

**ABORIGINAL TASK FORCE RESPONSE**  
**to the**  
**REPORT of the ROYAL COMMISSION on ABORIGINAL PEOPLES**

**INTRODUCTION and PURPOSE**

The massive document entitled Report of The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP Report] traces its origins to the 16 point mandate given in 1991 by the Canadian Government to two co-chairs and five commissioners. Released in 1996 in four languages (English, French, Cree and Inuktitut), the five volumes are published as six bound texts. The RCAP Report's topics range from historical overviews to visioning a new path, from documenting destructive racial policies to recommending healing strategies, from depicting dysfunctional dependencies to proposing solutions.

The commission chose to filter its work through the question: *What are the foundations of a fair and honourable relationship between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Canada?*<sup>1</sup> Following five years of research and dialogue, the RCAP Report summarized its central conclusion: *The main policy direction, pursued for more than 150 years, first by colonial then by Canadian governments, has been wrong.*<sup>2</sup>

The report supports this conclusion by documenting the resultant distortions in self-respect, human relationships, relationship to the land, and power struggles between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. It calls for the recognition and restoration of Aboriginal peoples as nations with distinctive histories, values and cultures having an interdependent relationship with the nation of Canada. Its objective is to find ways to bring down barriers.

The Aboriginal Task Force [ATF] of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada [EFC] resonates with the need to build bridges, not barricades. It recognizes the stages of relationship through the past 500 years: the initial contact; a rough-edged mutual respect; growing disempowerment of Aboriginals; and the modern stage of recovery, renegotiation and renewal.<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to make the RCAP Report accessible to the Evangelical community, the ATF has published this paper as both a summarization of the report and an interaction with its contents. More importantly, it points to actions and attitudes which the Church must heed if justice and the Gospel are to be served in this land called Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> Canada, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples; *People to People, Nation to Nation: Highlights from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Canada: Canada Communication Group-Publishing, 1996), x. Note: this is an additional pictorial volume which summarizes the RCAP Report. Also see ATF response to the Governmental apology available from EFC.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 5.

## **VOLUME 1: LOOKING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK**

Response by Wendy Peterson

Terms such as domination, assimilation, paternalism and loss of dignity are used to describe the Aboriginal experience and perspective in this first section. The introductory volume entitled *Looking Forward, Looking Back*, contains over seven hundred pages of text. It begins with a lengthy Mohawk prayer of Thanksgiving. This prayer is reminiscent of Thanksgiving Psalms in the Christian Scripture. However, not only is the Creator addressed but each object of thanks is personally addressed. The prayer conveys a gentle, non-judgmental, healing tone. The Mohawk Elder offers words of cleansing and refreshment, acknowledging the strength, yet batteredness, of the people. And so the pray-er begins with addressing first the Creator, and then Mother Earth, moving to micro-organisms, to the crawling and slithering creatures (wolf, bear, turtle) that represent Mohawk clans; onto the fish, birds (notably, the eagle), and the “rooted nations” of trees and plants; the bodies of waters, the sun, moon, air; and back to the Creator. Only then does the prayer directly address the “two-legged” realm of humanity. The length of the thanksgiving element is in striking contrast to the two brief requests stated: the first is for protection, but balanced with the knowledge of death; the second is for “wisdom to use the power of the good mind” to listen, understand, respect and reflect upon the words of others. There is an intriguing blend of the ancient with the modern throughout as the Elder interweaves a concern for damage done to the earth and its inhabitants by pollution and exploitation. It is also a blend of the dual sense of human indebtedness and responsibility. Strikingly absent is any overtone of preachiness or blame for what lies ahead in this Report on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

