

A programme of events around **Kisemanito Pakitinasuwin**—*The Creator's Sacrifice*  
St. Joseph's Church  
174 Wilbrod Street, Ottawa ON  
Tuesday, April 2, 2013  
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### ***Why Reconciliation Matters: The Church's Role***

Good evening, everyone. I am deeply honoured to have been invited to address you on the important topic of the role of churches in the journey of healing and reconciliation Canada. I am particularly delighted to do so here in the traditional territory of my own Algonquin community, the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan . . . And, all the more so, because I was born here in this city of Ottawa, and attended the nearby university of Ottawa for five years. And while I now live in Toronto, this land is very much home to me. So it is very good to be here with you tonight on traditional Algonquin territory.

As an Algonquin woman, and also the child of settlers from Germany, Denmark, England, Scotland and Ireland, as an employee of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, who has spent most of my 25-year career working for the Government of Canada on Aboriginal issues, and as someone who has also worked, and is most passionately engaged as a member of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in the work of healing and reconciliation, you might imagine that given such a background my sense of call to reconciliation is acute. For it is my story.

It is the story of the Government of Canada's special relationship with indigenous peoples.

It is the story of the churches who are called to ministries in Canada: churches who seek to witness faithfully to Christ in this time and in this place.

It is the story of men and women from different faiths, races, cultures, and backgrounds who fall in love and have children.

These stories are the facets of my life – First Peoples, settlers, the government, the church – the actors in the story of indigenous and non-indigenous relations in Canada. A Canadian story. A Turtle Island story.

My Algonquin and European ancestors, my government and truth commission colleagues, the members of my church family within my own Presbyterian denomination, my ecumenical family, and the peoples of other faiths with whom I have come to work and to call my friends, are like strands of sweetgrass – intertwined at the centre of my being.

Also at the centre and intertwined throughout is my faith, faith in a God who loves all peoples and who calls each and every one of us to love each other, as we love ourselves. There is no greater commandment, the new commandment given to us by Christ.

And mindful of this commandment, when it comes to the subject of healing and reconciliation between indigenous peoples and non-indigenous peoples in Canada, the church's role should be self-evident. For at the heart of how we relate to each other should be God's call to us to love one another.

In my work with the Presbyterian Church, I found myself preaching from time-to-time on this topic, in this season of the church year, the Easter season. In fact, the very first sermon I preached was on the Sunday after Easter in 2007, the Sunday on which churches typically reflect on Jesus' first appearance to the disciples following his resurrection.

You will recall the scene. The disciples are gathered behind locked doors and they are afraid. The wonderful time they had spent with the Lord, the many hours they had enjoyed in Jesus' presence in fellowship and conversation, learning together, has come crashing ignominiously to an end at the cross. They are left feeling afraid and uncertain about what to do. They have shut the doors to keep the world out.

As you know, there are times in the church's story when we have been afraid and have wanted to shut the world out. For those churches that were directly involved in running residential schools in Canada, I imagine many in these churches felt a bit like the disciples after Good Friday, when some twenty to twenty-five years ago, the first residential school lawsuits began arriving on church office desks. When residential school survivors at first tentatively came forward, and then in growing numbers, to tell the most personal and painful and terrible stories of their experiences at the schools in public forums and called the churches and the government to account.

I am also confident, with the benefit of hindsight, knowing what has happened since that time, that there were those in our churches in the 1980s and 1990s who remembered what Jesus has taught us, and specifically those words he said, as recorded in the gospel of John, "Peace be with you. Do not be afraid. . . . Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you." These women and men remembered that when Jesus had said this, "He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'"

It is striking to me that as Jesus concludes his time on earth, he clearly recognizes that although his death and resurrection have reconciled us to God, overcoming sin and restoring the broken relationship between God's people and their Creator, Jesus recognizes that the road ahead is going to feel bumpy to those whom he has called to follow him.

“Peace be with you. Do not be afraid.” Words that twenty years ago our colleagues in the Roman Catholic, Anglican, United and Presbyterian churches certainly had to take to heart as they began to deal with the legacy of their involvement in residential schools, continue to be words we need to take to heart today as we carry out the work of healing and reconciliation.

