

25 September 2000

A Letter from Canadian Church Leaders Right Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples

*"I will listen to what the Lord God is saying,
for he is speaking peace to his faithful people
and to those who turn their hearts to him." (Psalm 85:8, NRSV)*

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

As we turn our hearts to God in the first year of a new century, as we seek to listen with our hearts to what God is saying in our time and place, we are promised a word — even a world — of peace. It is a glorious promise, challenging us to hope (all our hope, indeed, rests on God's covenant promise to be faithful to us); and it is set free by our willingness to be converted.

At this moment in the history of Canada, it seems evident that as a matter of urgency we are called to work for peace in the relationship between the Aboriginal peoples of this land and the later-arriving majority of people who live here. That relationship has been disfigured by a history of policy choices and broken promises which continue to bring grievous injury to the health of Aboriginal communities. If we are to hear God's word of peace and seek it with one another, then we must face past and present injustices which have caused and continue to cause a breach between us.

The biblical vision of Jubilee [see especially Leviticus 25:8 ff, and Isaiah 61:1-3] reveals what a fresh start might look like as we repent of collective sin and seek to be attentive disciples of the risen Lord, not only in our personal lives but also in our common life. When Jesus began his public ministry in the synagogue of Nazareth, he proclaimed good news for the poor because "the year of the Lord's favour" was at hand [see Luke 4:18, 19]. That is to say, he chose the vision of Jubilee to give a first expression to the new beginning God was offering through Jesus' life and work. Jubilee included rest from hard labour both for the earth and for its inhabitants, relief from the burden of debt, and restoration of ancestral lands to those who had lost land in the previous generation.

The biblical imperative of Jubilee sheds a most challenging light on the unresolved issue of Aboriginal land rights in Canada. It is clear that the recognition and implementation of those rights is central to the health of Aboriginal communities and to the healing of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, issued in 1996, offers concrete options for breaking out of failed, entrenched patterns within that relationship. Fundamental to the report's vision is the securing of an adequate land base for Aboriginal peoples with access to resources sufficient to sustain viable economies.

We believe that in the name of justice and for the sake of a renewed common hope, it is morally necessary for Canadians to engage deeply with the issue of Aboriginal rights to land and to natural resources. In recent years, governments in Canada have had in place official processes for recognizing and implementing Aboriginal rights, but these conflicted processes have for the most part produced frustration, failure and breakdown.

In writing this letter to the members of our churches, we are asking for prayerful reflection on a serious question of justice. It deserves careful, whole-hearted, conscientious attention-- much more than has so far been accorded to it in our common life in Canada. To help the people of our churches consider the question as believers and as citizens, a somewhat longer call to reflection has been prepared, entitled *Aboriginal Land Rights: A Jubilee challenge facing Canada*. We commend it to your serious attention.

The Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative (a coalition of 30 church-related organizations in which our churches participate) is inviting Canadians to sign a petition to the Prime Minister calling for action on a renewed process for recognizing and implementing Aboriginal claims and inherent rights.

- As church leaders, we support that petition, and we invite congregations, schools and other church bodies to study this cause and to take it up.
- We invite everyone to take advantage of Jubilee Initiative resource materials in examining the issues involved. [Go here to find out more about these materials]
- We encourage church members, when studying the issues, to engage others, especially Aboriginal people, in dialogue.

The task before us calls for a generosity of spirit deeper than has been known before in Canadian society. In this difficult work, our Aboriginal brothers and sisters over the years have demonstrated tenacious and long-suffering patience and an increasingly urgent hunger and thirst for justice. The primary responsibility for the liberation and healing of Aboriginal communities indeed rests inevitably on Aboriginal shoulders. But to reach a just and balanced mutual relationship, to achieve true healing of this wound in Canadian life, there is work to do which needs the active cooperation of Canadians as a whole.

As Christians, we are called to pray and to live towards a deep mutual respect among persons and peoples. The turning of our hearts towards radical love of our neighbour as ourselves is hard work, whether it concerns the family next door or the structures and mind-set of society as a whole. But if we listen for the word God speaks, God will give us strength, courage, and even joy: for the promise of peace founded on justice is the desire of God's own great heart.

Ottawa, Canada, September 25, 2000

Signed by:

Archbishop Michael Peers,
Primate, Anglican Church of Canada

David Nazar, s.j.
Provincial, Jesuits of Upper Canada

Most Reverend Gerald Wiesner, OMI
Bishop of Prince George
President, Canadian Conference of Catholic
Bishops

Ron Dueck,
Chair, Mennonite Central Committee
Canada Board

Anne-Marie Savoie, rhsj
President, Canadian Religious Conference

Claude Champagne, O.M.I.,
President, Oblate Conference of Canada

Kim Foster,
President, Canadian Unitarian Church

Glen Davis,
Moderator, Presbyterian Church in Canada

Gordon Pols,
Chair, Canadian Board of Trustees
Council of Christian Reformed Churches in
Canada

Gordon McClure,
Clerk, Canadian Yearly Meeting of the
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

Bishop Telmor Sartison,
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

Marion Pardy,
Moderator, United Church of Canada