The comparison of this Aboriginal prayer offering to Christian prayer offerings, both doctrinally and in terms of world view, is fascinating. This prayer reflects a cyclical view of life, as one would anticipate from a people who dwell in a land of extreme climatic cycles and are thus so dependent upon the providence of nature. Each species or element in nature is regarded as a separate “nation” with instructions to perform specific functions. These instructions were given by the Creator at the beginning of time. According to the Elder’s experience and observations, only the “two-footed nation” does not live in harmony with these instructions. And so the prayer has an underlying melancholy tone. The Creator is acknowledged as supreme over creation and all creatures, yet the personal address to elements of creation smacks hard against Christian doctrine. The elder uses the imagery of the eagle feather to ceremonially cleanse his ‘congregates’. The closest parallel is perhaps the minister who confesses corporate sin in public prayer. A valuable stepping stone to presenting an analogy to Jesus Christ as the living water is provided by the Elder’s words: “Water is indeed one of the most powerful medicines we have, for it has the ability to give and to sustain life.” This is a thanksgiving prayer, but it is also a pastoral prayer.

### **An Alternative Reality**

The first section of the text is entitled “Opening the Door”. A multifaceted volume, it is subdivided into three parts, followed by five Appendices including biographical notes on the Commissioners, and ends with a summarization of the 24 recommendations from volume 1 alone. Part One, The Relationship in Historical Perspective, provides an overview of the relationship of Aboriginals with the dominant society beginning with initial contact through colonization, Treaty making and modern court actions. The RCAP Report clearly denounces the concept of *terra nullius* -- that is, that Canada was an empty land awaiting a discoverer. With maps and diagrams, it teaches a reality that challenges the concepts most Canadians absorbed from Euro-centric educational classes. In an appendix, it reproduces the 1763 Royal Proclamation that guaranteed land rights to “the several Nations and Tribes of Indians,” ordering non-Aboriginal people

who have settled unpurchased or unceded lands to remove themselves.<sup>4</sup> The Report sardonically notes: “For at least 200 years, the newcomers would not have been able to survive the rigours of the climate, succeed in their businesses (fishing, whaling, fur trading), or dodge each other’s bullets without Aboriginal help.”<sup>5</sup>

One of the traditions shared by both Aboriginals and Europeans was the political and economic practice of treaty making. Treaties presuppose independent peoples, agreements made nation to nation.

### **The Tears of the Generations**

Part Two, entitled False Assumptions and a Failed Relationship, addresses the underlying ethnocentrism which led to assimilation policies. These were then translated into the establishment of residential schools,<sup>6</sup> abusive reserve policies, and double standards such as those endured by Aboriginal war veterans, and even the displacement and relocation of entire communities. It is in this section that the reader can hear the tears shed through the generations. One should pause here in respect. However, the report moves on to various Governmental Acts enacted as attempts to resolve or eliminate ‘the Indian problem’ on the presupposition that the answer was to “civilize Indians”. In the words of Duncan Campbell Scot: “Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of the Bill.”<sup>7</sup> One supposes that all the Treaties were to be as easily disposed of as ‘the Indian problem’.

### **Renewal**

Part Three, Building the Foundations of a Renewed Relationship, offers a strategy for reconstruction built upon mutual recognition, respect, sharing and responsibility. It is time for the shameful legacy to be acknowledged so that a new way of walking together can begin. For this reason, this initial volume of the RCAP Report ends on a positive note, a note that offers a vision of hope for change, as well as concrete steps that are achievable. This attitude encourages one to read on -- to learn more. The remaining five volumes round out this hopeful vision.

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<sup>4</sup> Canada, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *Volume 1: Looking Forward, Looking Back* (Canada: Canada Communication Group-Publishing, 1996), 724.

<sup>5</sup> *People to People, Nation to Nation*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> The ATF has spent considerable time on discussion and responding to the residential school issue as it has become a focal issue in Aboriginal / Euro-Canadian relationship gone awry. EFC has three articles available.

<sup>7</sup> *Looking Forward, Looking Back*, 599.

