

Canada apologizes for abuse at church-run aboriginal schools: Boarding schools were compulsory

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Church leaders in Canada hope that action will follow a public apology by Prime Minister Stephen Harper to victims of a policy whereby aboriginal children were placed in residential schools run by churches under a government policy of enforced assimilation.

Archbishop Fred Hiltz, leader of the Anglican Church of Canada, said he was moved by the apology given by Harper in Ottawa on June 11 in the lower house of the Canadian parliament on behalf of the government, followed by apologies from other party leaders.

"I was very encouraged by their determination to make sure that this apology is seen as a beginning, and that it will be accompanied by actions that will significantly improve the quality of life for First Nations people in this land," Hiltz told the *Anglican Journal* after the prime minister's statement.

A law passed by Canada in 1920 made it compulsory for aboriginal children aged 7-15 to leave their communities and live in residences at schools run by churches, including the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Presbyterian churches and the United Church of Canada. The last of the schools closed in 1996.

During the 1980s former students began making allegations of sexual and physical abuse inflicted on them in the schools. In 2006, a class-action suit resulted in the awarding of the largest financial settlement in Canadian legal history.

The moderator of the United Church of Canada, David Giuliano, said his denomination hoped the apology would spark a substantive grassroots response. "The June 11 apology offers the opportunity to begin the process of healing, forgiveness and reconciliation," said Giuliano.

Harper made only passing reference to the fact that the 132 federally supported schools were run jointly with the Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and United churches. In 1986, the United Church was the first of the four to apologize for its role in the schools. It was followed by the Anglican Church in 1993 and the Presbyterian Church in 1994. The Presbyterian and United churches each were named in fewer than 10 percent of the legal claims, the Anglican Church in approximately 18 percent and the Catholic Church in 72 percent.

Canada's Catholic Church is the only church body that has neither issued an apology nor contributed to a \$1.9 billion compensation package announced by the government in 2005 to benefit some 65,000 survivors of residential schools.

The Archdiocese of Toronto noted that only 16 of 62 Canadian dioceses and some three dozen religious orders were associated with the schools, and neither the entire Catholic Church nor the bishops' conference played an official role.

"These are the reasons why an apology on residential schools has not been made by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops or in the name of the Catholic Church in Canada," the statement said. *-Ecumenical News International, Religion News Service*