

Anabaptist/Mennonite statements of Confession/Repentance, apology, Reconciliation & Reparation, etc. to Indigenous peoples

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In this paper I seek to document the statements and actions of Anabaptist/Mennonite conferences and organizations with respect to the situation of their Indigenous neighbours in the world, with particular attention being given to Canada. As it turns out, *Be It Resolved*, the 2021 reference book edited by Esther Epp-Thiessen and Steve Heinrichs, has basically covered this ground, so what follows is essentially a summary of selected statements, letters, and actions pertaining to my title.

I therefore preface each section with the appropriate 'Be It Resolved' reference abbreviated BIR followed by the page numbers.

BIR 13

In 1969, at the 67th annual session of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (CMC), the delegates gave a response to the federal government's proposed "Indian policy." In the last paragraph this statement included these words: "As a conference, we acknowledge our own guilt in this respect. As individuals, organizations, and congregations within a conference, we commit ourselves to this particular ministry of reconciliation." The Executive Secretary of the Mission Board at the time was Isaac Froese.

BIR 16-19

In 1970, it seemed especially fitting being the 100th anniversary of the Province of Manitoba and the 25th anniversary of Mennonite Pioneer Mission (MPM), for the CMC meeting in Winkler for their annual assembly to include a "corporate confession to Indigenous peoples." Menno Wiebe was the Executive Secretary of MPM at the time. This document can be seen in its 2-page entirety in *Be It Resolved*. Interestingly, it is spoken as if addressing Indigenous people, but, instead of directly asking an apology of them for the litany of failures on our part, each of the twelve items is followed by asking the "Lord" for forgiveness. Indeed, we needed to ask forgiveness of the Lord, but we needed to do more. Were we not ready yet? Did we still not at the time realize the depth of our guilt and the extent of the impact of our actions on our Indigenous neighbours?

Being 1970, it is interesting that the language is still masculine, addressing brothers but not sisters, even though at one point a female name is used as an example of brothers! Also, it was still customary to refer to our First Peoples as Indians rather than First Nations or Indigenous peoples.

Noteworthy are these lines, separated by paragraph breaks depending on the item quoted:

- We have tried to be helpers without first becoming acquainted with you... We have been guilty of contributing to the destruction of solidarity in your communities.... We have not allowed your voice to be heard....

- We have wanted you as converts but we weren't sure we wanted you as brothers... We were interested in you when you lived on the reserve, but when you came to the city we ignored you like everyone else is ignoring you. In the city we have neither invited you nor really wanted you in our fellowship...
- We didn't recognize you as a people who are called of God to be his people. Where we recognized you as Indians by the colour of your skin but didn't recognize that you were fellow human beings, friends, brothers...
- We have sent missionaries to your communities and it pleased us to be able to report of our mission work up north, but there is reason to believe that a portion of our motivation may have resulted from our craving to do missionary work rather than from a capacity to love, understand and share the love of Christ.
- We have not understood you when in your own way you have tried to talk to us.
- We have, by our silence, sided with the powerful forces of government and industry when they invaded your rights, discounting your modest protest, and exploited your resources.
- We are guilty of tracing America's history back no farther than 1492.... The accounts of your own history, your stories, your dreams and your visions have meant nothing to us.

BIR 130-131

In 1989, at the General Conference Mennonite Church (GCMC) binational assembly, a resolution was passed to help prepare and equip General Conference Mennonite congregations for 1992 – the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas. The preamble to the resolution stated:

“Those of us who were immigrant peoples now own land which was once the collective possession of the Native peoples. We have been the beneficiaries, however indirectly, of their violent and unjust displacement... While some among us have spoken out courageously on these issues, we have too often been silent.”

The resolution included the following:

1. During this triennium following our resolution, “A church of many peoples confronts racism,” we seek ways to correct the distortions of history and racist attitudes regarding Native people in North America.
2. That we encourage our congregations to use the *multi-cultural worship resource notebook* and the new educational material, *neighbours far and near: native people in North America*, and to invite speakers who can interpret Native concerns.
3. That we incorporate into the 1992 General Conference sessions (a) a public confession of our sin of silence about continuing injustice, (b) an affirmation of the dignity and integrity of Native peoplehood, and (c) a testimony that all of us stand together as God's people.
4. That we request the Commission on Home Ministries, the Native Ministries Board of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, and Mennonite Indian Leaders Council to prepare action for 1992 and beyond, which will symbolize and make public our commitment to the above resolution.