## VOLUME 2: RESTRUCTURING the RELATIONSHIP

Response by Wendy Peterson

### Nationhood and Self-Government

Canadians accustomed to thinking of Aboriginal people as “Indians on reserves” find it difficult to wrap their minds around the term First Nations. Reclamation of nationhood is one of the steps taken by Aboriginals in the attempt to regain dignity and a sense of place. The claim to individual nation recognition is historically rooted in the nation-to-nation treaties and trade alliances as well as cultural self-identity. This is not a new need nor a new way of thinking for Aboriginals. Hear the words of British Columbia Chiefs from a 1910 letter directed to Sir Wilfred Laurier:

We find ourselves without any real home in this, our country. . . . Our people are fined and imprisoned for. . . using the same game and fish which we were told would always be ours for food. Gradually we are becoming regarded as trespassers over a large portion of this, our country.<sup>8</sup>

A second step is the declaration of the right to self-government. “Self-government is a right they never surrendered and that they want to exercise once more,” declares the Report on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.<sup>9</sup> Oral history informs and gives life to cultural memory of self-determination. More importantly, Aboriginals believe the Creator is responsible for the development of each nation and is the giver of land. No government can ever claim to truly “own” land anymore than they could claim to own the oxygen we breath. RCAP Report supports the claims to nationhood and self-government as being legitimate according to both international law (in terms of “rights to self-determination”) and Section 25 of the 1982 Canadian Constitution.

Colonization so fragmented Aboriginal Peoples’ relationship to the land that nations need to be reformed. There is no neat and tidy method for doing this.

The problem is that the historical Aboriginal nations were undermined by disease, relocations [as well as intermarriages] and the full array of assimilationist government policies. They were fragmented into bands, reserves and small settlements. . . . They will have to reconstruct themselves as nations. We believe strongly that membership in Aboriginal nations should *not* be defined by race. Aboriginal nations are political communities, often compromising people of mixed background and heritage. Their bonds are those of culture and identity, not blood. Their unity comes from their shared history and their strong sense of themselves as people.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Inclusion of intermarriage mine. I would add, historically communities were divided at the whim of or based on the value system of the Government of Canada rather than self-identification by Aboriginal peoples.

Based on population, territory and shared history, there are 60 to 80 Aboriginal nations.<sup>11</sup>

### **Restructuring for Renewal**

This volume of RCAP Report is split into two texts due to the sheer quantity of information. Part 1 lays the groundwork for governmental change, offering models for reformation and renewal. These begin with the elimination of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and its replacement with a senior cabinet position entitled the Minister for Aboriginal Relations along with a new Department of Aboriginal Relations. An additional Minister of Indian and Inuit Services plus a Indian and Inuit Services department would have the task of delivering gradually diminishing federal services.

RCAP Report envisions three basic models of self-government. These include Nation Government in exclusive territorial bases, Public Government where Aboriginals are in the majority (for example, the Nunavut Agreement), and Community of Interest Government related to urban centers. Core Aboriginal jurisdiction is delineated in twenty different areas covering citizenship, elections, environmental management, economic life, taxation, social and child welfare, education, housing, *et cetera*. Will self-government work? In the words of Mavis Etienne, a Mohawk, “How could it be worse than what we have now?”

Part 2 of *Restructuring the Relationship* devotes over 350 pages to the discussion of lands and resources. Since Confederation, almost two-thirds of the land designation for exclusive Aboriginal use has gradually “disappeared”. Some of this land was reneged upon, other land was squatted upon and then absorbed by Euro-Canadians; in other cases, it was simply expropriated and sold to corporations or other outsiders. One of the misconceptions RCAP Report sets out to correct, is the impression that great tracts of land belong to Aboriginals in all provinces. A pictorial illustration compares the larger reservations (U.S.A. system) in the four states below Saskatchewan and Manitoba to the minute reserves in the two provinces. The difference is staggering. In Manitoba, for example, if all reserves could be brought together into one area and placed on an envelope-sized map of Manitoba, the territory would be the size of the stamp.

