

Minute for Right Relations – We Are All Treaty People

By Rev. Elizabeth Frazer – Manitou Conference Right Relations Home Group

“Who is a treaty person here tonight?” Sitting in the learning circle I was caught off guard by the elder’s question. Maurice, our First Nations facilitator paused for a moment, waiting for a response. Back in my mind I remembered former Moderator Stan McKay’s wisdom to the United Church about “treaty as covenant”. Hesitantly I put up my hand. “I think I am a treaty person, but I am not sure.” As it turned out, Maurice thought I was too. As a settler person, what does it mean to be a treaty person?

Stan McKay reminds us that First Peoples understand that the agreements through treaties are a tripartite project. It involves the Creator, the Crown’s representatives and First Peoples. “We have spoken often about the spirit of the treaties and have maintained that it is much more than a legal document. We are bound by a covenant.” (Understanding Treaty as Covenant)

As people of faith we understand our relationship with God as a covenant.... “*I set my bow in the cloud and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.*” (Gen 9:13) I am not sure many of us understand the relationship between First Nations Peoples and settler peoples as a covenant of mutual respect, justice and friendship. Our history would suggest otherwise.

In September 1850, the Robinson-Superior and the Robinson – Huron Treaties were signed. The negotiations were presided over by treaty commissioner and former fur trader William Benjamin Robinson and the Anishinabek peoples who lived in the area of 52,000 square miles that comprised the lands in question. The territory covers an area mostly in central and northern Ontario. Both treaties were considered innovative as each provided reserve lands. The Robinson Treaties also guaranteed the “full and free privilege to hunt over the territory now ceded by them and to fish in the waters thereof as they have heretofore been in the habit of doing.”

I live in the territory of the Robinson-Huron Treaty. According to former Grand Council Chief of the Anishinabek Nation, John Beaucage, “There are many important and out-standing issues related to the Treaties. Our right to hunt and fish has been restricted by constant government harassment and interference and annuities have not increased to reflect the resource development on traditional lands.”

His comments are challenging and I want to learn more. Treaties are not relics of the past, but living documents that continue to impact present day realities and relationships. Right Relations between settler and First Peoples in Canada are guided by our treaties. From what I have learned, we have a long way to go before the intent of the Robinson-Huron Treaty is honoured. As treaty people, how do we settlers honour the promises contained in our treaties? I am still learning.

Sources:

- 1: **Welcome to Anishinabek Territory**, “Treaties, Promises Broken for 155 Years” Published 2010 Anishinabek Nation, North Bay, ON.
- 2: **Ontario Treaties**, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada
- 3: **Mamow Be-Mo-Tay-Tah – Let Us Walk Together**, “Understanding Treaty as Covenant” Stan McKay, Canadian Ecumenical Anti-Racism Network, The Canadian Council of Churches