BIR 156-157

In January 1992, in Boissevain, MB, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Canada and then also MCC USA prepared the following statement, referred to as the “500 Years After Statement,” “shaped by consultations with Indigenous partners and organizations, discussions in the wider ecumenical movement, and developments within the broader Mennonite Church. The statement was intended ... to offer a public apology to Indigenous peoples for the colonial legacies of conquest and domination in which Mennonites had participated.”

Note the still incomplete progression of language from the terms Indian, Native, and then Aboriginal, now to the current term of Indigenous.

The statement stated in part:

As part of our response to God’s call to ‘love justice, seek mercy and walk humbly’ (Micah 6:8), we ask your forgiveness:

- Where we have sanctioned the conquest of land and domination of you and your ancestors;
- Where we have not fully recognized the humanity and dignity of Aboriginal peoples;
- Where we have, by our silence, endorsed cruel treatment of Aboriginal peoples;
- Where we have used a false notion of cultural superiority as rationale for forceful takeover.

We welcome your gracious offer to establish new relationships of mutual respect and cooperation. In turn, we offer to work toward a fair and just life together. ... We promise to work for the just and honourable fulfilment of outstanding obligations related to land, the resolution of conflicts over industrial development and other areas of dissonance. ... We respect your traditional vision for a world in which all life is valued, all peoples are treasured, and where recognition is given to the long history before Christopher Columbus. ... We commit ourselves ... to learning and teaching the truth about events in the 500 years since 1492. ... We, of non-Aboriginal heritage, pledge to join you in working toward a new chapter of honourable co-existence.

BIR 159-161

The above statement put out by MCC caused so much criticism and opposition that, in the fall of 1992, MCC created a statement, crafted by John Redekop, answering all the criticisms which became part of the document “*Why Apologize?*” *The Teachable Moment: a Christian Response to the Native Peoples of the Americas*, a ten lesson educational series.

BIR 190-192

In December 1995, following a meeting between Menn Wiebe (Director of Native Concerns for MCC Canada) and Elijah Harper (Oji-Cree Member of Parliament from Manitoba), church and Indigenous leaders across the country got together and organized a Sacred Assembly, four days of ceremony, prayer, teaching, political addresses, and public promises to do justice and

reconciliation. A Reconciliation Proclamation was crafted and adopted by treaty elders and knowledge keepers, members of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, and the Aboriginal rights coalition (representatives of Indian and Northern Affairs). It was perhaps the first time evangelical and mainline church leaders stood together and promised to take real action for Indigenous justice.

Menn Wiebe was present as well as two Indigenous people involved with CMC's Native Ministries, Norman and Thelma Meade of Manigotogan, MB, and director Walter Franz. "The Proclamation and the following statement of principles and priorities ... was ... a remarkable covenant that commits faith communities to walk with Indigenous peoples in a joint effort towards healing."

The document acknowledged that "... we do share a common spiritual foundation ... we share a common belief that:

- ...as the original inhabitants of this land, Aboriginal peoples have a special right and responsibility to ensure the continuing integrity of the land and the unity and well-being of its inhabitants; and
- non-Aboriginal Canadians also share in these responsibilities.

"We have also shared a recognition that:

- reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians must be rooted in a spiritual understanding of land as a gift from the Creator God;
- the sins of injustice which have historically divided Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples remain active...
- concrete actions must be taken by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples alike to overcome these injustices and to bind up the wounds of those who have "suffered.

And we have a shared understanding:

- that the starting point for healing and reconciliation lies in person communion with the Creator God;
- ... relations based on justice will require a full respect for treaties, a fair settlement of land rights disputes, the implementation of the inherent right of self government, and the creation of economic development opportunities and other institutions to support them."

It went on to say that "we must accept personal responsibilities for:

- ...returning to our communities and develop ways to continue the process of healing and reconciliation that has begun at Sacred Assembly '95;
- ... continuing to explore with each other our sacred foundations, in order to bring about spiritual reconciliation, Aboriginal justice, and the fulfilment of political responsibilities in this country;

- continuing to respect the differences in our spiritual journeys, even as we seek to discover the common spiritual link between us.”