### **Preparing the Path**

RCAP Report recognizes the necessity for education in preparing Canadians to comprehend and accept self-government, including the settlement of land claims. Canadians are largely uninformed “about the role treaties played in the creation of Canada and about the rights and obligations they conferred on all peoples who share this land.”<sup>12</sup> This is not only the job of the government, awareness

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>12</sup> Canada, Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Part 2, Restructuring the Relationship* (Canada: Canada Communication Group-Publishing, 1996), 613f.

of Aboriginal issues and the history of injustice is an educational task that the Church should own.<sup>13</sup>

The courts, while having been resorted to, are not the preferred body for renegotiating relationships. Throughout the report, recommendations are offered either to circumvent litigation or as a means of retaining credibility and vitality in new relationships being forged. This area illustrates the thoroughness of the report. Thus RCAP Report calls for the formation of “an independent administrative tribunal, The Aboriginal Lands and Treaties Tribunal. One of its principal roles will be to ensure a just resolution of existing specific claims . . . . The tribunal will have responsibility not only for monitoring the fairness of the bargaining process; . . . but also, where no agreement is reached, for adjudicating outstanding substantive issues and making final and binding decisions on the merits of these claims.”<sup>14</sup>

This volume moves on to the issue of economic development, recalling historical Aboriginal economies and the forces of deterioration; then it moves on to envision a new reality of interdependence, self-respect and shared resources. The section concludes by tackling the issue of welfare dependence and principles for change. It is followed by an appendix which summarizes the RCAP Report recommendations put forth in this volume alone. They total 59 pages. This is hardly a product of hand-wringing and helplessness. The Church, as the channel for justice, cannot ignore this work under the guise of being too busy elsewhere. The prosperity of Euro and other Canadians has been built on the losses incurred by Aboriginals.

RCAP Report concludes its highlights of this section with these words directed to Aboriginals: “But it will not work unless Aboriginal people, in their nations and communities and personal lives, see that it does. To do so, they will need to develop and use their full potential as human beings and as citizens of their nations. This significant challenge is the subject of the next [volume].”

We would add: The intent for reclamation of nationhood and self-government is to provide Aboriginal peoples with opportunities within their own cultural norms to develop meaningful work and sustainable wealth. No more than any other people group expects. Can the Church deny or ignore this?

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<sup>13</sup> We would recommend, as a resource, the kit designed for this purpose: *Wiciwetowin: Walking Together on the Path of Justice*, Citizens for Public Justice, 1998. Available from Citizens for Public Justice or World Vision Canada.

<sup>14</sup> *Restructuring the Relationship.*, 592.

## **VOLUME 3: GATHERING STRENGTH**

Response by Ray Aldred

We live in a competitive society. Western culture has become synonymous with competition and money. In a competitive society most things are reduced to winning or losing, producing or not producing, success or failure. As a result, people are considered valuable only when they are producing something. The competitive society only cares about results, results within a short time period. Thus governments must produce change quickly if they want to stay elected. People who desire society's affirmation must "produce". Everything else is secondary to production. This expectation applies to Royal Commissions.

Unless a Royal Commission produces immediate change in an efficient manner, it is ruled a waste of time. There are times when change requires a larger perspective; a more holistic model than competitive, individual western society can offer. Volume 3 of RCAP Report, *Gathering Strength*, presents such a model or perspective from which to talk about change. It seeks to implement change not for the sake of production, even though change might translate into greater economic prosperity on reserves, but for the sake of the inherent dignity God has endowed upon human beings. *Gathering Strength* is about looking at the First Peoples as a distinct people and seeing how a successful strategy for the reversal of adverse consequences must encompass both the symptoms of broken relationships as well as healing the relationship.

### **A Model for Change**

The social sciences provide a kind of model for change that views the process as well as the goal of change as valuable. What is particularly helpful is the model for change or recovery used by some addiction counselors. They present change as a multifaceted event. It covers a period of time that involves different kinds of tasks that will produce recovery for the long term. In the process of change there are times when difficult situations and pressures slow or stop the person in their efforts of recovery. However, telling the person they are failing will only serve to produce despair and hopelessness. Therefore, periods of slow change are not defined as failing but as a time for withdrawing to gain strength so the person can readdress the situation, this time with more strength.<sup>15</sup> When one is facing something that has warped their entire character, one rarely is able to stop a destructive habit and then proceed completely changed in permanent recovery without gathering strength at different points.

In the same way, Volume 3 of RCAP Report seeks to build room for withdrawal and building strength for the First Peoples of this land. It seeks to build into the process of relationship renewal, a rationale for more immediate aid, treating the symptoms of the problem so that strength can be gained to forge ahead in developing a more harmonious Canada. More harmonious relationships will lead to greater health for Aboriginal people. Restored relationships are the key to restored people.

