

Revised Presentation to Council
Re: M&O Conference
Bonnie Dillon

Each year Conference adopts a theme. This year it was “Living in Right Relations”, a reflection of the work being done by the United Church, its ecumenical partners and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

There were 3 keynote speakers at Conference:

Rev. Maggie McLeod, appointed to the General Council Office as Executive Minister, Aboriginal Ministries Circle, spoke of the basis for Right Relations with others as the sharing of stories. We have to connect in order for us to know what to do together. Jesus connected with people by doing the unexpected and having conversations of love and caring: feed my lambs, tend my sheep.

Her presentation and that of the speakers that followed led to table discussions of questions posed by the presenters. The intent was to get to know one another and share our experiences, thoughts, perceptions and opinions equally. We followed a native custom of using a talking stick...I was a table facilitator for the Conference.

According to Rev. Maggie McLeod, Right Relations requires courage, encouragement, patience and long-term commitment. Her questions for us were: What has formed your understanding of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples? What has been your experience of them? How does your call connect you with right relations?

In closing, Rev. Maggie McLeod outlined steps towards right relations:

1. Take the first step
2. Put aside past assumptions and be open to enlightenment
3. Presbyteries are to provide 10 candidates (half Aboriginal) to the Labour Day weekend UC M&O workshop on Right Relations. (Sara, Linda and I have volunteered but it will be up to the Presbytery to choose participants from those interested)
4. Practice our new President David Fine’s theology of God’s radical inclusive love.
5. All that we need is right here in our M&O Conference, Presbyteries and congregations. We have been given a gift of learnings. Make a commitment to carry it forward.

The second presenter was Francine LeMay, the sister of the OPP Corporal who was killed at Oka. She told of her healing journey towards forgiveness and reconciliation with the Mohawk people. Her questions to us were: Have you ever lived a crisis that you could have avoided? According to 2Cor.5:18-20, what is the ministry of reconciliation for you? What price are you willing to pay to be reconciled with someone?

Jeff Copenace, the third speaker, commended us on focusing on right relations finally as it has been 50 years since the First Nations people got the right to vote.(Mar.21, 1960). Jeff is a policy and political advisor to the Leader of the Official Opposition. Jeff's message to us was to put aside what we know as "history" – which is subject to ethnic interpretation and to suspend our beliefs and see with our own eyes the true situation before engaging in discussions.

He spoke of the loss of identity suffered through the residential school system; the missing aboriginal women in our country; and a suicide rate – more than 8 times the national average. He also spoke of accomplishments in the face of adversity and systemic barriers.

Jeff encouraged all to become educated about racism and to support efforts to engage in open and honest discussion. Presently Bill C-3 will affect the Aboriginal status and rights of some 45,000 grandchildren, and some say up to 200,00, who lost status as their female grandmothers lost their status due to a patriarchal Indian Act. Recognition is an important aspect of reconciliation. Jeff's questions were four:

1. Following upon Canada's apology to residential school survivors, what can members of the UC do to ensure that the next generation of Aboriginal youth can overcome the tragic legacy of residential schools through improving health, self esteem and the overall well being of Canada's First Nations, Inuit and Metis young people?
2. What roles can the UC play in promoting the need to improve the identity, culture and spirituality that is so crucial to the positive growth and development of Aboriginal youth, that so many Aboriginal Canadians were robbed of a result of residential schools?
3. What can members of the UC do to help bridge the gap in socio-economic indicators that so many Aboriginal communities find themselves at the bottom of (i.e., health, education, etc.)?
4. How can members of the UC help to educate and create awareness amongst Canadians to eliminate the many stereotypes that negatively impact relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities?

Other Conference business dealt with in plenary was:

- A discussion by members of the General Council Executive of a \$9 million budget shortfall. All were advised to read "Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith" which can be found on the UC website. There will be ongoing conversations with presbyteries until January 2011.
- Points were raised concerning the distrust of presbyteries by congregations and the need for a wider view of the church using all forms of media to connect. Partnering with other congregations was encouraged. We need to reach out to other faith groups as well and not focus just on our own internal needs. We need to practice a theology of abundance.
- A motion to move pastoral care from Presbytery to General Council was debated. Travel costs and resourcing as Council was downsized by 10%

(15 out of 165 positions). Consultation by the GC did not include global partners who would suffer from the cutbacks to grants and staff. The GC emphasized that we have to let go of some things as M&S has flat lined and in some areas declined. Discussion will continue with the hope that inter-congregation and inter-faith communication will grow.

- On another social justice theme, there was a motion passed that the M&O Conference concur with the Montreal Presbytery to receive the document “A moment of truth: A word of faith and hope from the heart of Palestinian suffering” (text can be found on the web) as an authentic voice of Palestinian Christians and commend it to its Presbyteries, congregations and community ministries for use in their ongoing consultation, dialogue, study, prayer in discerning appropriate action they may take toward ending the illegal occupation of Palestinian territory and moving the two peoples toward reconciliation.

In addition to the plenary work, delegates were encouraged to attend informational workshops. I attended one based on a DVD entitled “Muffins for Granny” which was developed and produced by a young Aboriginal woman who interviewed several residential school (1840 – 1996) survivors. Issues of shame, hurt, anger, rebellion, and the barriers to their healing journeys were explored. Kelly Running Wolf, a Micmac elder, and Rev. Maggie McLeod, a Cree, led the discussion. Surprise and concern was evident about the torture and violence in some schools; baby snatching in the 50s and 60s and other atrocities.

We learned about the Healing Fund - a UC initiative that is still ongoing. It is different from the Healing Foundation which is a government initiative through Health Canada and their funds have been cut back.

We learned that Canadian Aboriginal Veterans returned from WWII to no land and no houses. Very little is being taught about First Nations in our school system. Our discussion presented many ideas and resources to educate us on our way to right relations, e.g. the UC resource Circle and Cross; the Kairos Blanket Exercise; visits to reservations, a healing centre, the need to covenant with first nations people. I have more details that we can explore.

In addition to these items, we were given the gift of new connections. I met the Mission and Enthusiast Coordinator for the M&O Conference. I gathered some new resource material. I discovered pastoral charges to partner with.

Each year Conference elects a President for a one year term. Debby Poirier from the Rawden Pastoral Charge is our new President Elect.