

# Native residential school forgiveness granted

'The only way to come into our full healing'

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Federal Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl has accepted a "charter of forgiveness" from members of the aboriginal community as part of the healing process for survivors of Canada's residential schools.

Chief Kenny Blacksmith presented the charter Saturday at the National Forgiven Summit, a conference of Aboriginal Peoples in Ottawa.



*Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl is presented with a 'charter of forgiveness' at the aboriginal National Forgiven Summit. (CBC)*

The charter was signed by elders and survivors, as well as young people, who said that the damage from residential schools is intergenerational.

It stems from Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apology two years ago for previous government policies of assimilation. Standing in the House of Commons, Harper apologized on behalf of the government and asked for "forgiveness of the Aboriginal Peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly."

Blacksmith, a residential school survivor and former deputy grand chief of the Grand Council of the Crees of Quebec, said that "at that moment, the onus was placed on our people as individuals to respond."

"The only way to come into our full healing as the First Peoples of Canada is to forgive," he said in a statement. "Forgiveness is not political; it cannot be bought or sold; it cannot be legislated. It is an individual choice that can break the generational cycle of victimization and accusation."

About 150,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit children were placed in more than 130 residential schools across Canada from the late 1870s until the last school closed in 1996. The schools were government-funded but generally operated by churches, and many former students have alleged being physically and sexually abused.

Blacksmith spent 11 years at a residential school where said he was sexually and physically abused and spent little time bonding with his parents. "After 11 years, I actually counted that I had 2½ years of a mother-and-son relationship," he said. "That is what happened."

Next week, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will hold the first major hearing into Canada's residential school system. The commission was established to give survivors an opportunity to share their experiences and establish a historical account of the system.