Renewed and restored relationships between Aboriginal people and the rest of Canada are difficult. Solutions must encompass the same group dynamics that are enmeshed in the problems facing native people. What has been difficult is for the rest of Canada to understand how non-Aboriginal Canadians

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<sup>15</sup> Notes from *Recovery and Relapse*, a film by Gorski.



are enmeshed within the problems of Aboriginal people. Thus, *Gathering Strength* seeks to outline how the past continues to haunt our present. Therefore, it is necessary to renew the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, but also to treat the symptoms of a relationship soured over so many years.

However, it is not easy for much of Canada to acknowledge that the First Peoples are a distinct group of people. Over and over again government programs are designed to strip individuals of their group identity and assimilate them into the macro culture and consciousness, resulting in the negative conditions that exist for many of the First Peoples. These conditions are but symptoms pointing to the problem of broken relationship.

### **Relationship Renewal**

The RCAP Report calls for a renewal of relationship because relationship was violated. It calls for a renewed relationship because we humans were created for relationship. This relationship needs to include recognition that each partner has an identity that is valid. Respecting each other's group laws and institutions will go far towards creating a climate for positive mutual respect based on sharing rather than exploitation. Finally, there needs to be a recognition that each person is responsible to honor others. These are all values that the Church can affirm. The Church should have, and can yet, lead the way in the renewing of relationship and in the treatment of the symptoms of broken relationship.

So often the symptoms of broken relationships impact the children to the greatest degree. Many children have been devastated by the residential schools and ongoing social problems. For this reason it is vital that the church act to relieve their suffering. Jesus warned his followers in Matthew 18:7 that those who caused children to "stumble" would be deserving of death, of being drowned in the ocean with a millstone around their neck. Does not the suffering of hundreds of Aboriginal children at church run residential schools cry out in testimony of how the Church has failed the children? It is for this reason that the Church must act, to try and remove the stumbling blocks and build credibility among Aboriginal people. We must do it for the children. We must do it for ourselves because the children are the future.

One of the best ways to help children is to help the whole family. The report states that there is a need for more rehabilitation services so that people who have serious problems can find a place to recover. Also, people who are in situations that are pushing them into trouble, need preventive support structures. There is need for reform among existing services. The services need to be knit together in a more comprehensive approach with control turned over to Aboriginal people until such a time as there is genuine interdependence.

Each of these areas, rehabilitation, preventive support, and reform of existing services are all areas where churches can get involved. The good news is that some groups have long laboured in these areas; that is good, but there is still a need. At any one of these points churches could enter in and provide support for families. It is significant that in the RCAP Report ideas for changing the situation are put forth by Aboriginal people. Churches would be helping in ways that Aboriginal people have asked for help.

Unless native people overcome their problems, they will never be free. It is impossible for other



people to do the work of changing Aboriginal culture. Changes must be constructive and initiated by themselves. However, there are areas where churches can empower people to change. For example, violence against women needs to be overcome in the native community. While it is incumbent upon Aboriginal leaders to speak out against violence and not to permit any legitimizing of violence,<sup>16</sup> the Church can provide support for people who are at risk. Work to protect the vulnerable and do not allow cultural differences to be used to excuse violence towards women.

### **Church Involvement**

There is also a need for resources and training to overhaul the health, education and housing programs. There is a need to train people to do the work themselves. Church groups have an opportunity to do community development work on reserves, as they have done in other countries. However, what is important is that the people are given control of the programs so they can learn and change their communities themselves. There is a need for partnership, not more paternalism.

Finally, in order to gather strength, there needs to be an assault on the stereotypes that have been ingrained in Canadian society. Churches can do much by allowing Aboriginal people to define for themselves how they will incorporate their cultural forms in worship and in the Church. There is a desire for native people to embrace their identity and culture as valid and meaningful. Canada must learn to trust Aboriginal people. The Church also must learn to trust as they seek to find healing by gathering the strength the Creator has given them.

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<sup>16</sup> *People to People, Nation to Nations*, 67 & 68.

