

Living Into Right Relations Circle Briefing Paper for TUCC – October 2016

The Living Into Right Relations Circle of Toronto Conference has existed, under various names and in various forms, since 2000. Over many years we have learned that the building of right relations takes a long time, so that trust and true partnerships can be established, and requires a consistent and trustworthy presence in advocacy and action. This is not just another social justice issue, but calls from those involved, and from the church, a long term commitment.

Consistent Indigenous presence and/or leadership in the Circle has proven to be difficult to establish, especially in light of difficult personal circumstances, health and transportation issues, etc., and we are aware of, and struggle with, the truth of the phrase *“nothing about us without us,”* ie. we can’t speak for Indigenous people. But we’ve also been made aware that *“we as the non-Indigenous church have our work to do.”*

Some of that work has been to:

- establish smudging and other Indigenous spiritual practices and teachings as vital in our gatherings;
- share information about many issues and events within the Circle and the wider church;
- offer educational opportunities to many people, with and without Indigenous leadership;
- support advocacy and education efforts of partners, including Kairos, whose Blanket Exercise has been a tremendous tool for all Canadians to learn about the history of Indigenous oppression and resilience;
- build supportive relationships with the two Indigenous United Churches within our bounds, namely Georgina and Christian Islands, as well as with the downtown Toronto Council Fire Native Cultural Centre;
- attend to church-based initiatives and promote actions suggested by General Council, including acknowledging the territory and its peoples upon which we live, work and worship;
- mark significant dates with the circulation of resources, including following the federal Apology in June of 2008 and on the Sunday closest to Aboriginal Day June 21st each year.

Many other events could be listed, but over the past seven years perhaps the most important work has been to mobilize awareness, support, education and advocacy regarding the six-year Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process. We supported the attendance of Residential School survivors at TRC national events, helped to organize a Toronto area TRC Regional event in 2012, offered numerous educational opportunities, and expressed solidarity with the TRC’s work in public and church-based events. Over the twelve months prior to the closing event May 31 – June 3, 2015, a multi-faceted plan to undertake a Conference-wide Witnesses program, with communication to each congregation and the identification of people to “bear witness” to the TRC’s closing events, in person or from afar, unfolded. Dedicated Conference and presbytery staff, as well as volunteers, all contributed a lot of time and attention to detail, leading gatherings for teaching and training witnesses, developing and leading programs for young people, etc. with the result that people from a large number of congregations were locally engaged, and more than 100 people traveled by bus or car and were in Ottawa for the Walk for Reconciliation on May 31st as well as other events held by both the TRC and Kairos Canada. A Right Relations website was also created, which continues to serve those witnesses and the rest of us about work our Conference is doing.

Since then we’ve offered more educational opportunities for the Circle and the witnesses, as we collectively consider our post-TRC role in continuing the journey toward reconciliation, justice, healing and right relations by looking at the 94 Calls to Action of the TRC. In particular we await from the General Council the detailing of ways the church as a whole can live into the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and intend to implement those suggestions as best we can.

The Circle continues to “live into” its calling and mandate, found on the back of this sheet, and looks forward to collaborating with new partners, such as TUCC, in identifying new ways we are called to give voice, face, hand and heart to our desire to build right relations based on justice, peace, healing and reconciliation.