Indigenous Day of Prayer 2024
June 16, 2024 – Proper 6 Year B

A Service of Blessing and Celebration from the Settler Church for the Autonomous Indigenous Church

*In spring 2024, the congregations of the United Church approved a remit from the 44th General Council:*

That The United Church of Canada will be organized as follows: (1) a three-council structure, consisting of communities of faith, regional councils and a Denominational Council; and (2) an autonomous National Indigenous Organization; and

That once the new autonomous National Indigenous Organization is established within The United Church of Canada, it will have its own mechanisms to make any future changes to its structure and processes.…

*This came after long years of advocacy from the Indigenous Church.*

*While I am certain that there will be formal words of institution to acknowledge this historic moment, on the Indigenous Day of Prayer, here are some words for each congregation to celebrate this decision and to offer their prayers.*

### A Call to Worship

*To situate ourselves into this moment in the life of the church*

One: To those of us for whom it feels only recently were lighting a tiny candle of incarnation into that longest night of winter, we find grace here, unfurling.

**All: As these longest days bring light upon light, we find grace here too, unfurling as well.**

One: In rain coaxing into dry earth,

**All: The golden green ready to receive,**

One: The resplendent light calling us to unshackle ourselves into connection,

**All: The truth-telling vulnerability of unending evening, here is grace.**

One: To those of us whose grandparents were missionaries, who have settled here amidst golden greens not our own, we find grace—undeserved—unfurling too.

**All: There is grace in this—that some, at least, of those of the Nations here have opted to journey beside us after all that’s been done and all that still is.**

One: Not in the same shoes, nor always close beside, but—after all of this—on the path Christ makes. This summer, we get to witness what that journeying together might now look like.

**All: To all of us, the followers of Christ, here on Turtle Island, in this moment, there is an unexpected grace unfurling,**

One: As light makes its way back into the world, we are invited into new relationship,

**All: Unshackling ourselves, and one another,**

One: That we might walk alongside one another, into summer’s light.

### An Opening Prayer

*For courage in this hour*

Almighty God, our Rock, and our Redeemer—you who are the foundation of existence; you who invite us to nurture, with you, the renewal of all things; you who are the vivacious seed through which that which is impossible finds possibility bursting forth:

May the words of my mouth be bold, be compassionate, be measured, be joyful, recognizing that you are unnameable and unknowable and yet long to be in relationship, seeking to name you and to know you, grateful for your invitation.

May the meditation of each heart gathered here today be open and genuine and vulnerable and hopeful and real, recognizing that your calling is always beyond us and yet your Spirit works through the stillness at the centre of our being, seeking to answer your call, grateful for your companionship.

In this hour, in this place, with these people: may we be courageous in this new thing.

### Possible Hymns

*An unambiguous celebration:*

VU 222 Come, Let Us Sing
VU 224 Sing a Happy Hallelujah
VU 245 Praise the Lord with the Sound of Trumpet
MV 88 Over My Head
MV 120 My Soul Cries Out

*A reminder of whose we are:*

VU 248 When Long before Time
VU 375 Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness
VU 282 Long Before the Night
MV 28 God of the Bible

*Affirming divine complexity and multiplicity:*

VU 268 Bring Many Names
MV 106 I Am The Dream
MV 142 Oh a Song Must Rise
MV 159 In Star and Crescent
MV 173 Put Peace into Each Other’s Hands

*Grounding amidst complexity:*

VU 82 A Light is Gleaming
VU 374 Come and Find the Quiet Centre
VU 395 Come In, Come In and Sit Down
MV 79 Spirit, Open My Heart
MV 157 I Am a Child of God

### Scripture Readings

1 Samuel 15:34—16:13
Psalm 20
2 Corinthians 5:6‒10, 14‒17
Mark 4:26‒34

### Video Reflection

### [Tongues of Flame](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyEn-p9FAzc)**: Interview with Renée Pelletier**

[youtube.com/watch?v=PyEn-p9FAzc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyEn-p9FAzc) (*Permission is granted for congregational use.*)

*Back in 2021, in the season of Pentecost, Kimbourne Park United Church interviewed members of the congregation to explore how the Spirit moved through them in their life and work. This is an interview we did with Renée Pelletier.*

*Renée is of Maliseet descent, from Fall River, Nova Scotia; is a partner at the Indigenous law firm Olthuis Kleer Townshend, focusing on Aboriginal and treaty rights litigation; and is a member of Kimbourne Park United Church. Here she is speaking about self-determination.*

### Sermon

*On Mark 4:26‒34*

This sermon was partially inspired by trying, and failing, to remove burdock from my garden.