This post-resurrection story reminds us that we are called and we are sent. As the Father sent me, so I send you. We have work to do and part of this work, if we believe that we have been called to witness to Christ in Canada in the early twentieth century, must be to confront our complicity with the residential school system, whose history is now so plainly evident in the faces of the thousands survivors of the system who are coming forward to share their stories and from whom we need to ask forgiveness.

Jesus also said, among those final words, that if we retain the sins of any, they are retained. And I have to wonder, in our context, whether this is not a reminder of our baptismal calling to repent. That following Jesus, who has taken our sins upon us and called us to new life, far from freeing us from our responsibility to address the sins that are a part of us, a part of our churches, a part of our history as Christians in this place, demands that we wrestle with them, repent of them, and be reconciled with those whom we have sinned against.

There are some deep theological issues embedded in this story, and we have the opportunity, if we take it, to learn much from reflection on the church’s role in this Canadian story—not the least of which are questions about the operation of evil in this world—and not in any abstract sense but in the real sense of how easy it can be for people of faith to become complicit with systems that cause other peoples great harm.

For as the confession of my own denomination said, clearly, “we do this, out of new understandings of our past, not out of any sense of being superior to those who have gone before us, nor out of any sense that we would have done things differently in the same context.”

I suggest we will miss some of the most important lessons of the residential school story if we do not approach the story with the humility that asks if our brothers and sisters in Christ participated in such a system, so could I, and so what must we learn from what happened?

Moving away from the past and looking at the present, we see other signs, we hear other calls from our brothers and sisters in this country, which ask us to respond.

This came to the fore late last year when suddenly something new, something bold, something exciting and challenging was making the news in Canada. It is still buzzing in

the background, with suggestions that as the snow melts, we will hear more about it, and I'm sure it is a movement that is on the minds of people in this hall today and that something is the *#idle no more* movement.

It is one of the first big social media campaigns around significant issues of public policy to emerge here, on Turtle Island, and how interesting and how revealing about the state of modern Canada it is that the movement should focus on indigenous issues.

I loved the statement put out by the Christian Reformed Church of North America, our hosts this evening, on the topic of *#idle no more*. It said, "As a grass roots movement *#idle no more* is unpredictable, controversial, dynamic and celebratory . . . The campaign requires our care and discernment over the long run. But for now, given the awakening that *#idle no more* is causing among indigenous and non-indigenous people alike we believe that now is the moment for deep prayer; for renewed dialogue about the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in Canada; and for a passionate and active response to God's call to live as covenant (treaty) people."

That is very well said, and I can only echo and applaud the statement's call for prayer, for careful discernment, and for an active response to this call for a transformed relationship.

Thinking about *#idle no more*, people have started asking is this a *kairos* moment for Canada? Is this the tipping point? Will this movement take-off and have long lasting significance? I like to ask, thinking about the "Arab spring" – which also turned on strategic use of social media – is *#idle no more*, our Canadian winter? Our time for change, rebirth and transformation?

Another event that took place as we began 2013 was the second inaugural of the first black president of the United States of America, Barak Obama. How poignant and how emotional it must have been for those who have worked tirelessly for civil rights for the black community in that country to witness that event on the very day Americans have set aside to remember the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and in this the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of Dr. King's famous "I have a dream" speech at the Lincoln memorial.

The events of January – which also included chief Teresa Spence's fast for justice – led me to think about the dreams I have for Canada, and that to me, answer the question I frequently am asked, "what does reconciliation look like?" Let me give you my answer.

I dream and not only dream but I believe, believe with all the certainty that I believe in God, that Canada can be a model for the world. That there is every reason to believe that we can create a society where indigenous and non-indigenous peoples are not only reconciled but have a thriving relationship with each other.

I dream and believe that we do have the resources, the ingenuity and the imagination to build strong First Nation, Inuit and Metis communities, to overcome the challenges of poverty, lack of housing, clean water, access to education and employment that plague far too many indigenous communities.

I dream and believe we can settle outstanding land claims.

I dream that people will come to Canada to learn how we did so, and to learn from a new political framework where indigenous people live in self-governing communities and work in partnership with other governments and the private sector to make decisions on how to balance the need for economic development with the protection of the environment so that future generations may benefit from the lands and resources over which our creator has given us stewardship.