Then the churches and faith communities noted that “Despite their historic involvement in the cultural and spiritual oppression of Aboriginal peoples, churches have a vital role to play in building a new Canada based on justice and reconciliation. The formal apologies, which most of the churches have made, are hereby acknowledged and appreciated. But statements of apology or not enough. The churches need to not only renew their commitment to the principles outlined in the New Covenant declaration (this was a pastoral statement by leaders of Christian churches on Aboriginal rights and the Canadian Constitution drawn up in 1987), but to go back into their parishes with a new and concrete program or action for justice and reconciliation... in greater collaboration with... other religious faiths in this increasingly pluralistic society. Specifically, the churches must:

- continue the process of healing and reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples, by providing the forums and supports needed to heal the wounds created in the past;
- become stronger advocates for justice and reconciliation in current and future public affairs;
- recommit ourselves to a program of education and action on issues relating to land rights, self-government, and racism;
- take steps to hold government and other public institutions accountable for their policies and for their efforts to promote reconciliation.”

BIR 277-279

In January 2007, Mennonite Church USA Executive Board members sent letters to their senators and representatives asking them to co-sponsor the resolution commonly called “The Apology Bill.” In July of that year, urged on by Indigenous members, including pastors, MCUSA went on record at their delegate gathering as supporting “the joint U.S. Senate and House bills that ‘acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the United States government regarding Indian tribes and offer an apology to all Native peoples on behalf of the United States.’” The bill “did not include financial restitution, and admission of wrongdoing could not be used to support legal claims against the United States. Nevertheless, for [the Mennonite Indigenous leaders] and others, there was “something dynamically powerful in saying ‘I’m sorry’.”

The Mennonite Church stated that “We want to be truly repentant as God teaches and we understand that unless an apology goes hand in hand with restitution and a change in behavior, it is meaningless. At this time, we see our support of this federal apology as a first step in our white Mennonite journey toward repentance. We hope that we will also be able to commit ourselves to walking this long road together toward a place of justice and true reconciliation.” MCUSA had already supported *Return to the Earth*, described as “a restorative act that goes beyond confession.” This was a project “initiated by Lawrence Hart, a Cheyenne peace chief and Mennonite pastor in Oklahoma.” This project was also endorsed by MCC and supported “Native

Americans in burying ancestral remains now scattered across the United States and enables the process of education and reconciliation between Native and non-Native peoples.”

BIR 290-291

Then, in 2008, when Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper “delivered a formal statement of apology on behalf of the federal government and all Canadians to former students of Indian Residential Schools,” Don Peters, Executive Director of MCC Canada wrote the Prime Minister expressing “support and affirmation for the government’s recent national apology to the former students of Aboriginal boarding schools on behalf of the government of Canada....

“We welcome leadership in the federal government that seeks to take responsibility for past wrongs and works towards reconciliation. We agree with your words that the “policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in this country. ... It is our hope and prayer that your administration will continue to work towards justice for Aboriginal peoples.”

BIR 358-361

In 1996, the Report of the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP) called on the Canadian government to acknowledge that “concepts such as *terra nullius* and the Doctrine of Discovery are factually, legally, and morally wrong,” and that they should “no longer form part of law making,” or be “the basis of arguments presented to the courts.”

“Disappointingly, the federal, provincial and territorial governments did not respond to RCAP’s call, and neither did the courts.”

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) repeated the summons. Governments, also called on “all religious denominations and faith groups ... to repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples.” (Call 49).

As a result, in 2016 Mennonite Church Canada passed a resolution repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery and recommended forming a working group to help flesh out that commitment. The background piece that accompanied the resolution noted, among other things, that, because of this, “systemic racism and discrimination continues to undermine the dignity and well-being of Indigenous peoples around the globe. All of these are tied to the Doctrine of Discovery.”

The second part of the resolution with respect to the working group stated that it should “be formed by representatives of Mennonite Church Canada and Area Churches to begin by reviewing any related recommendations from the TRC report, make the appropriate study material available to congregations, and make further periodic recommendations to the General Board/area church boards on steps along the path of reconciliation.”