Contrary to Mark’s dramatic flair, which it sometimes seems he’s not capable of telling a story without, mustard “trees” are not—in fact—tall. They don’t require gazing upwards, nor the expansive sweep of the hands, nor the slight slackening of the jaw or widening of the eyes in an expression of awe. Most of the time, if you’re looking for mustard, you can look straight ahead, maybe down, even.

While occasionally they can be a respectable size, they are not the mighty cedars or the noble oak, nor are they the golden glow of a field of flowing wheat.

Amidst those, the mustard plant looks small, and it is hard to imagine how it can possibly be much to aspire to. And yet it’s the mustard seed that becomes the home for all of the birds of the heavens.

The kingdom of God, I hear Jesus’ parable telling us, is, at best, a shrub.

A person might argue that drawing the vision of the world renewed down to shrub size might seem pejorative, but here I mean it with nothing but love and admiration—Mark’s vision of Christ is of one who is rooted, and is tenacious, and keeps trying again no matter the circumstances.

In Robin Wall Kimmerer’s book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she argues that the Western tradition is to recognize a hierarchy of beings, with humans at the top and plants at the bottom. But in Indigenous ways of knowing, humans are the younger siblings of creation—the ones with the most to learn. Other species are our teachers, and they teach by example. After all, they’ve been around a lot longer than we have. “Our Indigenous herbalists say to pay attention when plants come to you;” Kimmerer declares, “they’re bringing you something you need to learn.”

What did we miss in not paying attention to Jesus’ teaching about the mustard? What does the mustard have to teach us?

While the oak is often admired for its nobility, and the wheat for its utility, the mustard field is resilient in dryness or in rain. It is close to its source. It is humble. It doesn’t overextend. Mustard plants are scruffy, dependable, close to the ground, quick-growing, self-sowing, free of insect and disease problems. They grow well in most soils. They are hard to kill.

Our world offers rocky earth for justice. It is dry soil for goodness. The pests that seek to drown out a renewed world coming are abundant.

The mustard is solid.

We too are invited to be grounded, secure in our roots and sense of self, able to withstand complex situations, secure enough in our identity that when circumstances around us change, we have the emotional resources that we need to be able to thrive nonetheless.

Just as the mustard thrives in any circumstance, even as—for example—the governance of the United Church changes in response to the complex relationship between settler and Indigenous Christians, we know that we are grounded and have what we need, and we know we are able to thrive.

The mustard is also small, relatively unobtrusive, and lives on the margins.

I suspect that if we’d held on to the mustard’s wisdom for a little bit longer, we might have fewer mighty sanctuaries and giant skyscrapers. I love their awesome magnitude, the ways that they uplift me into feeling the grandeur and transcendence of the Divine, but I also recognize that we have been called to be immanent—seeking to be present and embedded within this world, close to the ground, scruffy, and resilient—rather than seeking to transcend it.

I wonder, if we held onto the mustard’s wisdom for a little longer, whether we’d have so intentionally sought to Christianize the social order. Mustard plants aren’t the social order—they are “weeds” on its fringes and margins, but not subordinate to some grand vision nor invested in subordinating others to it. They survive, and adapt, and disrupt the centralization or commodification or imperialism of the world they find themselves in. What would holding onto that status look like for us?

The mustard is tasty, and I don’t think there is any shame in us showing up with a little pizazz, a little spice, in zhuzhing it up a little bit. As we in the settler church engage with our friends in the Indigenous Church, what is the particular spice that we bring to the table? What is our unique flavour as a part of the Christian communion?

The mustard is also—I should say—native to North Africa, the Middle East, and the higher altitudes of Eurasia.

In particular, though, as Jesus argues, mustard is receptive to the coming and going of the birds, provides a safe haven for them when they arrive, and is comfortable when they leave again.

I wonder if there is a model here for our relationship with the Indigenous Church as well. Can we work towards being that safe haven for relationship that is both hospitable and not in control? Can we be that place of welcome where a person who has undoubtedly experienced some level of intergenerational trauma arising from the brutal Christianization of the social order here might still feel safe enough to be vulnerable, safe enough to be courageous, safe enough to rest for a little while?

When that person lifts up their proverbial wings to make their way to the next place, can we let them go without concern about what that might be, happy to return our focus to the deep abundance of the soil, to our scruffy calling, and to that warm glorious glow of the sun?

I don’t know what the newly autonomous Indigenous Church is going to look like. I don’t know how they will engage with these texts, with Mark, with Samuel, with Paul. I don’t know what the kingdom of God means to them, or what lessons they take from the mustard seed, or how they conceptualize the role of the church in community, or how they understand their calling.

