



New Stories to Tell: Living Ecumenism Today

A project of the
Anglican-Roman Catholic
Dialogue of Canada

Introduction

The following story comes from a priest involved in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada. It evokes some aspects of the reconciliation to which we are called:

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*As those who took part in any of the national TRC events will know, one way that the churches were asked to participate was by making available official ‘church listeners’ who would be on hand during the proceedings in order to meet privately with residential school survivors and their family members, to listen to their stories, and to offer a personal expression of apology on behalf of their church if this was requested. One man who came to sit with me was quite elderly and had spent several years at a residential school in his teenage years.*

*He told me that seeing me wearing my clergy shirt and collar that day triggered in him memories of how he had been made to feel by Christian priests he knew in the past. He shared that ministers of the Church only ever evoked in him two emotions: fear and shame. He had been afraid that the priests would catch him doing something he was not supposed to be doing and that this would result in him or someone in his family getting into trouble. He became ashamed to be “an Indian” because*

*he was told that his was a savage culture. And so, when he saw me, he knew he needed to come to speak to me.*

*He did not come with anger, and he did not come with blame. But he said that he wanted me, as a Catholic priest, to know that he was not afraid of me anymore, and he was not ashamed of who he was. He was confident and secure and even proud of his identity as an Indigenous person, and he wanted me, while wearing my clerical collar, to sit with him and hear that from him, because he had never been able to say that to any of the priests he had previously known. He did not feel he needed my apology, but he appreciated that a priest of the Catholic Church was willing to be there to offer one if desired.*

*At this point, after some awkwardness, it became clear to both of us that there was a misunderstanding. He had attended a school operated by the Roman Catholic Church in Canada, not the Anglican Church of Canada. I was an Anglican priest. So what were we to do? Should I offer a word of apology anyway? Or should we find a Catholic priest and start the process over again? At this point he uttered words that stuck with me deeply ever since: "Catholic... Anglican... It's all the same. It was Christians who ran these schools and who did these things to my people. You are all responsible together. You all need our forgiveness. Maybe you should get your own stories straight before you talk to us."*



As we gathered stories of Roman Catholic and Anglican relationships in Canada for this volume, this encounter stood out. It speaks clearly about our shared identity as Christians in the present, and about our dividedness in the past. It speaks clearly about our need for right relationship with Indigenous neighbours, as

well as with one another, and about the way one relationship affects another. It points to the work of reconciliation as the way forward for the healing of our relationships. And most clearly of all, the speaker in the story asks us to “get our own stories straight” as churches.

Our stories overlap, but they are not the same. We are Anglicans and Roman Catholics in Canada, where the history of our faith is one of separation. From the beginning, we have been divided churches in this land. Our separation was transmitted first of all to Indigenous people during the earliest missions in New France and British North America. It was a stark reality in colonial life, as a Catholic majority came under the rule of an Empire whose established religion was Anglican. It continued to resonate in the ways the Protestant population expressed prejudice towards Catholics (and the favour was often returned!) and in the separateness of our educational, language, and legal identities.

That separateness is a reality which looms large in our present-day experiences as Christians together, and which affects the perceptions our society has of us, the stereotypes we have of one another, and the ministry we can offer. Both the work of the Anglican–Roman Catholic dialogue, and the stories of people and communities encountering one another in new ways, present a way forward. The path involves facing and reconciling our memories, but also making new history together.

We have chosen to present an invitation to that new path by telling stories. Our history of division is itself a story: not just fact on a page, but the lived experience of our ancestors. The stories we tell in

this book are new chapters. Each of them, in some way, illustrates the agreed statements of the second phase of the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II), because that dialogue is rooted in the stories of real Christians and their communities. (In fact, the experience of dialogue is a story too, of encounter between people of our two traditions.)

But stories are also a way to engage our imaginations, our feelings, and our experiences, which may be similar or different to the experiences other people share. By entering into these stories, we can understand in new ways what is happening, and what can happen, when we encounter one another. Most importantly, the stories and the events they narrate contain glimpses of God’s grace offering us a new future, along with the healing of the past. And so, we hope, they will encourage others to make that discovery for themselves. We look forward to hearing new stories which people will live out and share, as a response to what we read here about what God is doing in our churches.

One way in which ARCIC describes our present situation is to say that we are in “real but incomplete communion” (cf. *The Church as Communion*, 47). We are discovering that the faith we share, and the grace we receive together, is more powerful than the hurts and divisions of the past. We are discovering that it is possible to grow together into a new right relationship, with one another and with God, that also leads to a renewal in our relationship with our neighbours and our society. Together, we can also face our failures, past and present, as we receive together the promise that God’s power is made perfect in our weakness. Reconciliation includes the grace to make an apology and also the grace of forgiveness, whether immediate

or gradual. Living these graces takes prayer, dialogue, time and effort.

The language of reconciliation and of right relationship is a gift we are learning, ever more deeply, from people like the Indian Residential School survivor who told us to “get our stories straight.” The broken relationships which Christians brought with us to this land continue to affect the way we relate to the land, to its First Peoples, and to one another. Yearning for and coming back into right relationship involves all those aspects of who we are.

We invite you to read these stories, ponder them, discuss them, and share them with your Anglican, Roman Catholic, and other neighbours. We invite you to see God’s grace at work in reconciling our churches and the peoples of this land. We invite you to remember when you have been a part of stories like these – or wished you could have been. Most of all, we invite you to live and to tell your own stories.