There was considerable discussion on the floor of the delegate session about this and some comments worth noting are:

- “Our own [problematic/racist/supremacist] attitudes [are] ingrained in us because of this doctrine. We should be doing this as a church body but also as individuals.
- This [Doctrine of Discovery] is not just a historical document, but is still a reality in current law and a current political issue.
- We may not be historically responsible for the Doctrine of Discovery, but we do reap the benefits. We do need to say “sorry.”

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (2010-2015)

Between 2010 and 2015, survivors of the Canadian Indian Residential Schools and supporters prevailed upon Indigenous leaders and eventually the government to put in place the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It was empowered to gather information from survivors, documenting their experiences, from which we were to learn what had happened with a view to increasing our understanding of the multi-generational impact of that failed government enterprise, a tool of attempted enforced assimilation of the later 19th and most of the 20th centuries in Canada. Because of the significance of that I have devoted a special section to it.

BIR 298-301

After the TRC got underway in 2010 with its first national event in Winnipeg, Mennonite Church Canada delegates gathered in Calgary and passed a resolution, confessing complicity in the residential school system and committing themselves to “engage the pain” of that legacy.

The resolution stated:

- That Mennonite Church Canada congregations and individual members recognize and confess our complicity in the failing of the Christian church and its role in the tragic physical, emotional, mental, and sexual abuse, denial of culture, language, and peoplehood of Aboriginal peoples in Canada.
- In recognition of this past failure, and in acknowledgement that destructive individual attitudes, such as paternalism, racism, and superiority are still present among us, we as Mennonite Church Canada congregations and as individuals will seek renewed opportunities to work with the Aboriginal people of Canada, opening our hearts, minds, and ears to engage the pain resulting from the legacy of residential schools, and strive to recognize each other as sisters and brothers created in the image and likeness of one God.

There was concern that this resolution would cast a shadow on the work of Mennonite Pioneer Mission and Native Ministries and a resolution was introduced to deal with that. However, it was rescinded. “Instead, the movers entrusted the General Board to give attention to the intent of this part of the rescinded resolution.”

BIR 316-317

When the Canadian TRC, established in 2010 “to uncover the harms of the Indian Residential School System and to lay a foundation for a lasting reconciliation across Canada, held hearings in

Saskatoon in 2012, MCC Saskatchewan offered a formal “Expression of Reconciliation” which stated, among other things:

- We acknowledge that there was - and is - much hurt and much suffering.
- We regret our part in an assimilation practice that took away language use and cultural practice, separating child from parent and people from their culture.
- We repent of our participation in the destructive acts of the dominant society.

BIR 332-333

In 2013, when the TRC hearings came to Vancouver, an ecumenical group of Mennonites (including Mennonite Church BC (MCBC)) presented an “Expression of Reconciliation.” In part it read:

“We confess that we have failed in our love and care toward our Indigenous neighbours. We commit to working towards reconciliation ... peacemaking and bringing justice. We commit to growing in our understanding of your history and culture, your attachment to and care for the land, and to educating those with misconceptions in our communities...”

BIR 336-338

In 2014, at the last TRC hearing in Edmonton, “a group of Anabaptist denominational leaders, including the Director of MCC Canada, issued [a] statement of acknowledgment, repentance, and commitment. It should be noted that this was not an official delegation of the Canadian Council of Anabaptist leaders, because not all members of CCAL participated. The statement confesses that Anabaptists have been part of the dominant Canadian culture that is guilty of racism, and it acknowledges that Anabaptists have also been part of the larger Christian community that has wielded the gospel with coercion.”

The statement includes the following:

- As we have listened to your stories, we’ve added our tears to the countless tears that you have shared We acknowledge that there was, and is, much hurt and much suffering.
- We have learned much and we have much to learn.
- We recognize that being part of a dominant culture, our attitudes and perspectives made the residential through experience possible and that these attitudes and perspectives became entrenched in our relationships and in our culture.
- We regret our part in the assimilation practice that took away language use and cultural practice, separating child and parent, parent from child and Indigenous peoples from their culture.
- We regret that, at times, the Christian faith was used, wrongly, as an instrument of power ... that some leaders within the church abused their power and those under their authority.
- We acknowledge the paternalism and racism of the past. As leaders of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ church communities, we acknowledge that we have work to do in addressing paternalism and racism both within our communities and in the broader public.