I couldn’t be more excited to find out.

This is an exciting moment, and one worthy of celebration. The Indigenous Church, through careful discernment, passionate advocacy, and prayerful engagement with the rest of the church, has unencumbered itself from some level of colonial oversight, and has achieved a greater level of self-determination and a meaningful level of support from the rest of the church for traditional Indigenous modes of self-government.

This isn’t just happening within the church. Here, we find ourselves a microcosm for self-determination efforts in Indigenous Nations across Turtle Island. It has been hard fought, but we now get to watch and witness as these Nations take back control over their child welfare system, or justice system, or healthcare system, or water management systems, seeking title over territory that they properly have jurisdiction over.

This is an exciting moment, and one worthy of celebration.

Also: The work is only just beginning as we continue to receive and respond to the invitation from those Nations, and the appropriate Indigenous governance bodies within the church, to work with them and support them as they untangle the incredible knot of colonization, as they rebuild and re-empower their traditional systems of government and spirituality, and invite us to work towards undoing the harm done by our ancestors and by the systems through which we still benefit.

I pray—with a full heart and a spirit of celebration—that we will have the wisdom to be grounded amidst it all, that we will have the courage to be small, that we will bring our particular spice when invited, that we will receive those who come into relationship with us and bless them as they fly off to that which is next.

Within this, the littlest seed, we might find a taste of the kingdom.

Amen.

### **A Rite of Celebration**

*For the self-determination of the Indigenous Church*

#### Opening

One: Friends, let us open our hearts in prayer with the Indigenous Church.

Together, we celebrate the 58 communities of faith as they gather this morning to pray, to sing, to pour over scripture, and, as the case may be, to engage in traditional spiritual practices.

In particular, we pray with (*you are invited to name* [*Indigenous churches that are near you or that you have a relationship with*](#_Indigenous_Communities_of)).

We pray with those who are gathering in buildings that need repair, who are boiling water, and whose ministry responds to the brutal and unrelenting intergenerational impact of colonial violence.

We hold in our hearts the children, the youth, the young adults, the older adults, and the Elders who make up those various communities. We hold them in our hearts as friends and siblings.

**All:** **God bless us all. Bless us and give us ease. Bless us and give us strength. Bless us and give us peace.**

One: We receive, with gratitude, the vision of the Indigenous Church:

We carry a common vision and dream, respect everyone’s story, care for one another, uphold community, build positive relationships.

We thank our Ancestors and All Our Relations who have brought us to this moment. We are all spirit first. The work of Right Relations continues.

We commit to moving forward together in a good way.

We receive, with gratitude, the Calls to the Church from the Caretakers of Our Indigenous Circle:

Our own Indigenous understanding of the Christ story is what we need. We are Indigenous nations, tribes, confederacies with clans and Elders. Creator has placed us in our sacred lands and taught us to harvest the food just as the first humans in the Bible. Our ways, of seeing and being in this earth, are much like the Hebrew people. We can hear creation and have learned from all our relations, the animals, the water folk, the plant families, our mother the earth, etc. We hear in the groaning of the earth the sufferings of Christ. We feel the preciousness of life and the sanctity of love in our communities and lands.

We remember, with humility and with contrition, these words from The United Church of Canada’s 1986 Apology to Indigenous Peoples:

We confused Western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ. We imposed our civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel.

We tried to make you be like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were. As a result, you, and we, are poorer and the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred, and we are not what we are meant by God to be.

We think about those Elders, and advocates, and theologians, and committed and thoughtfully engaged United Church people, who sat together, showed up at the committee meeting or the circle, who left their responsibilities back at home for a little while, checked in, smudged, prayed, discerned, spoke, listened, who attended to the voice of the Creator calling to them in this moment, who wrote down that calling and shared it with the rest of us.

**All:** **God bless us all. Bless us and give us ease. Bless us and give us strength. Bless us and give us peace.**

One: Thank you, Almighty God, for the Indigenous Church.

We have experienced them as a source of wisdom and have received what they have offered with gratitude; we have witnessed in them a resiliency in the face of brutal and unrelenting harm, and have been moved by the power of their testimony, their commitment to one another and to you, their willingness to open up broken hearts again and again in service to a healing love.

We are grateful, God, for the unique spiritual gifts that we have experienced them bringing to this communion, for their contributions to our attempt to discern your nature and your call, for the pleasure and the joy of being able to spend time with them, for the gift of being invited to share a table together.

Thank you for the accountability that they have offered us, the justice that they have demanded, the return to right relationship that they have sought.

All: God bless us all. Bless us and give us ease. Bless us and give us strength. Bless us and give us peace.

