

**Presentation made to the ELCIC Convention
regarding Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery
July 10, 2015
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Thank you for the warm welcome. I am honoured to be here with you. I am grateful to be here on the land of peoples of Treaty 6. I am humbled by the leadership of Dr. Marie Wilson and Stephen Kafkwi offered this morning.

When I returned home from the Truth and Reconciliation Closing ceremonies—a bit of full circle moment for me after being transformed by my experience of being an ecumenical witness at six of the seven national events—people asked me how it was, and I found it difficult to find the words. I had writing and speaking to do but I kept putting it off.

A friend had asked me to reflect personally on the experience for a discipleship publication in the United States and when I could delay it no longer and I finally sat down to write, it all came, including the tears I thought would never stop. You see, I abhor but I do have categories for a government's national project of assimilation, what the Commissioners called "cultural genocide." I understand greed and politics and I can put what my government did in a context of horrors that other governments around the world have inflicted on their citizens. And I abhor but also have a category for individual criminal acts of abuse against children. For that which seems unspeakable, we do have words. But what I struggled with, what brought tears of frustration, shame, anger and sadness, was how my church, how each of the four churches, could have collaborated with government and abusers in the profound harm of generations of children. How could my faith, our faith, have been the motivation of such profound wrong?

These are some of my soul wrenching questions:

- How did we who claim to know what is sacred help break the bonds between parent and child?
- How did we who claim to recognize the dignity of each person made in God's image replace names with numbers and bury children in unmarked graves without informing their families?
- How did we whose God is love, humiliate children or tell them their beloved family members were of the devil?
- How could we who are called to bring good news to the oppressed enact such terrible oppression in the name of that good news?

Christian people participated in what some have called systemic evil by trusting in their own benevolence. We did that in the schools; we did that in the broader project of colonization. What kind of ideas, assumptions brought us there? And what will stop us from ever doing it again?

There is of course no definitive answer to these questions. But a clue lies in that which you are being asked to repudiate today, and that is the Doctrine of Discovery.

What are we talking about when we use that phrase? The Doctrine of Discovery is the premise that Christians have a moral and legal right based in their religious superiority to invade and seize Indigenous lands and to dominate Indigenous Peoples.¹

At one level the Doctrine of Discovery is church teaching. It can be traced back to a series of church documents, papal bulls, such as those of 1452, and 1455, that called for non-Christian peoples to be captured, vanquished, subdued, to put them into perpetual slavery and to have their possessions seized by Christian monarchs.² Another in 1493, by Pope Alexander VI, emboldening the explorations of Columbus, said that non-Christian barbarous nations should be subjugated and proselytized for the propagation of the Christian empire. The convenient rationale: Indigenous peoples so called “primitive” nature meant that it acceptable, preferable for them and their lands to be put in the hands of the Christian monarchs of the explorers who “discovered” them. So on one level, the Doctrine of Discovery has its roots in Christian teaching that provided moral justification to imperial territorial claims.³

On another level, the Doctrine of Discovery is law. In 1823, the U.S. Supreme Court codified this moral justification into secular law in a ruling that gave the U.S. "ultimate title" over all lands within its claimed borders.⁴ This ruling has been cited repeatedly by Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and United States courts as the basis for assumed sovereignty over Indigenous lands, used as recently as 2005. Part of this legal rationale, particularly used in Australia, was the idea of *terra nullius*, or the concept that the land was empty (or at least empty of “civilised” people, putting it to “civilised” use) So on another level, the Doctrine of Discovery is law—about legal right.

But perhaps most importantly, the Doctrine of Discovery is a set of ideas: That to be European and Christian is to be so superior to Indigenous peoples; that it is only good and right for them and their lands to be subjugated; that this domination, if it results in the conversion of Indigenous peoples, is for their best interest. As the Truth and Reconciliation Summary Report points out, the foundational view

¹ *Statement on the doctrine of discovery and its enduring impact on Indigenous Peoples, 17 February 2012*
World Council of Churches Executive Committee, 14-17 February 2012
<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/executive-committee/2012-02/statement-on-the-doctrine-of-discovery-and-its-enduring-impact-on-indigenous-peoples>

² These papal bulls related to Portugal’s expansion into Africa, including the trafficking in African slaves, and established a tradition of church sanction of discovery and conquest in which *Inter Cetera*, of 1493, would be understood. See *Five Hundred Years of Injustice: The Legacy of Fifteenth Century Religious Prejudice*, Steve Newcomb.

³ While these are a few of what could be considered written source documents for what came to be called the Doctrine of Discovery these beliefs were widely held over the next centuries by Christian nations and employed in exploration and conquest. For example, John Cabot, was given sanction by England to take possession of lands “notwithstanding the occupancy of the natives, who were heathens...”

⁴ The case, *Johnson v. McIntosh*, established the US as a successor nation to the discovery and dominion claims of the age of explorers.

is that Indigenous peoples should be colonized “for their benefit in this world or the next.”⁵ These concepts are what enabled the churches to collaborate in the residential schools system and to continually pour Christian fuel on the colonial fire. Twisted benevolence wrapped around dehumanization is what has allowed actions to flow from churches and people of faith that were theological and morally repugnant.

It is fair to say that was then, what about now? Indigenous peoples call for repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery because they see not only the legal framework but these core concepts of superiority and dehumanization still operative in their daily lives. They see European world view continuing to be made normative, to be sustained in law, while their cultures, traditions, perspectives, many of them deeply prophetic in light of the current ecological crisis, are trivialized and demeaned and Indigenous rights are invalidated.