- We repent of our denominational encounters with Indigenous peoples that at times may have been motivated more by cultural biases than by the unconditional love of Jesus Christ. We repent of our failure to advocate for marginalized Indigenous peoples as our faith would instruct us to.
- We are aware that we have a long path to walk. We hope to build relationships with First Nations communities so that we can continue this learning journey and walk this path together.
- We are followers of Jesus Christ, the great reconciler. We are aware that words without actions are not only ineffective, but may also be harmful. We commit ourselves to take your challenges to us very seriously. We will seek to model the reconciling life and work of Jesus in seeking reconciliation with you. We will encourage our churches to reach out in practical and loving ways, including dialogue and expressions of hospitality.
- We commit ourselves to walk with you, listening, and learning together as we journey to a healthier and more just tomorrow.

BIR 366-368

As a follow-up to the above Edmonton statement by Anabaptist leaders, MCC in 2017 deemed it necessary to release a “response to the truth and reconciliation commission calls to action 48 and 49.” In the preamble they wrote, “Arriving in a new land with the hope of starting a new life free from oppression, we became part of another story of dispossession, of which we were initially unaware. As Settlers who became part of the mainstream of society, Mennonites benefitted directly or indirectly at the expense of Indigenous peoples and assimilated prejudices that gave rise to the residential schools and other abuses of Indigenous peoples.”

The statement began by repeating the items from the Edmonton statement, going on to say the following:

“In keeping with this commitment and in response to the TRC calls to action, MCC repudiates concepts used to justify European superiority over Indigenous peoples, such as the Doctrine of Discovery (DOD). Such concepts of superiority, coercion, violence, and abuse are opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the inherent dignity and equality we believe all people have received from God.

“The purpose of MCC is to demonstrate God’s love for all people... working for peace and justice... In our ongoing efforts to seek right relations with our Indigenous neighbours, MCC also commits itself to using the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) as a guide for right relations and reconciliation. We affirm the principles of self-determination, equality and respect embedded in this declaration, and commit ourselves anew to the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us by Jesus Christ, the great reconciler.

“We know that these words and commitments tonight do harm, nor do they ensure a path of respect and equality going forward. We still have much to learn and are working with our member churches to understand the meaning and impact of both the DOD and UNDRIP.

We are already at work discerning what other words and actions are needed from us. We are thankful for the accompaniment of Indigenous partners and teachers in this learning and discernment. We welcome the accountability of our constituents, Indigenous partners, and others in living up to this statement with integrity, and with which we intend to herald a more hopeful, respectful and just time in our friendships and partnership with Indigenous peoples.”

BIR 372-374

In the wake of a 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA, “MCC US, with a long history of anti-racist education and advocacy, issued this statement ... part of a larger discussion within the organization of how it might expand its anti-racism work.”

“While we Anabaptist Christians have been willing to join other movements for justice, we have too often been slow or unwilling to join the struggle for racial justice, failing to see white supremacy as the violence that it is. As MCC, we confess and repent such hesitancy and even blindness, which exact an ongoing physical and spiritual toll on our sisters and brothers of colour and leads to spiritual and moral decay for white people.

“MCC rejects white supremacy and its violence in all forms including white racism, white silence, white fragility, and white privilege as a scourge that continues the legacy of trauma infected on people of colour. White supremacy and racism deny the dignity of each person.

“As Anabaptist Christians we are called to follow the example of Jesus in community. To this end:

- MCC rejects all white supremacy movements as contradictory to the gospel Jesus Christ...
- ... MCC also recognizes that in the context of white supremacy, our peace stance requires us to work alongside and with those striving for racial justice, while remaining committed to nonviolent means.
- We acknowledge that US history is animated by violence against people of colour. MCC confesses that our understanding of and response to that violence has not been adequate.
- MCC proclaims that the call to discipleship explicitly includes the cost of the work of dismantling racism in all its forms. In other words, to follow Jesus... means to confront white supremacy, white privilege and white silence as a matter of faith.