#### Ritual

*In their own language, the presider invites the congregation to assume the orans position, with feet shoulder width apart, spine straight, and hands outstretched, palms up, reflecting on the Indigenous Church and prayerfully inclining their hearts in blessing.*

*Explaining themselves as they do, the presider dips their thumb in oil, looks off into the distance, prayerfully reflects on the Indigenous Church and, inclining their heart in blessing, moves their thumb in a wiping motion as if they were anointing a person’s brow.*

*The presider invites the congregation to place their hand on the shoulder of the person nearest them as they say together:*

#### Prayer after the Anointing

One: Holy God, as we go in a new way,

**All: May we trust the path.**

One: As we go in a new way,

**All: May we celebrate the parts of the journey that we share.**

One: As we go in a new way,

**All: May we commit to keep pace.**

One: As we go in a new way,

**All: May we seek to remove all that might entangle us.**

One: As we go in a new way,

**All: May we celebrate that you are the one who sets us on the road.**

One: Send us forth from this place, transformed, knowing that this is holy ground.

### Commissioning

Friends, let us go forth, humble as sojourners.

Let us go, living into our recognition that this has been, is, and will continue to be, the territory of (*again, you’ll want to localize this to your context*).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let us live into our understanding that this watershed, this ecosystem, and the plant and animal nations that inhabit it have been, are, and will continue to be in a covenantal relationship with them.

Let us live into our knowledge that (*those nations*)have established a legal tradition for their jurisdiction over that territory and for upholding those covenantal relationships, and that those traditions continue to hold and will continue to hold.

Mindful of the covenants made long before us that are present in this place, let us hold ourselves accountable, as is appropriate, to the traditions already in place in this land; let us go as fellow travellers with the Indigenous Church in this place.

### Blessing

Friends, breathe deep.

Breathe deep, and hold onto that small grace of a world transforming around us, of God at work now in this place as They have always been at work here and in all places.

Breathe deep, and sit in the blessing of stillness.

Breathe deep, and let possibility begin to unfurl.

Breathe deep, and let courage grow within.

—*The Rev. Daniel Reed is serving in ministry at Kimbourne Park United Church, in Toronto, on the territory of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit.*

### Indigenous Communities of Faith

### Ontario ‒ Quebec

* Hiawatha (Keene) United Church
* Cape Croker United Church
* Saugeen (Ontario) Wesley United Church
* Alderville United Church
* Chapel of the Delaware United Church
* Nations Uniting
* Curve Lake United Church (Buckhorn)
* Georgina Island United Church
* Christian Island United Church
* Toronto Urban Native Ministry (TUNM)
* Kahnawake United Church
* Kahnesatake United Church
* Grand River United Church
* Kettle and Stoney Point United Church
* Moraviantown United Church
* Oneida United Church
* Rama United Church
* St. Clair/Sarnia United Church
* Shawanaga United Church
* Wahta United Church
* Wasauksing United Church
* Walpole Island United Church

### Keewatin Circle

* Cross Lake
* Berens River United Church
* Deer Lake United Church
* Fisher River United Church
* Garden Hill, Henry Fiddler United Church
* God’s Lake Narrows-God’s River
* Kinosao Sipi Keenanow United Church, Norway House
* Little Grand Rapids
* Pauingassi
* Nelson House United Church
* Oxford House, Vernon Grieves Memorial United Church
* Raymond Flett Memorial Pastoral Charge
* Red Sucker Lake United Church
* Sandy Lake, Adam Fiddler Memorial United Church
* Angus Bonner Memorial United Church
* Tower’s Island United Church, Norway House
* Wasagamack United Church
* Thompson Outreach
* Winnipeg Outreach

### Plains Circle

* Wanapakew United Church, File Hills
* Hurricane Hills United Church, Carry the Kettle
* Mamohkamatowin Saskatoon Urban Indigenous - Outreach
* Goodfish Lake United Church
* Saddle Lake United Church
* Central Alberta Spiritual Circle/Interconnect - Outreach
* Regina Native Outreach
* Morley United Church

### British Columbia

* Anspayaxw: Pierce Memorial United Church (Kispiox)
* Augsburg United Church and Emmanuel United Church
* Gitsigukla United Church
* Haida Gwaii United Church
* Haisla (Kitamaat Village) United Church
* Emmanuel United Church Hartley Bay
* Grace United Church – Lax Kw’alaams
* Quadra Island United Church
* Vancouver Longhouse - Outreach
1. Refer to [Native Land Digital](https://native-land.ca/) (native-land.ca), an Indigenous-led not-for-profit, to learn more about traditional territory. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)