

“What is Meaningful Reconciliation?”

Grant Wedge / July 24, 2022

St. John's the Evangelist, Elora

Ahnee, Boujou, Kwe, Sago, Tansi, Bon Jour, Good day!

It is such an honour for me to be here today, at the end of this so long awaited in-person Elora Musical Festival, and after you have heard from Michael Freeman 2 weeks ago.

I would like thank Reverend Judy and Father Paul for the invitation to share with you this morning some of my story.

What is Reconciliation?

How is it meaningful?

As it is said, “in the eye of the beholder ...”

We should ask ourselves how is reconciliation different depending upon your point of view – from the Indigenous perspective to that of Government, Canadian society, depending upon where you are in Canada and Ontario, and you & me?

I believe that faith communities - like yours - have a very important role to play in working toward meaningful reconciliation.

Let's start with **Land Acknowledgements**.

Some Indigenous Peoples say:

“You stole our lands and now what?”

“You're just acknowledging that we were here first –
“but it's not like you're like prepared to give it back,
eh?”

Acknowledgements can serve to remind us of our shared history – but they should also serve as a call to action:

Here at St John's your Land Acknowledgement notes that:

“St John's church sits on the unceded territories of the Attawandaran, Mississauga and Haudenosaunee First Nations. These lands are covered by the Between the Lake Treaty and the Haldimand land grant.”

Ok, let's unpack this because this history is complex, controversial and contested.

Of course, after the end of the last Ice Age some 11,000 years ago, this area has been home to many Indigenous Peoples.

First who are the **Attawandaran**? Yesterday, the Singers' Acknowledgement referred the time of “contact”. Samuel de Champlain entered Ontario over 400 years ago when he crossed the Ottawa River in 1615. His Huron allies word for their “southern neighbours” was the Attawandaran. I know them by French description of there

being “Neutral Indians” who were in this area in the 1500’s into the 1600’s – until they were incorporated by the Iroquois.

The Iroquois – or as they called themselves, the **Haudenosaunee** – came into Southern Ontario with the fur trade – until being pushed back into upper New York State by the Mississaugas and Chippewas by 1700.

The British Crown entered into the “*Between the Lakes Treaty*” with the **Mississaugas** in 1784, by which almost 3 million acres were *ceded* for £1,180 from St Catharines to Hamilton to Guelph. But it wasn’t finalized in 1792 when the surveys showed that the area here above the Jones Baseline Road up to Dundalk hadn’t been purchased after all.

While the English legal expression in the Treaty was that all the land was “ceded, released and surrendered” – from the First Nations’ perspective they were “sharing” the land with the settlers. And by the way, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation Chief Stacey LaForme has told me to expect their land claim next year about unfulfilled entitlements with the Between the Lakes Treaty.

To compensate their Iroquois allies after the American Revolutionary war, the British promised the Six Nations “six miles on both sides of the Grand River from the mouth to the source.” That’s in the Haldimand Proclamation in 1784. But the land here in Elora up to the source of the Grand River wasn’t part of the Simcoe Deed given to Six

Nations in 1792 because the British hadn't completed the "surrender" for this area at that point. So whether this should be considered Mississauga traditional territory or under Six Nations-controlled lands is all part of the Six Nations litigation that started when I was Deputy Minister in 1995 – and it's finally going to court next year.

Welcome to my world of Land Claims!

What are these **Treaties** about?

We have at least 46 Treaties in Ontario – some from before Confederation – like here in Elora, and some after 1867.

Here's the question: are these Treaties one-time land transactions or enduring covenants for mutual respect and reciprocity? Let me briefly talk about three aspects:

- (1) Harvest rights
- (2) Residential Schools
- (3) Reserve lands

Permit me to tell you my story with **Treaty #3** signed in 1873 in Northwestern Ontario.

In 1980 I started work with Grand Council Treaty #3, as their Association Representative. These are the more than 2 dozen Anishinabe First Nations in Northwestern Ontario from Dryden to Fort Frances and Kenora.

Their Ogichidaa – or Grand Chief – Robin Greene came into their office in Toronto and asked if I could write a letter for him.

“Sure”, I said – as former Legislative Intern at Queen’s Park, I knew how to write a letter ...

“I’d like you to write a letter for me to ... Queen Elizabeth.” He said.

Well, that was a different kind of letter than I was used to writing.

What was the letter about?

The Grand Chief wanted to ask Queen Elizabeth to have the Governments in Canada respect the **Indians’ treaty rights to hunt and fish.**

Robin had been charged with illegal commercial fishing in the late 1970s.

He was out on Shoal Lake, bordering Manitoba, off from his reserve, in a small boat catching fish to sell to provide for his family, when along came a Provincial Conservation Officer who confiscated his fish, his nets and his boat and charged him for fishing without a provincial licence.

