
Land Acknowledgements: What are we saying?
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Genesis 28:10-19 and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlG17C19nYo>

At a recent Board meeting, someone asked what the United Church of Canada expects congregations to do with land acknowledgements. Whether specific words were provided or required. How often we were supposed to do them. Very practical questions.

My response to the Board was that the United Church wants us to take land acknowledgements seriously, and that includes doing them, but also talking about them, and what they mean. It also includes having honest discussions amongst ourselves.

In order to honour that question the Board is taking 3 steps. Step 1 was that I changed the words in our land acknowledgements. We are now using a rotating list of different words for our land acknowledgments. Step 2 was that I will preach to the subject, which is happening right now. And Step 3 is that next week during coffee time after service we will all engage in a group discussion where we will express ourselves and listen deeply to each other.

I am happy to report that step 1 has already proven effective. Some of you have reacted to some of our land acknowledgements in the past 4 weeks. Mainly because there was something about the particular words used that you did not like. And that's great. Often it is hard to know what we want. It can be easier to know what we do not want. I want to hear all of those concerns next week during our group discussion time. And of course feel free to reach out to me anytime you like.

And when you have a reaction to something about a land acknowledgement, please take seriously your own reaction. And ask yourself two questions:

- What is it that bothers me (words used or not used).
- What does my reaction say about me? Why do I personally care about this? What does my reaction say about me? Make the story personal.

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- Actually, this works for positive things too. If there is something you like about land acknowledgements, what does that say about you personally?

Full disclosure - I have a bit of skin in this game myself. My great-grandparents were pioneers in Saskatchewan in the “old days” and had a very positive relationship with local indigenous people who they thought of as simply their neighbours. And I myself - back when I worked as an environmental scientist - spent a summer in Labrador working in partnership with people from the Innu Nation and I developed close relationships with some of them. I also had close relationships with a number of indigenous people when I lived in Brantford. I have participated in numerous Indigenous-led church events including blanket exercises. In seminary I took a course on “Native Spirituality”. In 2015 I went to Ottawa to march during the closing of the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) work. I care about indigenous issues.

But with a small number of exceptions, I have absolutely no idea what most of you think about land acknowledgements. Because I am still new to this community. And because - in the United Church at least - we are all encouraged to think for ourselves and to form our own opinions. So I do not presume to know what you think until you tell me.

I do not say any of this this lightly.

Before we came here, Marjorie and I were in Brantford, which is west of Hamilton. Brantford is located within the Haldimand Tract and only 9 km from the reserve with the largest indigenous population in Canada called, “Six Nations”. Also, Brantford was the local large city, so people from nearby rural communities came to Brantford for shopping, health care, employment, and many other reasons. And that included members of indigenous communities. Living in Brantford I saw indigenous people all the time. And guaranteed, if you went downtown, you would see indigenous people.

So when I did land acknowledgements in Brantford, my message was three-fold. Firstly I used video during land acknowledgements. I wanted to bring the land into the sanctuary so each week I showed a video of the land that I had created in the week ahead. Secondly, I wanted to remind people which tribes inhabited the land prior to colonization.

Thirdly, I wanted to remind the congregation that we should engage with and get to know actual indigenous people in our own community - because they were right there. In Brantford you could start a relationship with an indigenous person just by going downtown and saying “Hello”. It really was that easy.

But here we are in the Thorncliffe Park and East York communities. Although there are many indigenous people in Toronto, I do not believe I have seen a single indigenous person here in Thorncliffe Park. You and I cannot just pop into the mall and find indigenous people to talk to. So I seriously do not know what land acknowledgements mean to you here - and what they could mean to us here.

I find the United Church particularly unhelpful here too. I’m sorry to say that. The United Church consists of something like 2200 congregations. And Chapel in the Park United Church ranks very high amongst the most diverse of those 2200 congregations. In case you don’t know it, most United Church congregations are very white. And United Church materials around land acknowledgements are targeted towards white people of European descent. Messaging to white people around land acknowledgements often focuses on making people feel guilty about what their ancestors did to indigenous people in the past here on Turtle Island. But that approach does not necessarily work here too well.

