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## The apology dilemma

As members of the Presbytery which now includes Port Alberni, we are well aware of the dilemma General Council faced as it strove to act appropriately in the residential school matter (*Church*, October). At its February meeting, Comox-Nanaimo Presbytery carefully weighed all the issues, and chose to offer a formal apology, as did British Columbia Conference during its meeting in May, legal concerns notwithstanding.

Try as we may, we are unable to see Council's expression of repentance, no matter how sincere, as a genuine substitute for an apology.

We do celebrate the fact that the United Church has publicly acknowledged its need to repent. But there is more to repentance than that. The mistakes we made in connection with the residential schools hurt not only God but many of our brothers and sisters. Repentance therefore demands that we seek restoration on the human level. While the needed restoration will undoubtedly be complex and costly, it most definitely needs to begin with a simple apology. Failure to provide an apology cannot help but place the genuineness of our repentance in question.

Further complicating matters is the close connection between the actions of the General Council, and the United Church's earlier decision to launch a third-party claim against the federal government.

That the state should be held accountable for its share of responsibility in the management of the residential schools is beyond dispute. It is, however, much less clear that it is the role of the United Church (as one defendant) to bring the state to account. And even if we were called to do so, is legal action the appropriate way for Christ's disciples to proceed?

The general perception, reinforced by numerous editorials in major newspapers, is that our denomination is simply trying to shift our own financial liabilities onto the shoulders of the Canadian taxpayer.

The tragedy is that the very real ini-

tiatives taken by the United Church since 1986, including the Sudbury Apology and the subsequent Healing Fund, are being overshadowed and largely overlooked.

Our core mandate as a church is that of bearing public witness to Jesus Christ. When the church loses its credibility as Christ's witness, it is unable to discharge not only its core mandate as a truth-bearing community, but all of the other work that is ours to do.

More importantly, these recent decisions call into question our moral and spiritual authenticity as a people of God. To the extent that we have been acting in response to legal advice, we need to ask not only whether it is sound advice but also whether we, as followers of Christ, can ultimately allow anxiety over possible legal liabilities to have the last word in matters of faith.

Yes, it is true that a church facing potentially extravagant liability costs does confront a difficult future. But a church that has begun to live out of fear rather than out of faith has, in a sense, given up on the future: God's future.

(Rev.) Foster Freed  
Parksville, B.C.

(Rev.) Phillip Spencer  
Qualicum, B.C.

To offer an "apology" is to offer a defence or an explanation of why something happened. The United Church chose not to offer a defence; rather, we acted to "repent." We listened to those whom the Government of Canada said must be assimilated by taking away their culture, their language, their values and their dignity — and we cried saying, "We repent." We promised to continue to walk with those who suffered so much and who now seek justice.

Our repentance included accepting responsibility for our part in a national policy which shames us as human beings, as a church and as a nation. Following our decision, those Native Canadians present said they "wished we would take a bolder step" but they acknowledged that our walk