## **Volume 4: Perspectives and Realities**

Response by James Kallappa and Ray Aldred

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples aims to make the voices of Aboriginal peoples heard. However, in doing this it does not claim to put forth one voice that speaks for all of the First Peoples in Canada. There is a diversity among Aboriginal people that needs to be recognized so that simplistic solutions are no longer put forward as a way to deal with the 'Indian Problem'. After all, the legacy of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal has been one of tension as governments brought in broad sweeping policy that imposed a rigid European framework seeking to build one monolithic kind of nation. What was and is needed is for government and others to recognize that there are different questions and answers being offered. What is important is to first hear what is being said and then to try and form a partnership that will empower Aboriginal people to heal themselves.

Thus, Volume 4 seeks to offer the perspectives of Aboriginal Women, Aboriginal Elders and Youth, the Métis and the North. These are offered not only to express what is important to each group, but also to show the diversity that exists among the First Peoples of Canada.

### **Identity: Individual and Communal**

It needs to be emphasized again and again that the identity of Aboriginal people has been ravaged by western culture. Women have been degraded by having their status removed and devalued. A paternalistic European culture robbed women of their status on a political level and on a spiritual level. At one point women were considered sacred but the European were male dominated and relegated women a second class citizenship. Also, where women intermarried with non-Aboriginal, they were stripped of their legal status as a "treaty Indian." Attempts to define Aboriginal by the Federal government are missing the point that self-determination is part of being human. Aboriginal women want affirmation of their traditional role as an intricate part of society.

Young people also feel pushed aside by the current practices and policy. The youth feel their concerns are not taken seriously. They have an appreciation for the past, but also want practical programs that can help them avoid many of the social evils that are preying on their peers. They desire to be reconnected with the past but in away that will help them face the future.

The Elders will play a key role in this process. They have a wealth of knowledge and insight but they too must be afforded their traditional place in culture. Canada needs to give back the power to Aboriginal people to define "skill for living". It must not be limited to people who have university degrees. Those things are fine, but skill for living -- or wisdom -- is what elders have and what the rest of society needs. Wisdom does not seek to assert itself but waits to be sought. Ways must be discovered to provide an atmosphere where the wisdom of the elders can be heard.

### **Identity: Culture, Language and Values**

Identity cannot exist unless one can re-appropriate one's language, culture and values. These need to be taught or they will be lost. To this end it is necessary for education to involve the elders and the teachings of the past. Not that these teachings are the be all and end all of what it is to be an Aboriginal person, but it provides wisdom of how to live. It shows where we came from and gives pride in one's people. Language

was the target of assimilation, perhaps if the government helped to restore the language of Aboriginal people, it would be making recompense for past wrongs.

### **Identity: Self-government**

Aboriginal people do not want to create anarchy or chaos. They do not view self-government as something to run in competition to the Federal or provincial governments. The signing of treaties reveals that the Aboriginal people view the Federal and provincial governments as having some authority, but they do not view them as being the best place from which to gain wisdom for establishing community or health for the Aboriginal Nations. Fear of self-government comes because it is assumed that it will lead to chaos with each person doing what they want in exclusion to all others, in fact that is what exists in much of Canada. What Aboriginal self-government is wanting to affirm is respect for the group that is characterized by consensus instead of an adversarial system. A government that affirms individual dignity but also group identity.

### **The Métis**

The Métis people also want the privilege of being acknowledged as a distinct people. They consider themselves a nation of people and desire the privilege of self-government. They have a legal right to lands and resources, but these have not been honoured. In fact, Alberta is the only province that gives allotted lands to Métis people. The government needs to honor the promises of the past and work out a solution to outstanding issues with the Métis people.

### **The North**

Perhaps because of the geographic location, the North provides some examples of remarkable political change. Governing institutions there are an attempt to reflect the social and cultural variety of the Northern people. People in the North must rely on each other to survive. Perhaps this reliance is what is missing in the rest of Canada.

### **Urban Indians**

Over half of the Aboriginal population now lives off-reserve. They continue to want to define themselves as Aboriginal but want to live in a respect relationship with non-Aboriginal. However there continues to be problems of racism that lead many to try and change their identity and devalue themselves. They desire help to maintain their identity.