“Therefore, MCC commits in our work to reject white supremacy and to respond to it as a form of violence. We interpret this to mean that our peace work... consists of efforts toward:

- Dismantling the DOD and the social, economic, and racial consequences of Settler expansion and land seizure that Indigenous communities... continue to bear.
- Confronting the racial disparities in mass incarceration that have had a devastating and disproportionate effect on communities of... people of colour

- Deepening the work of anti-oppression among our staff, boards, and constituencies by providing anti-racism training and committing to establishing structures and practices of accountability.

“... we invite and call on our constituency to reject white supremacy, and to join us alongside other communities in forming creative and prophetic response to racism as an expression of Anabaptist Christian convictions.”

BIR 378-382

We have been noting actions by denominational Anabaptist/Mennonite conferences in Canada and the US, as well as by MCC in both countries. In 2018 the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) was challenged by Mennonite Church members from Panama. They asked for help in their “struggle to have titles to ancestral land recognized and enforced ... to help them in their struggles to stop Settlers from taking their lands and from exacting resources without consent.” They asked for prayers “amid the continuing invasions” and for concrete advocacy.

Three years later, MWC’s General Council approved a “declaration of solidarity with Indigenous peoples, proclaiming that ‘the struggle of Indigenous peoples is our struggle.’” In this statement MWC repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery and affirmed the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

The statement included the following sentences of solidarity:

“We are saddened and pained when our fellow Indigenous sisters and brothers, who form part of our global community of churches, as well as Indigenous peoples who may not be part of our communion, are treated unjustly and are oppressed. Pain in one part of our body causes pain throughout the whole body.

“Our being is interconnected. Their pain is also our pain; their cry, our cry. Mennonite World Conference stands united with our Indigenous brothers and sisters for justice. The struggle of the Indigenous peoples is our struggle. And we recognize the peace [and I might add, especially in our Canadian context, reconciliation] is not complete while some are still suffering.”

Of special importance to my topic, the statement also went on to include three items of confession and repentance:

- We confess that at times the Church has denied the experience and witness to wholeness of our Indigenous sisters and brothers. There have been times when the Church has failed to recognize the dignity and cultural heritage of our Indigenous sisters and brothers. Indeed, there are times when we have forgotten that some of our Indigenous brothers and sisters also form our Church.
- We confess that the church has benefitted from the strategies of empires that have included violence, unsustainable extraction of natural resources, colonial mission, genocide,

environmental and water destruction, segregation, assimilation, imprisonment, and ongoing racial marginalization in health, housing, employment, and education.

- We confess that some Anabaptist, as global migrants and Settlers, have, in some places, gained access to land and benefits that have been withheld from Indigenous peoples. And we confess that we still continue to participate in systems and mechanisms that perpetuate current economic inequality and oppression, which has often resulted in the loss and dispossession of land.
- As a global family of Anabaptist churches, we repent of our participation in this violence and ask for forgiveness from our Indigenous brothers and sisters. As we commit to walking with our Indigenous sisters and brothers, we commit ourselves to seek justice through challenging the beliefs and systems of domination. We have a grace guard call to announce this ongoing violence and I am grateful for and humbled by the witness of some of our and the Baptist churches and agencies and their work with Indigenous groups towards restoration and reconciliation.

The statement ended with the following:

“We pray to God for the power of the spirit to lead us on the journey towards repentance, transformation, and preparation.”

BIR 390-393

In 2016, Romeo Saganash, a residential school survivor and a Member of Parliament, put forth a private member’s bill, C– 262 - *An act to ensure that the laws of Canada are in harmony with the United Nations declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples*. An ecumenical coalition, including MCC and Mennonite Church Canada Indigenous Settler Relations sent a letter to the Senate to support passing this bill as it had passed in the House. Unfortunately and ironically, “Conservative tactics prevailed, and the bill died on the order paper on June 21, 2019 - National Indigenous Peoples Day.”

By this time, Romeo had been working on this issue, including within the UN itself, for some 35 years. He personally describes how the language was watered down again and again over time. The last step in this process was when the government itself then put forward a similar bill, C – 15, in 2020, and that passed.

In the following year, the Government of British Columbia forged ahead and became the first province to pass a similar piece of legislation, Bill C-41, the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*.