Many people in this congregation are fairly new to Canada. And your ancestors did not participate in the colonization of Turtle Island. Not only that, but many of you are from places in the world where the people were victims of colonization, not the colonizers. How do you react when you hear a message of implied guilt for a colonization project here? Particularly if you are new to Canada or if you and your family were victims of colonization somewhere else? And if your ancestors did come from Europe, what do you think of the message of implied guilt? Were you here? Did you participate in the colonization project yourself?

I want to share a short video that reflects how many people feel about land acknowledgements. I invite you to react to this video in whatever way you like, and to use your own reaction to help focus your own ideas.

VIDEO LAs (Baron Von Sketch) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlG17C19nYo>

One way to look at land acknowledgements is to realize that in many ways, land acknowledgments are not about the land anyway. Land Acknowledgments are about the people. The people who were discounted as being less than human. The people whose languages, cultures, values, and spiritualities were simply dismissed.

The Bible actually speaks about colonization. Unfortunately, it speaks in favour of colonization. One example is from our reading today. I left out most of the juice bits, but the ending is clear enough. “Jacob called the place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at first.” In other words, Jacob went to a place that was already inhabited. A place that already was full of people, families, children. A place already full of languages, cultures, values, and spiritualities. And Jacob simply ignored all of that and - according to the story anyway - simply replaced all of those human values with ones from his own cultural group. This is symbolized by renaming the city. “Jacob called the place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at first.” That is what colonization looks like. And in the story, Jacob weaponized his faith to justify colonization.

The same thing happened when Europeans colonized Turtle Island. They weaponized Christianity to justify colonization. The formal name for this was the “Doctrine of Discovery”. “The Doctrine of Discovery was the principle used by European colonizers starting in the 1400s in order to stake claim to lands beyond the European continent. The doctrine gave them the right to claim land that was deemed vacant for their nation. Land was considered terra nullius (vacant land) if it had not yet been occupied by Christians. Such vacant lands could be defined as ‘discovered’ and as a result sovereignty, title and jurisdiction could be claimed. In doing so the Doctrine of Discover invalidated the sovereignty of Indigenous nations and gave Christians the right to subjugate and confiscate the lands of Indigenous Peoples.”¹

It is truly sad that the Bible can so easily be used to justify colonization, racism, sexism, and even genocide. But we are free to read the Bible in whatever way makes the most sense to us. We can do better. We must do better.

In 2021, the CBC ran an article called, “What’s wrong with land acknowledgement, and how to make them better”. In the article, 5 Indigenous people say

¹ <https://www.theindigenousfoundation.org/articles/the-doctrine-of-discovery-and-terra-nullius>

what works - and doesn't work - for them.

Here's what some people want for land acknowledgements:

- Should not be read, but done from the heart.
- Should reflect what the speakers believes and they can back up if challenged.
- Should use specific names of nations - pronounced properly.
- Should be in the present tense, not the past.
- Should lift up Indigenous teachings while not using them.
- Should be an obligation - but also authentic.
- And according to one elder from Quebec, land acknowledgements should not be done unless there is actual interest in giving the land back.

So where do we go from here? What do we do with these different perspectives? What is the point of land acknowledgments if there is no intention to return the land? I think there are 2 things to keep in mind. First of all, that land acknowledgement are not really about the land - unless you do want to give it back. And secondly, if you think it's vitally important what we do - or do not do - in this church for 20 seconds every week during worship, you have perhaps missed the point of land acknowledgments.

