

## **The Acknowledgement of Traditional Territory:**

*a dialogue for sharing in a UCC congregation*

*Note: Underlining indicates sections that will need to be changed, depending on the context of the congregation.*

V1: When we began our worship service today, we heard that we are gathered on the Traditional Territory of the Anishinaabe people, land that is part of one of the Williams Treaties.

V2: In 2009, Manitou Conference sent a proposal to the General Council of the United Church, asking that all formal gatherings of our Church begin with a recognition of the Traditional Territory on which the meeting or worship is being held. That proposal was approved.

V1: Recognition of Traditional Territory means we are acknowledging the Indigenous peoples who first lived on this land, and their descendants, who we, as "settler people," have come to live beside.

V2: Maybe we should clarify... who are the Indigenous peoples, and who are settler people?

V1: Indigenous peoples are the original inhabitants of this land--those who were here when the European explorers arrived. The settlers are those who came to this land from somewhere else, settling upon the land that was occupied by the First Peoples.

V2: Recognizing Traditional Territory not only acknowledges the history of this land, the First Peoples who were here but it is the beginning of a journey into the past as it now impacts the present. By exploring the past, we can make good choices about how we want to live as faithful people in the future.

V1: It is important that we know about laws like the "Doctrine of Discovery." During the "Age of Discovery," when European nations were extending their reach in the world, a law was made in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Rome. This law gave Christian explorers the right to claim lands they "discovered," laying claim to those lands for their Christian Monarchs. Any land that was not inhabited by Christians was available to be "discovered," claimed, and exploited.

V2: In fact, the Christian "Law of Nations" asserted that Christian nations had a divine right, based on the Bible, to claim absolute title to, and ultimate authority over, any newly "discovered" non-Christian inhabitants and their lands. Over the next several centuries, these beliefs became known as the "Doctrine of Discovery" used by Spain, Portugal, England, France, and Holland, who were all Christian nations.

V1: The French and English also developed the idea of "terra nullius," which means "vacant land." The implication was that before the European Christian explorers came to this land, it was "nobody's land."

V2: It wasn't until 2012 that the World Council of Churches denounced the "Doctrine of Discovery," as did The United Church of Canada.

V1: The Doctrine of Discovery has had a wide and long-lasting impact. It is still alive within international and Canadian law. For example, the Doctrine of Discovery found its way into the Royal Proclamation of 1763.

V2: Britain and France fought against each other in the Seven Year's War. The British won the battle on the Plains of Abraham, taking control of Canada and the Thirteen Colonies along the eastern seaboard of North America.

V1: The British assumed that because they had defeated the French, that the Indigenous peoples, who were living on that land, were a conquered people and now under their rule. New policies imposed by the victors made the Indigenous peoples unhappy. They had been allies of the French and enjoyed a prosperous fur-trading relationship with them. As a result, the Indigenous peoples rose up in opposition.

V2: Britain realized very quickly that they needed the support of the Indigenous peoples if they were to maintain control of the continent. The British wanted a peaceful environment in order to promote settlement across the land.

V1: So in 1763, after the end of the war, King George III issued the Royal Proclamation. The British retained

monopoly over all Indigenous lands, as would be their right given the Doctrine of Discovery, since the French not only surrendered their colonies but also their "discovery rights."

V2: However, the Proclamation recognized Indigenous peoples as Nations, and upheld their right to inhabit and to use their traditional lands. It recognized that Aboriginal title to the land existed and continues to exist, and that all land would be considered Aboriginal land until ceded by treaty.

V1: A treaty was the accepted European way to make legal contracts and agreements between Nations of people. The Royal Proclamation enabled the development of the treaties we continue to live with today.

V2: The first treaty in North America was the Treaty of Niagara. In July 1764, Sir William Johnson representing the British Crown and 2,500 Chiefs representing 24 Indigenous Nations of the Great Lakes met at Niagara Falls to confirm the terms of the Royal Proclamation.

V1: Can you imagine 25 hundred Chiefs representing 24 Indigenous Nations gathering to make this first treaty?