The Jubilee Project

Another item of special significance in this whole discussion is the Jubilee Project. It is important because of its biblical roots, the nature of some of its formation and statements, as well as discussion that arose in terms of using such funds for purposes of reconciliation and reparation with our Indigenous neighbours.

BIR 141-142

In 1990, the quincentenary of Columbus' arrival in the Western Hemisphere on the horizon, CMC, at its 88th assembly, stated:

- Whereas 1992 is the 500th year since Columbus came to the Americas; and
- Whereas CMC has a long-standing concern for Treaty Land Entitlement for the Aboriginal people in Canada; and
- Whereas MCC Canada is exploring the implementation of a "Jubilee Fund";
- Be it resolved that we, the delegates at the 88th sessions ... express our support for the establishment of a "Jubilee Fund." Such a fund would,
 1. Express to the Native people of Canada our gratitude for their generosity in sharing their land with us and our ancestors; and
 2. Acknowledge the way in which Native people repeatedly and consistently have been thwarted in their endeavour to have access to their rightful lands and their unique status.

On the 500th year of enjoyment of this land, each family in the CMC would be invited to contribute toward this fund. The fund would be used to fulfil outstanding Treaty Land Entitlements. Focus would be on areas where Mennonites have directly benefited from the treaty process and where promises given have been denied justice.

An amendment added: "That CMC explore the possibility of participating in such a fund, or establishing such a fund, and preparing a plan of action."

BIR 110

One can see some of the genesis of Jubilee thinking in Native Ministries' (NM) submission to Manitoba's Aboriginal Justice Inquiry in late 1988. Neil Funk-Unrau wrote:

"Another Hebrew concept which had an impact on the legal code was the concept of the Jubilee Year. In order to ensure that a certain equality be maintained within society, the law decreed that every 50th year all property that had been sold would return to the original owner or the descendants of the owner... The laws around the Jubilee Year gave special priority to the situation of the poor and mandated a certain degree of sharing and economic levelling which could have prevented the extreme disparities between the rich and the poor..."

BIR 150-151

In 1991 the Jubilee Project was taken further. "In consultation with leading First Nations organizations [Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC), Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN)], MCC Canada (MCC-C) and the CMC expanded the direction of their newly created Jubilee fund. Alongside the provision of money to support land justice and the actual return of lands, Indigenous colleagues believed Mennonite institutions should focus on educational initiatives and advocacy among their constituents."

As a result, a motion was carried which stated "That CMC endorse implementation of the Jubilee Project as outlined."

David Neufeld indicated \$5,000 seed money would be provided by Native ministries and that “information will be provided for individuals and families to make donations for the homeland which we as Mennonites have received at the expense of Canada’s Native people.”

There were to be three foci:

1. Education - pursuing “programs which will help us understand 500 years of relationships between Native and non-Native people.”
2. Advocacy - “in regard to Treaty Land Entitlement”, and
3. Concrete Projects - “making land and resources available.”

<https://www.mennonitechurch.ca/jubilee-fund>

BIR 225-233

Nearly a decade later, there was an attempt to give these initiatives new energy as part of Jubilee 2000. This was an ecumenical venture to educate Canadians and mobilize them for action. A 24-item statement, the “Jubilee Challenge,” (225) was crafted with the “conviction that, if Canadians were to practice Jubilee by taking action on global debt relief, they must also practice Jubilee at home by taking action for the recognition and just implementation of Indigenous treaty and land rights, including the provision of an adequate land-base for First Nations.” This document ended with these words: “We call upon congregations, churches, schools and other church bodies to study this cause and take it up.”(230) It also led to a petition to the Government of Canada on “Land Rights, Right Relations,” signed by 12 Canadian church bodies including MCC, the main point of which was “calling on the federal government to act immediately to establish a truly independent commission with the mandate to implement Aboriginal land, treaty and inherent rights.”(230)

Conclusion

When one looks back, one is encouraged to see what our people have done over the last 50 years. However, at the same time, one realizes with pain that so many of the noble words have still not reached our constituent members. Actions still lag behind words. We know that we still have a long way to go to get all of our members moving towards the same unity of understandings and goals in terms of our relationship with our Indigenous neighbours.

God help us as we continue to struggle with that at the same time as we struggle still to reach out to our Indigenous neighbours to try to walk together on a path of peace, as so many of these documents propose.