I dream and believe that people will come to Canada to see how we created a legal framework for our country that is fully consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

I dream that people from all over the world will one day come to Canada to ask, how did we do it, how did we reconcile, how did we overcome the mistakes of our colonial past, dismantle the mistrust that has arisen between our communities as settler peoples tried to impose their vision of how to live on indigenous peoples, and heal from the legacy of policies such as residential schools.

I dream and believe that we can create a country where all peoples can develop their own distinctive languages and cultures and where we respect and celebrate the right of other peoples to walk different paths from those we ourselves would choose.

I dream and believe that all of this is possible.

How do we make these dreams a reality?

I think one of the keys is to reflect on how we think about our relationship, the relationship between indigenous peoples and non-indigenous peoples, and how we live our call to love each other in a historical context in which the relationship has been strained to the breaking point.

I feel strongly that Christians and other peoples of faith have much to contribute to the journey of reconciliation out of our sacred understandings, our teachings about this subject of relationship, and how people should treat each other, about repentance and forgiveness. This of course includes indigenous peoples who have had a relationship with the Creator from time immemorial.

Indigenous people who practice traditional spirituality, like us in the church, share a belief in the sacredness of all peoples, see all peoples as sacred gifts from God the

Creator, and believe that we need to lift up and hold on to that sense of the sacred in each other as we move forward.

In Genesis, in the very first book of the Hebrew bible, in the very first chapter, we are told that “God created humankind in God’s [own] image” . . . Humankind . . . All kinds of humans . . . Each and every one . . . “in the image of God he created them.”

And as Christians we are taught to see the face of Christ in each other: that there is a Holy Spirit of God alive and at work in the world and in all of us, every one.

The theology that is crying out to be applied to relations between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in Canada is a theology of hope and abundance. A theology that focuses on the potential of our relationship, the beauty of relationship, and the remarkable giftedness we each in all of our unique God-given differences bring to our relationships.

Most of the time when we hear talk of the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in Canada it is framed in talk of problems, in terms of scarcity . . . Of a lack of capacity, a lack of resources, of a lack of political will, and most tragically of the hopelessness and despair that can prevail among some of the most vulnerable among us, those indigenous young people and children who live in communities where socio-economic challenges far exceed opportunities. Those who look around themselves and wonder what hope is there of a bright future.

When our Lord, Jesus Christ, answers that famous question posed by a lawyer as we are told in Luke’s gospel, namely, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answers, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

And Jesus goes on to illustrate that answer with the well-known story of the good Samaritan. I suggest the good Samaritan’s story, this parable, has direct relevance for us in Canada today.

It’s one of my favourite stories, not least because I remember being given the story in an illustrated gift book at church when I was very young and I treasure that book today.

You’ll recall the story as Jesus told it in Luke, “a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them.”

Jesus tells us how the Samaritan provided other support and ultimately took the beaten man to an inn and promised money to the innkeeper to take care of him, and above all the

Samaritan promised to return. He had entered into a relationship with the beaten man and it is clear that relationship will continue. The Samaritan will return to the inn.

I tell this story mindful that there is a risk we might assume we are more like one person in this relationship and in this story than the other. And so I want to hasten to suggest that in all relationships, all of us at times find ourselves in the place of the beaten man, in a place where we greatly need friends and people to support us. And at other times, we find ourselves in a place of abundance with skills, resources, and abilities to help others.

As many have pointed out in this story before me, we also find ourselves at times like the priest and the Levite. We find ourselves confronted with challenges with which we'd rather not deal, as much as we might be sympathetic to the other, and as much as we might desperately wish that someone would do something, we hope that that someone is someone else. Like the priest and the Levite, we look away, we move out of the way, and hope that other people will take care of the problem.

This doesn't mean that we're not good people, any more than the priest and the Levite in Jesus' story weren't solid, respected, contributing members of their society.

But the question posed at the heart of this parable to us, members of the body of Christ, to the church, is what do we do when we see a neighbour in need?

Or as Christ urged us in Matthew, chapter five, the famous sermon on the mount, when he said, "so when you are offering your gift at the altar" . . . Meaning when you are seeking to worship God and to show your love for Christ . . . "if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then [only then] come and offer your gift [of worship]."

First be reconciled.

The call to the church in Canada seems remarkably clear when it comes to the topic of "why reconciliation matters."

It matters because we all matter. God loves us all. And we need to love each other.

As members of the body of Christ, the church called to ministry in Canada, in the early part of the twenty-first century, how might we live out a theology of hope and abundance that focuses on the enormous future potential of a strong, healthy, and respectful relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples?