### **Evangelical Participation**

The suffering and pain as a result of the Indian Act and historical injustice is evident all around us. Aboriginal people have been subjected to numerous social injustices and prejudices: Children taken away from families to make them "white" children; languages and cultures ravaged by an over zealous colonial government, and now lost. In their place social problems have become the identity of many of our people. The Aboriginal people of today are looking to change things for themselves. They desire to be affirmed in their identity. How can the Evangelical Church help? Here are a few suggestions:

#### **The Family:**

- Develop culturally sensitive Christian education programs that build bonds between young and old, women and men.
- Provide a way to legitimate skill as being as valid as knowledge.
- Develop holistic programs for the abused.

- Create a safe atmosphere in which the sufferer may find Christ without having to become "white."
- Model reconciliation in denominations and para-church organizations.

#### Health and Healing:

- Provide health care that affirms the spiritual nature of healing.
- Offer culturally relevant counseling programs.
- Create fund and bursaries to help the financially disadvantaged.
- Create hospices for the terminally ill.

#### Self-Government:

- Affirm and support Aboriginal Christians.
- In humility, be open to learn from Aboriginal people and seek to partner with them.

#### Traditional Cultural Values:

- Educate our churches about Aboriginal Peoples.
- Be respectful of other people's ways.
- Affirm Aboriginal Theology; seek connecting points.
- Affirm Aboriginal culture as unique and valuable.
- Know the difference between culture and Christian obligation.

#### The Métis:

- Recognize the contribution the Métis have made to society.
- Recognize leaders and support them.

Besides these practical suggestions there is also a need by evangelicals to learn to embrace diversity in a way that does not diminish unity. So often in the past unity has been defined by uniformity. We do not need more uniformity but we do need unity. Perhaps, if we could learn to value that which is different, learn to appreciate and get to know the intricacies of the other, we would not seek to change the other into something that we are. In order to do this evangelicals must seek to go to others as learners, not teachers. Evangelicals must go as humble servants not conquering kings. For in embracing the other, we shall see

## **VOLUME 5: RENEWAL: A TWENTY-YEAR COMMITMENT**

Response by Adrian Jacobs

The Canadian legacy of broken treaties has received a stunning rebuke from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. In this fifth volume, after repeatedly demonstrating broken treaties, the RCAP Report calls for a renewal of the treaty relationship. Yet, how can Aboriginal Peoples, perpetually on the short end of the stick with promises reneged upon, pledge anew to the trust required for good faith treaties?

Incredibly, Aboriginal People in Canada still believe in giving their word and are willing to take the people of Canada, through the Federal Government, at their word! Aboriginal people are presenting their national honour, their covenantal treaty word, to meet with Canadian integrity. The challenge to the Canadian Government is to reciprocate to a people harmed by broken troths. Will their be a renewal based upon a spirit of respect for a people's solemn word? Or, will the whole process be aborted in the legal technicalities of jot and tittle bureaucratic erosion, with justice bound and gagged and carted off?

The very foundation of the report's recommendations center on the issue of nation-to-nation relationship between Canada and the First Nations of this land. The Five (then Six) Nations Iroquois Confederacy established the Two Row Wampum covenant belt with the European nations it first encountered. A white shell belt had two parallel dark rows running lengthwise. One row represented the English with their people and laws traveling down the common river of life in their boat. The other row represented the Iroquois and their people and laws traveling down the same river in their canoe. Each of the vessels was to be guided by their respective governments. The English had their monarchy and parliament. The Iroquois had the Great Law constitution with hereditary chiefs and the clan system. This belt represents the original nation-to-nation relationship that was reflected in the treaties. RCAP Report calls the people of Canada back to this mutual recognition and respect.

The Iroquois spoke of polishing the tarnished covenant chain with the British. The chain has not only been tarnished, but lies broken under the ashes of assimilation and under the dirt of the emasculation of Aboriginal sovereignty. It is amazing that the Aboriginal people are willing once again to dust the debris off the treaty relationship and try anew. Merciful forgiveness has been extended and awaits a respectful reply. What will the Creator and Judge of Nations do in response to recommitment to integrity -- or in the aftermath of continued violation?

