

Thoughts on Forgiveness

Thoughts on Forgiveness and Aboriginal Residential Schools

by Ray Aldred, Terry LeBlanc and Adrian Jacobs

A forgiveness summit, bringing First Peoples and other people together in Ottawa, is being planned for June 11-13, 2010. Responding to the Prime Minister's apology of June 11, 2008, the literature and Web announcements for "Forgiveness" at www.i4give.ca indicate the intention to "release forgiveness to the federal government." Let's step back and reflect on this idea.

Each of us is on his or her journey on the circle of the earth and so we write from our own hearts. For us, we write from who we are as aboriginal people as we try to think through the idea of forgiveness, the processes this might entail and the outcomes to which it might give birth.

It's probably important to say at the outset that we believe in forgiveness—both the need for, and the healing value of, forgiving those who have wronged us. The Bible, and our consciences call out to us to be forgiving people. We have all seen how unforgiveness can lead people to bitterness and self-absorption with pain. There are, however, concepts about the way forgiveness is given and received, proceeding from both experience and biblical teaching, which need to be centered in the process.

This is not the first time efforts at reconciliation, led by First Nations, Inuit and Métis people, have been undertaken. In 1995 Elijah Harper, following a serious illness during which he was given a vision of the problem engulfing Canada, convened a hugely significant plenary Sacred Assembly of political and spiritual leaders.

Harper believed the issues over which we fought are spiritually rooted. His deepest desire was that we might see the different people groups who share this piece of land we now call Canada move toward better relationships, that the conflict between various groups might be set aside, that relational healing might come as we are spiritually healed. This is, after all, where our Creator has placed all of us—in a land where its contemporary anthem pleads "God keep our land, glorious and free."

It therefore amazes us that once again it is First Nations people taking the initiative to seek a spiritual solution to the problem of broken relationships. Reflecting on the rootedness of this phenomenon in the Canadian narrative, John Ralston Saul, in his 2008 book *A Fair Country*, observes, "As always in our history, the elegance and generosity, when it is a matter of reconciliation, comes largely from the indigenous side, from those who have been wronged."

Many of the troubles shadowing our lands today may have originated, may have brewed long in other places, been initiated by other people, but they are here among us all now. And while on the one hand it is right that we, the First Peoples, should take responsibility for this discord that has been brought to this place—after all, we do have a special and deeply historic relationship to this land—it is not proper that we shoulder other people's responsibilities in this time as well. It is therefore right that we try to seek some mutually owned spiritual solution to move toward our shared destiny, toward harmony.

We must take care, however, for here is the thing about spiritual experiences: sometimes they can be offered as hope that is not hope. Dr. Dan Allender points out in his 1990 book, *The Wounded Heart*, that the Church, especially in regard to people who have suffered abuse, frequently offers "hope that is not hope." Church people do this when they say that what the abused person needs to do is to have a deeper spiritual experience and life will be okay; to partake in this or that event, and then they will be cured; to forgive and forget. This is hope that is not hope. Working through the abuse can be a long and difficult journey. The real and full hope is that Christ is with us on the journey, and even if we do not get there, even if we live half-way in our mourning, Christ the Creator is with us and He likes us.

The First Peoples involved in the Forgiveness summit are attempting to help people experience forgiveness. But forgiveness is not to be seen as a simple key. Luke's Gospel makes clear that there is a relationship between repentance and forgiveness. It is called the gospel of repentance and forgiveness—not apology and forgiveness but repentance and forgiveness. So for Canada and those who are part of her political, maternal care, the question is not about the survivors of abuse forgiving; it is about abusers asking, "What does repentance look like for us?" Or, even more pointedly, "What does 'not assimilating' First Nations people look like for us?"

What causes us the most consternation is that the Canadian government does not appear to do more than speak words in the House of Parliament. The government and wider Canadian society need to actually repent and change how they treat aboriginal people. Canadians need to keep their word, they need to honor the treaty relationship, they need to be the kind of people with whom someone could make a full peace.

We are concerned that current talk about forgiveness, without repentance, may place on aboriginal people the responsibility of opening the blessing of heaven. If this is so, it seems the victim will be victimized once again. When we do not make time and a way for people to feel and to cry and mourn—indeed to mourn with them as scripture admonishes us to do—then we make the scandal and the problem of residential schools the sole responsibility of the victims to solve. They forgive, and government and society sits back cloaked in civility, not even blushing as broken people try to work toward proper relatedness.

To the extent the forgiveness summit makes room for people to feel pain and gives opportunity for people to talk about what really happened, it will be successful. Our concern, though, is that it might do just the opposite and lead to a loss of dialogue; that some people and institutions might take the extending of forgiveness as an excuse to stop listening to the pain that people have incurred as a result of residential school abuse. It might also close down the emotions of the victims, leaving them not wanting to talk about what happened because they sense again there is no room for the honest pain of the wounded.

Finally, we are concerned that the Church could once more be complicit with the abuser: the lies of the residential schools can be inadvertently reinforced by the spiritual zeal that once again does not make room for the pain and reality of what has happened in people's lives. This is not what is coming from First Nations, but it is what is present in others who want to receive forgiveness and just forget what happened. Perhaps it would be great if that could happen, but it may take much longer.

And so there are some questions that are raised for us. Even as we desire to see a repentance and forgiveness experience which truly transforms the Canadian psyche and spirit, we cannot help but ask: Can people wait and walk it out with us? Can they take our frustrations and pain and love us through it? Do we need to be, one more time, the one who absorbs hurt and betrayal in order that the rest of society can feel okay about itself? Or are people saying to us, this time in the words of Dr. Phil, "Get over it and get on with it!"

Were we pessimistic we might ask, "Are we inadvertently being 'used' to deal with a church-perceived problem, to get over the past so that church renewal and revival can occur?"

Help us. What is your understanding of forgiveness? Ray Aldred is a Cree theologian who teaches at Ambrose Seminary. Terry LeBlanc is Mi'kmaq/Acadian and directs My People International. Adrian Jacobs, a Cayuga author and lecturer, also provides leadership with My People International. All are members of the Aboriginal Ministries Council of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.