V2: Yes, there was a lot of support for it! But what was also noteworthy is that the Treaty of Niagara was not made in writing as we might expect today. To guarantee the successful approval of the Royal Proclamation, Johnson relied on the longstanding

Indigenous practice of wampum diplomacy. First Peoples had exchanged wampum belts between their Nations for centuries when establishing agreements.

- V1: The original wampum belts were beaded sashes made from shells found in the Atlantic Ocean. They were considered sacred and exchanged in special ceremonies. Agreements between peoples were woven into the belts as a symbolic and tangible way of recognizing an understanding between them.
- V2: At Niagara, on behalf of the British Crown, Johnson presented the Indigenous Chiefs with 'the Great Covenant Chain' and 'the Twenty-four Nations' wampum belts.\* They are purple and white in colour. White representing peace and friendship. Purple representing government matters like agreements or "treaties." Johnson promised that the British would not allow the Indigenous peoples to become poor or have their lands taken from them.
- V1: In response, the Chiefs offered the British 'the Two Row' Wampum Belt.\* On it, the white background symbolizes peace, friendship and mutual respect. The two rows of purple beads represent the Indigenous peoples travelling in their canoe, and the Europeans travelling in a parallel path in their boat. Neither was to try to steer the other's vessel or interfere with their journey.
- V2: To the First Peoples, the Treaty of Niagara was about peace and friendship—a mutual relationship of peaceful

co-existence. They considered treaties to be sacred covenants, where "the spirit and intent" of the agreement was as important as "the written terms."

- V1: In the Church, we know about covenants. A treaty is like a covenant. Indigenous peoples understand their primary covenant relationship to be with the Creator and all of creation. Out of respect for the life they have been given, they say "all my relations," as an expression of their commitment to the covenant relationship they have, as part of the sacred trust of all life.
- V2: As Christians, we look to the Bible where God's understanding of covenant is a partnership of mutual respect and accountability. In Genesis 9, God makes a promise to all living beings. Later, in the Book of Jeremiah, the covenant is shared between God and human beings. To be in a covenant relationship with God means acting justly towards all our neighbours.
- V1: Covenants are agreements that Indigenous people and Christian people take seriously. They are promises meant to be kept. A covenant means that God or the Creator is always part of the agreement. For Indigenous peoples, the Creator is part of a treaty agreement especially because the treaties involve the sharing of land—a part of the Creation.
- V2: To Indigenous peoples, land belongs ultimately to the Creator. While Europeans considered the treaties as transfers of title or ownership to the land, the First

Peoples perceived them as agreements to share the land. They already shared the land with other Indigenous peoples and animals. The concept of legal title to land was foreign to their culture.

V1: Clearly though, First Peoples had a strong concept of territory—occupation of specific parcels of land was an acknowledged part of almost all their societies. However, land was not something that an individual could divide, transfer, surrender, destroy or own to the exclusion of others. The land was to be shared, as it was the source of all life. It was a gift of the Creator.

V2: It is now recognized that Indigenous Peoples were the original occupants of this land. Treaties are nation-to-nation agreements between the Crown, now represented by our federal and provincial Governments, and Indigenous Peoples. The treaties set out responsibilities, agreements, and benefits for both. There are 70 recognized treaties in Canada and 46 of those are in Ontario.

V1: As settler people, we are also Treaty People. We have benefitted and continue to benefit immensely by these Treaties, and as with any covenant agreement, we also have obligations to honour the treaties.

V2: The Williams Treaties were made in 1923 and were named for the head of the commission who acted on behalf of the Crown. The lands that came under these treaties were already being used for settlement and resource extraction by 1923.

V1: It was the Indigenous Peoples living in this area who brought it to the attention of the Crown, that this area was not under treaty. However, when the Williams Treaties were signed, the Indigenous Peoples received only a very small fraction of the value that the Treaty Commission placed on the land at the time.

V2: The Williams Treaties were made with the Chippewas and the Mississaugas, both of which are Ojibwe peoples. Today, many Ojibwe people prefer to be known as Anishinaabe, a term meaning "First People." Another meaning for Anishinaabe is "the good people-- those who are on the path given to them by the Creator".

V1: Acknowledging Traditional Territory affirms our respect and appreciation for the original inhabitants of this land—people who were ignored as a result of the Doctrine of Discovery. We also acknowledge that there were real people leading real lives on this land, long before settler people arrived here.