I had the privilege recently to sit in circle of Indigenous people preparing for ministry in one of the KAIROS churches. I asked them how the Doctrine of Discovery is still experienced. They spoke about how they continue to be defined by the *Indian Act*. About how governments are privileging the rights of corporations to give land for fracking, mining or pipelines, negating the land sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples. They gave other examples from questioning their capacity to be ordained to the colonial hymns that were **the** ones considered sacred to the racism that was a part of their day to day.

The residue of the Doctrine of Discovery is evident when people say “‘they’ can’t handle alcohol, you know”...or “‘they’ just don’t know how to take care of their children” or when the risk of violence for Indigenous women is some much greater than it is for me. Or when in churches we think but maybe don’t say, “they are just not there yet,” out of this sense that Indigenous peoples are aspiring to be us.

In repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery, we are being asked to reject historical church teachings and legal precedents that are inconsistent with the Gospel and the inherent dignity and rights of all peoples made in the image of God. But we are also being asked to examine any place in our churches, in our communities, in our country and in ourselves, where the ideas might still reside, and to disown them in favour of ideas, commitments and actions towards reconciliation. This is not just about a onetime resolution, but about a life of continued reflection, spiritual discipline and witness.

The repudiation of an abhorrent church history is challenging—we have to own up to our collective complicities as Christians—but the transformation from ideas that might linger, especially when we may not even be aware of our collusion with them--this is even harder. For me it helps to have companions who challenge me, folks with whom I can wrestle things out, places where I can hear others, particularly concrete ideas to advance change.

In that light, I am going to show you a very short video, where folks in the KAIROS community are reflecting on what this transformation towards reconciliation might mean... and then I will invite you be

⁵ *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future, Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, June 2015, p. 49.

challenged and inspired by each other, through some very brief conversation at your tables. The questions are:

- 1. Where do you see the Doctrine of Discovery continuing to operate?*
- 2. What does reconciliation mean to you?*

Thank you for your conversation.

In any call to repudiate, we must ask with what will we replace? I think the answer lies in renewal of the treaties and in implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples. The earliest of our peace and friendship treaties are said to reflect Elder's visions for a shared life together in mutuality and respect. For Indigenous peoples they were sacred agreements to share land and resources, with land understood as gift. National Indigenous Anglican Bishop Mark MacDonald reminds us that through treaties we made relatives of one another. Dr. Marie Wilson spoke of what we might in the language of our faith call a covenant. Our chronic violations in treaties have been settler failures and betrayals in our covenantal responsibilities.

Remember the words of Jeremiah 31: 33: *But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.* Jeremiah wrote against a backdrop of failure and despair, speaking of new covenant that could be written on peoples' hearts, describing a transformation of the human heart so great that the people would be enabled to keep the covenant. It would be unbreakable.

The courage of the survivors has given us truth and through that truth the only possibility of a new and reconciled future. It is our turn to respond with contrite hearts, to repudiate the past doctrine, to reject the ideas that linger and to claim a future of hope and commitment. Let us begin to renew those ancient treaties, write them on our hearts, change our lives to fulfill the obligations and possibilities of shared life together in this land.

Throughout the summary report and calls to action the Commissioners affirm the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* as the framework for reconciliation in Canada. We can read this as a "doctrine", written by Indigenous peoples—a "doctrine" not of discovery but of recovery, dignity and rights. As we reject the Doctrine of Discovery, let us embrace the UN Declaration as context for theological reflection, as a new legal framework, and as principles to guide our way of thinking, and therefore our way of acting. Might the Declaration be that unbreakable covenant that can guide our way to a shared future?

In KAIROS we walk together. I know that I need your hopefulness and commitment when I my heart is too unsettled by what we have done. I hope that I can offer my faith and witness when you get weary. As Bishop Susan reminded us, the Commissioners showed us the mountain and called us to do the climbing. On your tables is a resource to support you as individuals and churches as you work towards

reconciliation: *Strength for Climbing*. Between Canada Day and Thanksgiving, we are encouraging you, every Canadian, to read the summary report, to pray the 94 calls to action, to own this truth with heart and mind so that it will not be another report sitting on a shelf but a wake-up call for a whole country. At Thanksgiving, KAIROS will launch a bold campaign, Winds of Change, that will offer an opportunity to unite in advocacy for two of the key Calls to Action, mandatory curriculum for schools and for new Canadians, sustained public education about the history of colonization, residential schools, and the critical contributions of Inuit, Métis and First Nations people to our common life.

Through KAIROS, I hope the churches can be travellers on a common road, seeking reconciliation, praying the calls to action, renewing covenants with Indigenous peoples, and, more than anything else, sustaining hope that despite our brutal past, we can be different, we will be different. The most humbling reality is that after all that has happened, for the most part, Indigenous peoples continue to offer gracious welcome, seeking our partnership in a just transformation of this land. To that humbling invitation of true reconciliation, an expression of profound grace, how can we refuse?

Let us pray:

Gracious and loving God, forgive us for what we have done and what we have left undone in our country's journey with Indigenous peoples; Our failure to live up to the treaties, to live up to the dignity of all peoples, to live up to your dreams of justice, have created a deep rupture in our nation and a deep wound in our hearts. Bring us a change of heart, a renovated will, and a deepened resolve for renewed and hopeful future. With your enabling and empowering love, help us to begin to live in honour and mutual respect. Write this covenant of right relations on each of our hearts, and through the power of your Spirit, make it an enduring bond of love and justice. In the name of the One who loved every person, every creature, into being, we pray. Amen.