As with any relationship, it begins with getting to know each other better. This includes getting to know the history of our relationship and how it has shaped our present and led to the issues at the heart of the relationship, those issues, that movements like *#idle no more* bring to the fore.

But getting to know each other is key.

About six years ago, I met a residential school survivor named Vivian. I'm not going to mention her last name because, as she says, it's not her real last name. It was given to her in residential school by people who were not her family and so she prefers to just go by the name, Vivian.

Our relationship was pretty matter of fact at first. We both served on a committee of our national church, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, a typical committee whose job it was to review projects and determine which ones to fund; healing and reconciliation projects, in this case.

Over the course of time, I interacted with Vivian through many meetings of this committee. And then I got to meet her in person at a three-day annual retreat of another church committee. And we met again elsewhere. You get the idea. In our case, a common interest in reconciliation brought two people together whose life experiences happened to be profoundly different.

Time spent with Vivian began to add up. I came to enjoy in particular her delightful and unique sense of humour, the kind of humour, however, that sometimes might worry you, if you didn't know her.

I remember booking a plane trip for her once, and she wrote me an email to ask for a window seat, in case, as she said, she decided she wanted to jump out at 30,000 feet.

Vivian is a cat person. I am dog person. Vivian likes country music. My passion is opera. Vivian is most comfortable in t-shirts and jeans when speaking before audiences of 100 or more. I am not.

Over time, I got to see glimpses of the pain Vivian had suffered at residential school, including physical pain visible to this day in her damaged finger. I learned of how other members of her family had suffered, including a brother who died at a young age, having struggled following his school years to make it in "white" society. Instead he faced discrimination and rejection and he struggled to find hope. Contrary to the belief of some, his residential school education had utterly failed to prepare him for life among non-native people. And he died young.

One of the big highlights of my time working closely with Vivian occurred not far from here on June 11, 2008. Along with Vivian's son, Tyler, we found ourselves among a delegation of Presbyterian leaders and residential school survivors of Presbyterian schools, like Vivian, who had come to hear the prime minister apologize for Indian residential schools on behalf of all Canadians. It was a huge day. A wonderful day. A day of warmth and glorious sunshine that seemed to celebrate with those of us who had gathered together on Parliament Hill. It was day full of hope for the future.

Vivian celebrated after attending the proceedings in the House of Commons by managing to sneak in to a reception for dignitaries following the big event where she got the Prime Minister, National Chief Phil Fontaine, and opposition leader Stephane Dion to sign her copy of the apology, an apology whose fifth anniversary is coming up this year.

But the memory that means most to me is not of that day but of another day that Vivian herself chose to highlight at an address like this a few years later.

In June of 2010, Vivian and I found ourselves together again in a tent in Winnipeg during the first national event of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. It was cold and it was rainy outside. Another day that seemed to mirror the feelings of those who had gathered, this time the feelings of sorrow and repentance for what had happened in residential schools as survivors shared their stories.

At some point in that tent, when memories of residential schools were being shared and the need for healing was made plain to all of us, Vivian started crying. As she continued to cry, I went over and put my arm around her. By that time, I knew her well enough to do so. We weren't strangers anymore. Although we didn't see each other often, I knew her well enough to offer a simple gesture of human comfort without thinking twice about it.

Until about year later when Vivian was given the opportunity to address the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada on this very topic of the church's role in the work of reconciliation. And to my great surprise she mentioned that moment we had shared in Winnipeg. She talked about what it had meant to her that someone who represented the church had put her arm around her. I was taken aback, and humbled, that such a simple human gesture as a hug could mean so much.

On reflection I recognize that it meant so much because as peoples we are so very far from a place where most of us are ready to hug each other. Barriers have gone up. There is mistrust between us. We don't know each other. And so that, I suggest, is where we need to begin. We need to spend time with each other and to develop relationships.

Many Canadians are taking advantage of the work we are doing with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to begin a journey of healing and relationship building.

They are coming to our events. And if they can't come in person, they are watching Truth Commission activities on our website. They are bearing witness to what is happening and, many, in turn, are bearing witness to what they have heard to others.

Some, like the organizers of the events here in Ottawa which are accompanying *the creator's sacrifice* art tour, are organizing their own events and activities to bring people together and to learn from and listen to each other, with the hope of building deeper relationships over time.