Robin’s defence was that back in 1873 the Queen’s great grandmother, Queen Victoria, had agreed in Treaty #3 that

“the said Indians shall have the right to pursue their avocation of hunting and fishing...”

And it was said in Treaty #3 that these rights will last:

“as long as the sun will shine, and water runs, which is to say forever.”

However, throughout the 20th century, First Nations’ people were repeatedly charged for hunting and fishing without licences.

It wasn’t until 1982 that “the Aboriginal and Treaty Rights of the Aboriginal Peoples were recognized and affirmed.” in section 35 of Canada’s Constitution. I was there when this happened, and I have dedicated my work efforts to try to give effect to this promise.

So when we make Land Acknowledgements we should remember that we did not live up to all of our obligations under the Treaties to respect basic harvest rights that would have enabled First Nations people to continue to live off the lands – as they had for so many generations before we arrived.

Robin Greene was a respected leader of his First Nation – Shoal Lake 39 – and Grand Council Treaty #3, and he was an esteemed Medicine Man ... and a **Residential School** survivor.

Again, in Treaty #3, Her Majesty, Queen Victoria, had:

“agreed to maintain schools for instruction in such reserves ... whenever the Indians of the reserve shall desire it.”

These Anishinabe people knew that their lives were changing with the arrival of the settlers and they wanted

their children to be prepared to adapt & succeed through education.

Instead they got the Residential School system imposed upon them.

Robin went to the Cecilia Jaffrey Residential School in Kenora. It operated from 1902 to 1974.

I remember sitting at dinner with Robin back in 1980 when he said

“Grant, it was worse than Reform School.

They cut my hair, I couldn’t see my sister,

They wouldn’t let us speak our language,

We had to work in the fields to grow our food.

There were severe punishments.”

One day, he & and a friend ran away, got in a canoe and paddled back home – only to have his father say, “Son, you have to go back.”

In the late 1930’s and early ‘40’s when this was happening, I realized my parents were growing up in Toronto in warm, safe, loving homes and good schools.

Why did Robin Greene & his people compared with my parents have such different experiences?

Chanie Wenjack – the young boy in the Tragically Hip’s Gord Downie’s story *The Secret Path* – went to Cecilia Jaffray.

He was born in 1954 – the year I was born.

He died in 1966 at 12 years of age, freezing on the rail line trying to get back to his home reserve of Marten Falls 400 miles away.

I'm here today relating this - but Chanie Wenjack isn't.

How can we comprehend the enormity of the devastating inter-generational impact on individuals, families and communities of the Residential School system?

How can we atone for it? Apologies aren't enough.

And what are these **reserves**?

As you have heard, I serve as the Assistant Deputy Minister for Negotiations & Reconciliation with Ontario's Ministry of Indigenous Affairs, and my team of 45 – working with ministries across government – is responsible for resolving 80 land claims & land-related matters & litigation that touch on almost all the 132 First Nations in Ontario.

Today, First Nations have about 1% of Ontario's land mass as reserve – and they are 3% of Ontario's population, and growing. The Auditor General looked at our efforts and reported in 2020 that Ontario has settled 50 claims since 1983 – so we are making progress but we have a long way to go.

To settle these claims today requires us on behalf of the Provincial Crown to balance how to return land to First

Nations and manage the impacts on existing uses – from forestry, mining, parks, and the public.

This is reconciliation-in-action.

It is important for us to have public support to resolve such claims – and here I welcome faith communities such as yours to let your MPs and MPPs know that this should be done – sooner than later.

To conclude: what is meaningful Reconciliation?

“The restoration of harmony between people or things that have been in conflict.”

The reading this morning from Luke remind us:

“Seek and ye shall find...”

Currently there are efforts to find the unmarked graves of Indigenous children at Residential Schools – to get to the truth of the loss.

“Knock and it shall be opened...”

Making the effort to learn, understand and then act in support opens the way for Reconciliation.

“Ask and it shall be given...”

Can we ask for their forgiveness?

It takes time to rebuild trust and restore faith in human decency based upon respect for Indigenous peoples, their rights and cultures.

It will take our efforts over time to demonstrate commitment to promote physical & mental well-being – clean drinking water, quality housing, safe, healthy and vibrant communities and equal opportunities.

It is a call to action that engages all of us.

It isn't good enough to "forgive and forget" – what we have to do is "remember and change".

In the words of the black poet, Maya Angelou:

“History, despite its wrenching pain
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage need not be lived again.”

Working together with open hearts, understanding and good faith, we can work to achieve meaningful reconciliation.

Chi Miigwetch. Thank you.