

**An Ecumenical Statement on the
*United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:***

**Responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action 48
March 31, 2016**

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released 94 Calls to Action in June 2015 “to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation.” The Calls to Action provide multiple opportunities to address and overcome more than a century of systemic discrimination and abuse in the residential school system, and to create a transformed relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

The Government of Canada acted on behalf of all Canadians when it created the residential schools system. Some churches and religious communities ran the federally-funded schools as part of a national policy of assimilation spanning 160 years. The TRC has described the outcome of this policy as cultural genocide.

The church parties to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement received and promised to work with these Calls to Action. Other churches, faith communities, and ecumenical organizations have signalled their intent as well. In addition to the many statements released by churches and other faith groups in response to Call to Action #48, we the undersigned, jointly commit to Call to Action #48, to implement the principles, norms, and standards of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* as the framework for reconciliation.

The *UN Declaration* is an international human rights instrument adopted by the UN General Assembly on September 13, 2007. It affirms the inherent or pre-existing collective and individual human rights of Indigenous peoples. It does not create new rights. It provides a framework for justice and reconciliation, applying existing human rights standards to the specific historical, cultural and social circumstances of Indigenous peoples. The rights affirmed in the *UN Declaration* constitute the minimum standards for the survival, dignity, security, and well-being of Indigenous peoples worldwide.

In an executive summary of its final report, the TRC emphasized that “Canadians must do more than just talk about reconciliation; we must learn how to practise reconciliation in our everyday lives—within ourselves and our families, and in our communities, governments, places of worship, schools, and workplaces.”

Settlers in Canada have benefited, directly or indirectly, from the occupation and usurpation of Indigenous lands and resources. Indigenous peoples, however, have experienced impoverishment, oppression, dispossession from their lands, and the destruction of their cultures and spiritual practices. The root causes of this ongoing impoverishment and oppression of Indigenous peoples must be identified and, then, we must be willing to make it right.

The *UN Declaration*, with its emphasis on self-determination and consent, freedom from discrimination, and rights to spirituality, culture, lands, and resources, helps us to address the root causes of this inequity, and provides the means for us to correct it.

Call to Action #48 necessitates a fundamental reordering of our relationship, and a significant change in our identity as a country. It requires us to truly respect Indigenous peoples' right of self-determination and to acknowledge and respect nation-to-nation relationships based on mutuality and respect.

Implementing the *UN Declaration* includes examining the Doctrine of Discovery, which some faith bodies have repudiated. We acknowledge that this doctrine has had and continues to have devastating consequences for Indigenous peoples worldwide. All doctrines of superiority are illegal in international and domestic law, and immoral, and we affirm that they can never justify the exploitation and subjugation of Indigenous peoples and the violation of their human rights.

As churches and religious organizations, we have acknowledged our failures to respect the rights and dignity of Indigenous peoples. We acknowledge the harm done and are committed to journeying together towards healing and reconciliation. Many of us are on different places in that journey: some have been engaged in these questions for decades; for others, it is new terrain. But we are all committed to responding to this call.

We are strengthened in this journey by Indigenous peoples, both inside our faith communities and more broadly across Canada, who have chosen to journey with us. In these relationships, respect and understanding are strengthened, and we see the possibility for transformation.

We undertake this work in our communities of worship and beyond through educational initiatives. We support growing social, political, and legal efforts that promote the *UN Declaration*. As well, we welcome working alongside governments in Canada as they live into their stated commitments to the implementation of the *UN Declaration*.

Today we embrace the opportunity that Call to Action #48 offers faith communities to work for reconciliation and to fully respect the human rights and dignity of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Signed by:

Anglican Church of Canada
Christian Reformed Church
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada
The Presbyterian Church in Canada
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
The Salvation Army
The United Church of Canada