Looking at the church's role in reconciliation from a vantage point outside of Christian circles, I think many Canadians, regardless of their spiritual beliefs or in the absence of such beliefs, would see a role for those churches which had direct involvement in the residential school story in the truth and reconciliation process. They would regard apologies and action from the settlement agreement churches as a matter of justice and fairness. But what about those churches in Canada who did not have a history of institutional involvement in the residential school story, or even one in which their members might have worked in the schools? What is their role as churches?

I have given a partial answer already, when I spoke about our context for ministry, a context shared by all churches in Canada, in which a relationship exists between indigenous and non-indigenous Canadians as peoples who share the same land, and a history in this place.

And it remains significant to me that some fifteen years ago, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which examined all aspects of that relationship, made the somewhat mind-blowing observation that in their view, "of all the non-governmental institutions in this country, religious institutions have perhaps the greatest potential to foster awareness and understanding between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people."

For myself, I think that potential remains, and remains to be realized in the fullest sense. I feel profoundly hopeful as a Christian reading this Royal Commission finding, written at a time, not so long ago, when many Christians were beginning to worry, as they continue to worry, about their relevance. Are we getting it right? Are we living out are calling? And, if we are, why does it seem at times like no one's listening?

The Royal Commission reminds us that faith communities have an important role to play. I can only imagine they said this out of a common conviction still shared by many in this country that religions, at their best, do point to the sacred in life, do help us aspire to all that is good, and to go about our lives with, as indigenous peoples say, good minds, good hearts and good spirits, and to live each and every day, in everything we do, as an active prayer of thanksgiving to the Creator for all that the Creator has given to us.

The importance of education is a theme that has been amplified by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. We acknowledge in our interim report that in our school curricula, "Canadians have been denied a full and proper education as to the nature of aboriginal societies and the history of the relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples."

We make, in our interim report, several recommendations urging that governments revise curricula to ensure all Canadians in future receive a complete education about the history of relations between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. Churches have important roles to play in assisting in the work of education, especially among their members from a faith-based perspective, and as advocates for healing the relationship in the public sphere.

We churches also have much to learn from each other on this journey, and, in walking together ecumenically we may grow in faith together as we wrestle with this issue.

As an example, I turn again to the witness of our hosts this evening in the Christian Reformed community who at their most recent synod in 2012 decided to lift up the Belhar confession as an ecumenical faith declaration, and as such, a declaration worthy of careful study and reflection.

“The Belhar confession was created by Reformed Christians in South Africa in 1982 as a response to the sin of apartheid.”

I think the following excerpts from the Belhar confession resonate powerfully in our Canadian context:

“We believe that Christ’s work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another; that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ.”

“We believe that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted.”

“We believe that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another.”

It is no small point that this statement which calls the church to work for justice in relationship to all peoples is also a call for unity within the church.

And it is no small irony, in fact I think it is a profoundly important blessing, that many churches in Canada find themselves united at this sacred time in our conviction that the work of healing and reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples is our *missio dei*, God’s mission for us, in this place and at this time. It is our calling.

For me it is one of God’s great mysteries, and a sign of God’s unending and abundant grace, that churches who once competed to run residential schools as mission fields in Canada now repent of their sins and as Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and members of the United Church of Canada—the churches which historically ran residential schools—along with our brothers and sisters in the Christian Reformed community, Baptists, Evangelicals, Mennonites, Lutherans, and members of other faiths, Jews, Muslims, Baha’i, Sikhs, Buddhists, and many others see common hope and common purpose in the journey of truth-telling, healing and reconciliation.

My dream is that *all* peoples of *all* faiths in this country will unite in the work of healing and reconciliation. That *#idle no more* will mean no one in this country will remain idle, when and where there is opportunity for an indigenous and non-indigenous individual to enter into relationship with each other, to learn from each other, and to become friends, even as they walk along different paths, as the Creator's spirit leads them.

My dream is that one day people from around the world will come to Canada and ask, how did we do it? How did indigenous and non-indigenous peoples reconcile? And how did the people of the church contribute to making that dream a reality? And that all of us in Canada will respond by eagerly and joyfully sharing our story of reconciliation with all of God's people.

In the name of all of my relations, indigenous and non-indigenous, I thank you very much.