For me, I take this back to the whole Truth and Reconciliation movement. Land Acknowledgements pre-date that of course. But put your mind back to the purpose of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Prior to the commission, most non-Indigenous Canadians did not have a very realistic understanding of Canadian and Indigenous history. Take for example, the history that I learned as a child. What I learned was completely from a British perspective. Indigenous people were in the story only so far as they furthered the economic cause of the British Empire. The fact that Indigenous people had their own values, traditions, governments, rituals, spiritualities, etc was largely ignored. Most Canadians knew nothing about the history of residential schools, or the 60's scoop. Most Canadians only understood colonization through the lens of the colonizer.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008-2015) brought all that into the

light. Between personal stories and other actions, Canadians are now able to educate themselves on all of those topics, and more. And Canadians can also now better see colonization from both sides. I'm not saying there is nothing more to learn. But people are now better educated on Indigenous issues in Canada for sure.

When you think of Indigenous issues yourself, what do you think about? What do you yourself care about?

- Residential schools.
- 60's scoop.
- Over-representation of indigenous people in our correctional system.
- Treaties and land rights.
- Colonization - including ongoing colonization projects happening in other parts of the world.
- Inadequate access to clean water in indigenous communities.
- Teachings from Indigenous cultures.
- The existence of Indigenous people in our midst and in Canada.

What issues do you care about? And how would you like your issue to be represented using a land acknowledgement? Or perhaps some other liturgical act?

The point of a land acknowledgement is NOT that we think about Indigenous issues for 20 seconds once a week. The point is that we stand up for justice and human rights during the week when opportunities present themselves to you. And those opportunities happen more often than we might think if we pay attention.

One resource I used to prepare this sermon came from the "Native Governance Centre" They had this to say about land acknowledgments: "Before starting work on your land acknowledgment statement, reflect on the process:

- Why am I doing this land acknowledgment? (If you're hoping to inspire others to take action to support Indigenous communities, you're on the right track. If you're delivering a land acknowledgment out of guilt or because everyone else is doing it, more self-reflection is in order.)

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- What is my end goal? (What do you hope listeners will do after hearing the acknowledgment?)
 - When will I have the largest impact? (Think about your timing and audience, specifically.)”

I want to close with some personal observations. And some practical ideas. Because I have been doing land acknowledgements in different churches for many years. And I have seen changes over the years in how land acknowledgements have been done.

The first phase was when the real issue was simply whether or not you did a land acknowledgement during a worship service. Because you either did, or you didn't. And people would react - positively or negatively - depending on whether or not there was a land acknowledgment. The precise words were not really an issue. It was just a question of whether you should do them at all. Often, the words used came from a church committee that may or may not included indigenous representatives.

The second phase looked in great detail at the specific words that were used. And there was some sense that acknowledgments should be comprehensive. They should be complete. They should tell the history. Because of the need to be comprehensive they became sometimes quite long. But they were very factual and when done well gave a lot of great information about what happened historically in that very specific location. Often, the words came from indigenous groups, working alongside church committees.

The third phase - which perhaps we are now entering - is a move away from acknowledgements that are comprehensive. Moving towards acknowledgements that are personally meaningful to the speaker. Not something from a committee. Something personal. Something with a bit of skin in the game.

In seminary I was trained to only use land acknowledgments that had been approved by a committee. The limitation of that is that my words are not personal. But that raises an underlying question. When you hear a land acknowledgement do you want to hear the opinions of the speaker? Or do you want to know that the organization being represented thinks? Later today I will follow my training. The prayers of the people were written by an indigenous person I knew in seminary. And I will use her words unaltered.

One option open to us is to allow different people from the congregation - including me - to speak our own words. But in that case we have to be open to hearing words that we perhaps do not like from time to time. And as long as we are willing to hear each other with respect, we will be fine.

Other options include using other symbols, perhaps natural objects, perhaps video, to try to bring in meaning that goes beyond the words themselves. Other options include ... well, we will discuss that next week over coffee time.

Clearly, this is a work in progress. I look forward to ongoing conversations in this congregation. Are there perfect words for land acknowledgements? I think not. But as we try to speak our own minds and hearts, our conversation will move forwards. We can always start there. As one Indigenous elder said, “even the wrong words can be the beginning of a meaningful conversation”.

Amen.