

## **“Reflections on The United Church of Canada’s Apology to Aboriginal People -- 1986”**

A message shared by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman  
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury  
**June 21, 2015**

Job 38:1-11; Psalm 107

The Apology of 1986 marked the beginning and the focal point of the early stages of the General Council that year. The whole discussion around the appropriate response for the Council to take was in what seemed an artificial environment to me. The tables had been removed from the Great Hall at Laurentian, and all sat in what were termed “knee groups” as the debate went on in an intimate, close range. We were told that we were to use aboriginal principles – speak until all were heard, make sure there was consensus on the decision making process before moving forward.

That all made sense on one level, except that we were working to a deadline. There were aboriginal leaders holding a sacred fire and waiting in a tipi anticipating some action from the General Council.

In 1986 I lived in Forest, and my older daughter Mary attended a public elementary school that included about 30% aboriginal students. The Kettle and Stony Point Reserve was just north of town, so issues of aboriginal people were part of the community. I sat on the School Board Native Education Advisory Committee at that time, so thought I was current with issues being faced by aboriginal people, especially as it related to culture and language. We were beginning a native language program in Ojibwe that fall, and I had been part of the consultation in developing the curriculum, which included culture, crafts, and story- telling in the language development program.

Yet soon I learned that the issues facing aboriginal people across Canada, and within the United Church, varied from region to region. There was no way one person in one locale could understand all of the issues. And so the debate was helpful.

Eventually at the General Council that Friday evening, the wording for an apology was approved, and commissioners made the journey on foot to where aboriginal leaders waited.

It is not all that long a walk down to the parking lot where the cairn is located from the centre of the university for those who are mobile, but it seemed like a real trek that night at General Council. People walked solemnly and rhythmically, and the whole event had a certain mystery about it.

What I find most ironic of that General Council is that we passed a policy on inclusive language that emphasized not only inclusiveness in our language with reference to people, but more significantly inclusiveness in our talking about God. Our aboriginal sisters and brothers have shown a comfort with using other images and words to speak about the divine or the holy, and that policy of inclusiveness helped incorporate new words and images as we speak about God, yet where I came from that action was the

most controversial policy the General Council approved in the four General Councils I attended while a minister at Forest United Church. Sometimes we can be open to acceptance and understanding, even to apology, until we realize that such words and attitudes demand that we change, and then we find ourselves less eager to live the promise of our words.

About twenty years after this event I learned that Mary, who was the only non-aboriginal student in the Ojibwe language program in Lambton County, was ridiculed by her friends for taking the course. Some of these children were active, along with their families, in the United Church. They would say things like “My parents want me to be a good student, so I do not take Ojibwe” or “My parents love me so I am not allowed to play with kids from the reserve.” It was a wrenching experience to hear such words 20 years later, knowing that a small child was courageously defying her peers because she knew that this program, and the movement to reconciliation, was important to her father, and clearly became important to her, no matter the cost in her friendship with others. I think Mary also knew as a child if I heard such talk, I would suggest she drop the program because I would not, as a parent, have her bullied for what she was doing. It gave me a new appreciation for her strength and determination in all things in life as a teenager and adult.

Job is confronted by God in the scriptures of today, and his own way of being confident and arrogant are confronted with the phrase: “and here your proud waves shall stop.” There comes a time when we must set aside our self-confident ways in order to be open to new growth, new understanding, and new awareness. May that new start be part of our time today and our ongoing journey as we integrate insights and truth from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.