

Dear beloved friends of Pacific Mountain Region, I'll say this again. I'm so delighted to see you, gathered for another meeting of my church. That's who you are to me. I get to be with friends and colleagues, equals really, who want to worship together, study together, commit to a life of following the risen one, together. I feel so connected and I'm grateful for each of you.

Truth is, today I'm grieving and I'm celebrating, all at once. I so believe that the way the United Church of Canada proclaims the grace of Christ, now, is vital to healthy Canadian communities. I believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, lived out in the living body of the healthy church, is significant to the spiritual renewal for all people. And from where I sit, spiritual renewal is so badly needed. I believe so strongly in who we are becoming, even as my heart aches at who we have been. My own history is tied up in the lament of who we have been.

On the day before the world learned of the discovery of 215 bodies of children in unmarked graves in Kamloops, my family and I said goodbye to my mother of 92, who took her last breath. Born in the farmhouse of her grandparents, on land that is part of Treaty 6, east of Stettler Alberta, my mother was not immune to absorbing the enculturated racism of her family and of her time. With my dad having been born and raised on lands of Treaty 7, east of Lethbridge, Alberta, I was also not immune to absorbing the racism of my family and my time.

I want to begin by thanking my friend and colleague, Kimiko Karpoff, who introduced me to Ojibway author and elder Richard Wagamese. In an intimate gathering of people imagining the church's future, Kimiko helped me to reflect on a piece from the book "Embers." In that book, Wagamese seems to transcribe conversations he has with his elder, someone he calls Old Woman. Here's one of those conversations:

Me: You always repeat things three times.
Old Woman: Just the important things.
Me: Why? I hear you the first time.
Old woman: No. You listen the first time. You hear the second time. And you feel the third time.
Me: I don't get it.
Old Woman: When you listen, you become aware. That's for your head. When you hear, you awaken. That's for your heart. When you feel, it becomes a part of you. That's for your Spirit. Three times. It's so you learn to listen with your whole being. That's how you learn.

I was on the program management staff of Naramata Centre in 1994 when Arthur Henry Plinth pleaded guilty to 18 counts of indecent assault while he was principal at the Alberni Indian

Residential School, operated by the United Church. The name Willie Blackwater is forever lodged in my head as someone never to forget. Across the country, news of what happened in something called Residential Schools began to trickle. I listened and I became aware. For my head. Nearly 20 years later, in 2013, the Truth and Reconciliation hearings occurred in Vancouver. I sat among survivors and witnesses, hearing story after story of abuse, and insult, and cultural disregard. Sexualized violence perpetrated. I heard them all, and I awakened. That was for my heart.

215 children, in an unmarked mass grave some as young as three. It's not new information, I just felt it. I feel it continually. That's for my spirit. It has now become a part of me. When I gathered with the leaders and elders of Pacific Mountain Indigenous Ministries, 10 days ago, I barely got through it. I could not get past one elder's opening words spoken through his tears. "Generations have been looking for their children, asking, 'where did they go? Can you imagine your children taken away, never to return?'" That's for my spirit. It has become a part of me.

Last Saturday, on behalf of the region, I was asked to speak at an interfaith conversation about climate change. Christine Boyle led the panel discussion which followed. One of the panelists was Sonia Furstenau, leader of the Green Party in British Columbia. All of the speakers noticed the connection between colonization and climate change. Sonia Furstenau, an historian, reflected on the power and importance of stories and the searing reality of the story we tell about ourselves.

"The story that we have been telling of ourselves," she said, "has collided with truths and realities that do not match that story.

"The news of a mass grave of indigenous children is one of the hardest and most penetrating truths, that now require of us to recognize and let go of the story we have been telling. That we are a kind and gentle and fair nation, a nation that celebrates diversity, a multicultural nation, a nation that other countries look to around the world for our leadership and our peace keeping. This myth of who we are as Canada has now collided so many times with truths that don't fit into that myth."

And then with reference to this interfaith dialogue on climate change, Furstenau reiterated what others had begun to say:

"This story of Canada as a social construct is parallel with the story of Canada as an environmental construct... beautiful supernatural British Columbia Canada, the leadership of Canada on environmental fronts. That story is also colliding with truth that make it impossible to continue to hold onto that myth. These two stories are parallel and deeply intertwined.

Our history of colonizing, of displacing Indigenous people from their lands and communities and removing their children is absolutely entwined with our history of how we have treated land and the resources, and the natural systems and eco-systems.”

Sonia Furstenau touched a nerve and we were all silent.

Even here, right now, in the theme of this General Meeting, we tell a story about the one who came that we might have life and have it abundantly. We delight in the promise of that abundance. The problem with our interpretation of that text is two-fold. When Jesus makes the promise, he makes it to everyone. Equally. This life in abundance is not about stuff, it is about what makes life whole, and beautiful, and gracious, and filled with joy and it's for everyone... equally. You can be darn sure it's certainly NOT at the expense of everyone else. My abundant life cannot come at the expense of yours.

Turns out, as we head into our general, we are reeling from truths that have conspired against Christ's promise. In the beginning of this text, Jesus says: All who came before me are thieves and bandits.... the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Turns out before preaching a gospel of abundance, we have been more closely aligned with the thieves and bandits who came to steal, kill and destroy. Again, my friend and colleague Kimiko Karpoff shared the wisdom of others close to her. Not only did residential schools take the Indian out of the child, they took Christ out of the Christian. And now I understand what all MY relations really means.

What I cling to, is that Christ meets us where we are - the woman at the well, Zaccheus up a tree, the Syrophoenician woman whose daughter was sick, the woman caught in adultery. I spoke of these things in October. Jesus meets people where they are. And loves them. That's the grace, that's the hope, dare I say, that's where life is found in its abundance. Christ's holy presence, loving us.

Christ is meeting us right here, right now, right where we are and this mess we're in. Christ meets us in this stark confrontation of what is really real for us all, these myths and truths - settlers and First Nations. What I know is that we are loved. Settlers and First Nations. And together we must stand now, to make a different first step than ones we've ever made before. May this meeting reflect yet another first step and may this promise of Hope and Abundance lead us through the times when it will be hard.

I can't imagine doing this with anyone else. And I thank God for that.

Rev Blair Odney
President, PMRC