

ACKNOWLEDGING THE TERRITORY IN WORSHIP

This brief guide is intended to help congregations and bodies of the church incorporate an Acknowledgement of Territory into their gatherings.

Why Acknowledge the Traditional Territory?

Acknowledging the territory where we gather and the people who have traditionally called it home for thousands of years is a way to continue to live out the church's Apologies to the First Peoples of North America. The acknowledgement supports our calls to others to pay respect to Indigenous peoples.



Map in the public domain (www.mediaindigena.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/treaties.png)

It is also one way the church can work toward right relations—by repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery that assumed the land was empty when European explorers, traders, and settlers first came.

In order to promote mutual respect, peace, and friendship, the 40th General Council 2009 encouraged the recognition of Traditional Territory of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples at the gatherings of the courts and pastoral charges of The United Church of Canada. A proposal has been brought to the General Council Executive to encourage Parliament to include a similar acknowledgement in its opening address.

Helpful Definitions

Treaties are nation-to-nation agreements outlining promises between both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people that set out responsibilities, agreements, and benefits for both. There are 70 recognized treaties in Canada. However, some First Nations never negotiated treaty so the land remains unceded. These websites can help you find which treaty applies to your church context: search “Maps of Treaty-Making in Canada” (INAC) or “Reference Maps Natural Resources Canada.”

Aboriginal, First Peoples, and Indigenous are all-encompassing terms that include Inuit, First Nations (Indians), and Métis.

Inuit are the Indigenous people of the north (from the Arctic land and waters from the Mackenzie Delta in the west to the Labrador coast in the east, and from the Hudson’s Bay coast to the islands of the High Arctic).

First Nations is a term used to describe Aboriginal peoples of Canada who are neither Métis nor Inuit. This term is generally used to replace the term “Indian.”

“First Nation” can refer to a band, a reserve-based community, or a larger tribal grouping.

Métis are recognized Aboriginal people who have both First Nation and European ancestry.

For further explanations of the terminology and more maps, see www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca.

What Acknowledging the Territory Could Look Like

The acknowledgement may be printed, spoken, projected, or posted on your website. It may refer generally to First Peoples, or specifically to a treaty, or to a group. You might also include the recognition on your outside sign or on a special plaque at the entrance to your building. Be creative!

Examples

Ministry Context	Acknowledgement	How It Is Used
Athabasca United Church, Athabasca, Alberta	We acknowledge with respect the history, spirituality, and culture of the peoples with whom Treaty 6 and Treaty 8 were signed and the territory wherein our church resides, and our responsibility as Treaty members. We also honour the heritage and gifts of Métis people.	Spoken at the 100th Anniversary service
St. Stephen's on the Hill, Sudbury, Ontario	For thousands of years, First Nations people have walked on this land; their relationship with the land is at the centre of their lives and spirituality. We are gathered on the traditional territory of the Atikameksheng Anishnawbek and acknowledge their stewardship of this land throughout the ages.	Spoken at the beginning of every service and meeting
Presbyteries in Maritimes Conference	As we gather to share the work that rightly comes before this court, let us pause to remember that in this region we live and work and worship on lands that are, by law, the unceded territories of the Wabanaki peoples—predominantly the lands of the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, and Passamaquoddy. May we live with respect on this land, and live in peace and friendship with its people.	To be spoken at the start of meetings.

How Can My Community Start This Conversation?

Open hearts are needed to make this process authentic and meaningful. One place to start the conversation might be sharing this article with the worship committee and/or the group in your church concerned with issues surrounding Aboriginal justice, right relations, and truth and reconciliation. Once the research has been done and a statement has been developed, share with your congregation why the process of acknowledging traditional territory is important. Most Conferences have a “Living into Right Relations” group or similar body that could support you on this journey. You may also contact General Council staff, Cecile Fausak (cfausak@united-church.ca), or Springwater Hester-Meawassige (SHMeawassige@united-church.ca) for further pointers.