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Moderator's Statement on Residential School Burial Sites

July 19, 2021

To Residential School Survivors, Families, and Communities:

I want to acknowledge the pain that you, as survivors of residential schools, families, and communities, are experiencing. We understand that the pain endured at these schools went far beyond their walls and grounds into community and through generations.

The United Church of Canada operated 15 residential schools: Alberni, Ahousaht, Coqualeetza, Kitimaat (Elizabeth Long Memorial Home), and Port Simpson (Crosby Boys' and Girls' Home) in BC; Edmonton, McDougall Orphanage/Morley, and Red Deer in Alberta; Cote (formerly Crowstand), File Hills, and Round Lake in Saskatchewan; Brandon, Norway House, and Portage la Prairie in Manitoba; and Mount Elgin in Ontario.

We are aware of cemeteries on some of these sites, and we know that there are also unmarked and likely undocumented graves of children.

We acknowledge that our role in the residential school system and colonization is an abuse of power through our Christian faith. We hope that our ongoing work for reconciliation, which has been guided by United Church residential school survivors, more truly reflects what our faith calls us to be and do. We are committed to the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, especially those directed to us as perpetrators. These include those related to burial sites and missing children.

In the spirit of truth telling and transparency, we want to share the work that we have done, in consultation with community, on identifying and restoring graveyards. The United Church in southwestern Manitoba has actively supported ongoing work on the identification and preservation of gravesites related to the residential school in Brandon; this includes the 104 graves identified off-site in 2018. In Saskatchewan, we supported the community of Okanese in preserving its graveyard and honouring the children buried there. The United Church of Canada has also been a partner in the preservation of the Regina Industrial School cemetery. (Regina was operated by the Presbyterian church, but the United Church shares responsibility.) United Churches in Red Deer, Alberta, worked to preserve the residential school cemetery in cooperation with the communities whose children were sent to Red Deer. There has also been research into possible graves at the Edmonton Residential School.

This work is just a beginning, and we understand that it must continue. Steps are required to properly locate, identify, and honour these children, and for the truth that Indigenous people have always known to finally be heard. Any work we do to help search grounds of and surrounding United Church residential schools must be done with respect for, the consent of, and with the guidance of Indigenous leadership, communities, survivors, and families.

We know that we are not the experts in this work. We will continue to share all the documents and knowledge we have. If anyone in community wishes to share information and expertise with us, we will gratefully accept it and be committed to transparency.

We are committed to meeting with leadership to hear how they wish to proceed, and whether they would like our assistance at any stage. This includes financial assistance for what community leadership deems appropriate.

The United Church of Canada is committed to reconciliation and to transparency in our efforts to support Indigenous leadership, communities, survivors, and families in bringing these children the honour we denied them in life.

With respect,
The Right Rev. Dr. Richard Bott
Moderator