

Leave behind boarding schools, look to future

The AFN-led delegation to the Vatican and the subsequent meeting with Pope Benedict XVI was historic and should be the last piece of the residential school healing process.

All the churches that operated boarding schools along with the federal government have made an apology now. The Catholic Church, the largest body that had three-quarters of the children in boarding schools, was the final one to make a statement of regret. The Anglican Church's apology in 1993 was the first, followed by the Lutherans in 1994 and the United Church in 1998.

The word "apology" did not appear in the Pope's remarks, but he nevertheless expressed "sorrow" over the "deplorable treatment" aboriginal students suffered at church-run residential schools. This was good enough for the First Nations leaders present and the statement was accepted.

One can almost hear a collective sigh of relief spread across the land. The residential school era is finished, and it's time to move on.

If one issue dominated First Nations news over the past decade, it was the court cases and negotiations over a settlement for the abuse perpetuated at the boarding schools. Financial compensation is one thing, but recognition by the churches of their sins is another. The survivors waited as one by one the churches came clean and admitted their failure.

The boarding schools were wrong on two counts. First, it was fundamentally wrong to remove children from healthy loving homes solely to educate the Indian out of them.

Second, it was wrong for the government and churches to turn their backs and, by default, condone the physical and sexual abuse of aboriginal children.

Generation after generation of children became the front-line victims of failed church and government policies to assimilate our people. The results were the walking wounded, who spent years in an alcoholic haze or ended up in jail doing a life sentence on the installment plan.

Generation upon generation of men and women failed to reach their potential and many were damaged to the point of no recovery. This damage has filtered down to subsequent generations, and children who have never set foot in a boarding school are still feeling the effects today of those institutions.

That's the real sorrow of the legacy of the residential schools -- crippled people in a damaged nation. The Pope focused his comments on the "deplorable treatment" and didn't mention the fundamental crime of forced assimilation.

First Nations people today are at different stages of development. Some made their peace and moved on long ago; others are just taking the first steps; yet there are some who will never move on, stuck as they are in an unfortunate fossilized state.

But the boarding school era is over for the majority and its time to take ownership of our destiny.

The cruel consequence of colonialism is that it destroys an individual's ownership of his or her life, with other people telling you what to do, what to believe and how to live. After a while it permeates every facet of First Nations life.

Whether it's control from the churches or the heavy handed administration of Indian Affairs, if the wider society considers our people inferior and unable to look after themselves or their families, then people are ground down and unable to grow and develop.

The next big social movement for our people is to take back ownership and control over our lives. One can see it all over Indian country. Many churches now sit empty, conducting their ceremonies in the traditional way. Yet each summer the sun dances attract more and more people. Throughout the summer months aboriginal people hit the powwow trail to do what their ancestors could only dream of doing.

The sundances are not hidden deep in the bush anymore. Pipe ceremonies are open and well attended, and the sweat lodge has replaced the church for many.

Children who were adopted and grew up outside their culture continue to return to their roots. It's a natural reaction to want to be with your family, but it's a traumatic and troubling journey for many.

In Saskatchewan, all the boarding schools have been shut down and destroyed. Only the school on the Muskowekwan First Nation stands. This last institution should be preserved as a museum for future generations to witness the reality of these schools and the damage they did to our people.

The residential schools were a product of a different era and we need to treat them as such. We have to respect the past, but not dwell on it. After all, the future holds so much promise.

Source: By Doug Cuthand, Special to The StarPhoenix May 8, 2009