V2: By acknowledging Traditional Territory, we are saying that we are Treaty People too. By virtue of the treaties, settler peoples are in a covenant relationship with Indigenous peoples. Government people acted on our behalf in creating these covenants. We want to honour these partnership agreements, grow in our understanding of our shared history and model this for others in the settler community who might also grow in understanding.

V1: It is another step on the journey toward reconciliation. Acknowledging the territory where we gather and the people who have traditionally called it 'home' for thousands of years, is a way for United Church people and other Canadians, to live out our apologies for the misdeeds of the past.

V2: As the practice of recognizing Traditional Territory spreads, hopefully, it will increase a sense of belonging and pride amongst the descendants of the First Peoples. Perhaps it will also promote mutual respect, peace and friendship between Indigenous Peoples and others, as those first treaties were intended to do.

V1: Of course the land is central to all this. In recognizing Traditional Territory, we honour the Creator. We did not create the land but are privileged to live upon it and be sustained by it. Our on-going relationship with the land will determine life for future generations on this planet.

V2: Our United Church Crest, now includes the four colours of the medicine wheel, a symbol of peaceful interaction among all living beings and the earth. This revision was to honour the presence of Indigenous congregations at the time of Church Union.

V1: The words "all my relations," written in the Mohawk language are also on the crest. <sup>i</sup> Recognizing Traditional Territory opens us to the wisdom of

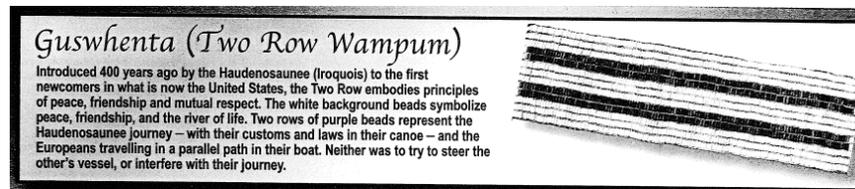
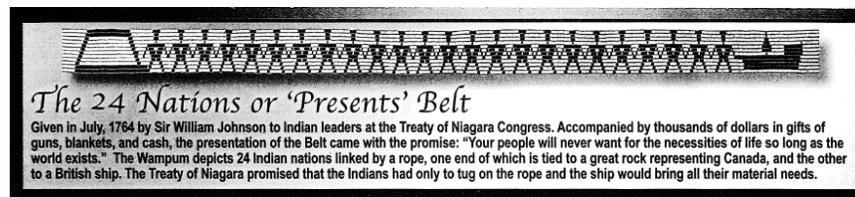
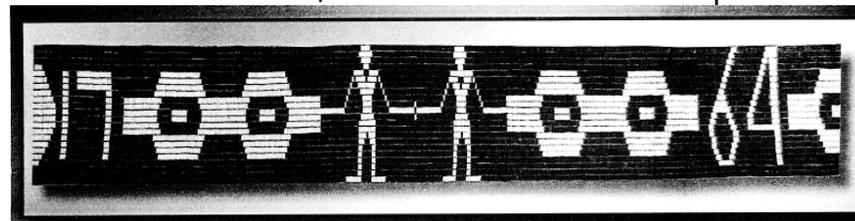
Indigenous Peoples who understand that all of Creation is one—"all my relations."

V2: In 1995, our Church revised our United Church Creed with the encouragement of the Right Rev Stan McKay, our first Indigenous Moderator. As a way of incorporating the wisdom of "all my relations" into our call to be the Church, we now say, we are called "to live with respect in Creation" as we confess our faith.

V1: May we pray for the humility that is needed as we live into an ever-deepening respect for the Creator, the land, and all living beings.

V1/2: May it be so!

\*Great Covenant Chain, 24 Nations & Two Row Wampum Belts:



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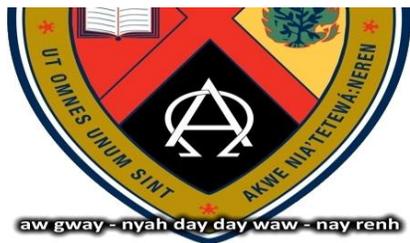
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i "All my relations" phonetic pronunciation in Mohawk



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For use by congregations