### **A New Royal Proclamation and Companion Legislation**

The very foundation of the original Nation-to-nation relationship between Britain and the Aboriginals of North America was codified in the Royal Proclamation of 1763. Aboriginal government and land title was recognized. No one could privately buy Aboriginal land without being required to do so under the auspices of the Crown. This meant a crown-to-nation relationship. A new Royal Proclamation would renew the spirit of the original proclamation with regrets for past errors and a commitment to never allowing the abuses of the past to be suffered again. Christians who know the power of covenantal relationships through their Bible and relationship with God can understand; and, they can stand by their country as it renews its commitment to justice and respect.

### **Cost of the Status Quo**

The financial cost of the status quo is given in all its staggering and ominous proportions: \$7.5 billion projected for 1996, increasing to \$11 billion by 2016. This financial dilemma is in part due to the fallout of cultural and social devastation from the erosion of the original nation-to-nation relationship based on mutual recognition and respect. The original Treaty Era Aboriginal leaders purposefully made good agreements securing the future of their people. Some Canadians may object to this heavy obligation to Aboriginal people. What needs to be kept in mind is the losses Aboriginal peoples have incurred since the original equation:

*All of 'Canadian' territory + Aboriginal nationhood >Euro-Canadian colonists + Their personal possessions*

to the existing equation:

*Small tracts of reserve land + Aboriginal wardship < Canadian Territory + Canadian nationhood.*

The report calls for a redistribution of wealth through securing an adequate land base and resources in order to rebuild Aboriginal nations. This is proposed to be accomplished within the Canadian Constitutional framework. To some Aboriginal idealists, this is an unacceptable compromise. Iroquoian nationalists, for example, have maintained their sovereignty and pressed for their recognition in the international forum to the chagrin of the Government of Canada. Canadians should welcome this fundamental conciliation on the part of the architects of the RCAP Report.

### **Institutions and Monitoring Progress**

A pledged word must be backed by corresponding actions. The renewal of the treaty relationship requires an institutional infrastructure to support the process. This system of accountability is necessary to ensure a serious commitment to fundamental change.

### **Call to the Church to Fulfill Its Role in the Kingdom of God**

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples Report sounds out as a Macedonian call to the church to "come over and help" Aboriginals. This is another example of Aboriginal forgiveness and their call for restitution. Even though the Church has had complicity in the socio-cultural devastation through the residential schools and inaction in the face of injustice, it is still being called to advocacy for the poor and disenfranchised. The magnanimity of Aboriginal people cries out for a humble, forthright response from the Canadian church. The God of the poor -- of the widow, orphan and stranger -- stands awaiting his people's response to this Aboriginal cry. May God have mercy if this call is drowned out by an appeal to Mammon or the god of expediency. Justice is rarely cheap. Human beings, God's image-bearers, are of utmost value.

### **The Ultimate Challenge**

The final volume of this report concludes with the ultimate challenge: Constitutional Amendment. Canadian failure to amend the present constitution to ensure Quebec's ongoing participation in the Canadian federation tinctures the prospects of what may be an even more fundamental change, resulting in the creation of an Aboriginal House of Parliament. The Constitution is the foundation

upon which the house of state is built. Does the will and energy exist to follow through with this massive deconstruction-rebuilding project?

No less than a national awaking to the historic injustice of the past, the cost of the status quo, a conviction to change, and a sincerity to follow through is needed. The Church in Canada stands in a place of prophetic opportunity to be the prophetic voice of the Kingdom of God calling for repentance, reconciliation, and restoration. Will it rise to the occasion? Or will it fritter away its moment of opportunity by fractious debate, lethargic apathy, or selfish protectionism? Will the Canadian Church pass by Aboriginal people like the priest and the Levite did when they saw the robbed, beaten, half-dead man on the roadside? Or will it respond to the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People with effort, time, and resources as did the Samaritan in his involvement, care, and financing of this man's recovery? We have spoken.