciliation from their experience thus far.

There will undoubtedly come a time when successive generations will wonder why on earth it took us so long to arrive upon a workable reconciliation. We will have achieved that laudable goal when it is no longer necessary for us to seek methods to further the process. But, we've still a long way to go before we arrive to that happy state, and in the meanwhile we must continue to be intentionally persistent.

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