

# THE POLE TELLS A STORY

# Get Over It!

Dwayne Buhler

Mark Buchanan

If you pass through the exhibition hall in Missions Fest 2012 you will notice something different. A number of agencies are grouped around booths A3 and A4 where First Nations artists will be carving a cedar pole, telling the story of healing that is taking place among their people. They use their art to share redemptive stories of restoration and forgiveness, coming out of one of Canada's darkest moments in history: the abuse endured by hundreds of children in residential schools.

Evangelicals, for the most part, have been quiet on the subject. Maybe this is because it is easier to point to others who were the perpetrators, rather than look at the complacency and indifference in which many treated the injustice and abuse that took place.

Some will ask about the presence of a totem pole in the exhibition hall. Some might share a concern that it is either an idol or an object that depicts evil spirits.

Mark Buchanan (plenary speaker at MFV-2009) and the New Life Community Church in Duncan, BC, have dealt with this issue, as they continue to build bridges to the First Nations community in their city. Mark writes:

"Is the Spirit Pole (or any totem pole) an idol? An idol, biblically, is any man-made object of worship. The second commandment forbids the making of idols, or graven (carved) images. The second commandment further defines an idol as that which we "bow down to and worship."

No totem pole fits this description. Though early missionaries saw totem poles as idols, later missionaries and anthropologists proved that this perception was mistaken. Let me quote a recent edition of the *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* on the matter.

"The meanings of the designs on totem poles are as varied as the cultures which make them. Totem poles may recount familiar legends, clan lineages, or notable events. Some poles are erected to celebrate cultural beliefs, but others are intended mostly as artistic presentations."

Mark goes on to say, "Totem poles were never objects of worship. The association with idol worship was an idea from local Christian missionaries. The same assumption was made by very early European explorers, but later explorers ... noted that totem poles were never treated reverently; they seemed only occasionally to generate allusions or illustrate stories and were usually left to rot in place when people abandoned a village.

"In fact, the word 'totem,' which has occult

overtones, was coined by non-natives; the Native word for them is 'story pole' or 'kinship pole'. They function in First Nations culture much the same way a coat of arms functions in Scottish culture: a symbolic picture of our clan's history, in my case, depicted with a dragonish lion, a steel-armour helmet, a laurel wreath, a hand, a crown, and so on."

The story of God's redemption is a work in progress in which each person finds themselves in a different spot along the journey. Each person has a story of how they came to



faith, forgiveness, and transformation.

Please come and talk to the artists as they share a graphic representation of their life journey. Listen to their stories and ask how individuals and churches can walk with them on paths of healing. Listen to First Nations brothers and sisters, some who are followers of Christ, as they share the stories behind the graphic representation of an event that most would like to forget about, or even sweep under the carpet. Pray with them that the Church and followers of Christ can become agents of redemption and healing. Take time to listen and learn. 🙏

Last Saturday, around 30 New Lifers (people from Mark Buchanan's congregation) gathered to hear the stories of six First Nations people, four of them Christ-followers, two of them not yet. I was unprepared for the emotional weight of their stories. Most of them were tales of loss and abuse. Some of the suffering our friends have endured is almost beyond imagining, and especially so since much of it was delivered at the hands of Christian leaders.

I was even more unprepared, though, for the real story that emerged: the power of forgiveness. Each of the story-tellers, including the two who are as yet not Christ-followers, talked openly about forgiveness. One of the non-Christians admitted that he's still not ready to forgive everyone whose hurt him, but knows one day he must. One man recounted the abuse he went through from early childhood on, and how bitter and angry, and cold he became. Then he talked about how Jesus led him to truly forgive, from his heart, and how, "I have a real smile on my face now, from deep within, not a fake smile and not the stone face

I had in prison." One lady shared about how her hunger for God sustained her in her darkest moments, and how Jesus has healed her deepest sorrows.

Many white people, many of them Christians, have said to me, "I know that Native people have suffered. But when will they get over it?"

My answer now: "Most have. When will you?"

Indeed, from now on whenever I have to "get over" some pain or loss or hurt myself, I know in part what I will do: I'll think of six people I know, overcomers all, and follow their example. 🙏

# CARVING A RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL HEALING POLE

Don Klaassen

Cross cultural ministry in and out of the local church is challenging these days. It seems that we face so many barriers in our own backyards that it is often easier to go far away to practice following Jesus. However, our effectiveness globally may depend on our willingness to practise discipleship and overcome barriers much closer to home. With the proposal below I am challenging churches to address a local issue that has broad implications.

Aboriginal people in Canada are sometimes referred to as the most evangelised and least reached people. Their forced attendance at

knowledge and address this issue they will be better equipped to live out their faith and will be blessed in their efforts to overcome barriers of suspicion and misunderstanding wherever those barriers exist. The proposal outlined below is an opportunity for churches to do something tangible on the road to healing and understanding.

## History

Through various efforts initiated by The Journeys Class at Sardis Community Church the harmful effect of Aboriginal Residential Schools became apparent. A participant in

denial school students or their family members. The carving design will draw attention to the impact residential schools had on the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents of B.C. and on the need for healing. The pole will be carved in various churches and public venues where non-Aboriginals will be invited to assist in the carving. Each person participating will be encouraged to take further steps along the path of healing and reconciliation. Upon completion the pole will be put on permanent display in a place accessible to the public.

## Desired Outcomes

- Carvers are encouraged on the path of healing and health through their participation in the project.
- Non-Aboriginal people become more aware of the impact residential schools had on those who attended and on their families
- Positive relationships are built between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) events to be held in B.C. in 2012/13 have tangible and lasting benefit.
- Christ followers will grow in their desire to live out their faith with authenticity, aware of the issues facing the First Nations people of our province. 🙏



“Christian” residential schools contributed to widespread misunderstanding of the gospel and suspicion of Christians and churches by First Nations people. Although not all students at these schools were physically or sexually abused, the legacy of these institutions is seen as overwhelmingly negative and viewed as a stark example of what can happen when one culture uses power or privilege to force its values on another culture.

Even though most Christians alive today, and many denominations did not participate in the residential school program it is still an issue that needs to be sensitively addressed and understood by all of us before honest relationships can be built between indigenous and non-indigenous people. If Christians ac-

the class, Isadore Charters, an Aboriginal artist and member of the Coqualeetza elders group shared his vision of carving a Residential School Healing Pole. With the encouragement of Don Klaassen, a church mission coach with Outreach Canada a yellow cedar pole was donated by a local business man and a way to transport it was designed. Various groups and churches are now being invited to participate in this project. This carving of the pole will be featured at Vancouver Missions Fest on January 27 – 29th 2012 and may also become a feature of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission events to be held in B.C in 2012 and 2013.

## Project Description

A 200 year old eight foot yellow cedar pole will be designed and carved by former resi-

*“When I carve on this pole I let go of my anger and my hurt. The new me comes out because I know that people are trying to help and not just trying to forget”*

Isadore Charters – an Aboriginal artist and member of the Coqualeetza Elders in the Chilliwack area.

*“The Residential School program was an expression of our cultural arrogance. As a result we have wounds of injustice embedded deep in our society. We need healing. Finally there is someone brave enough to say ‘let’s do this together’! Working together on this pole could increase our understanding of our cultural differences and similarities.”*

Darryl Klassen – Director of Aboriginal Neighbours Program within Mennonite Central Committee

*“As a First Nations Christian I want to be an equal partner in walking the healing Jesus Walk with non-Aboriginal believers. The process of carving this pole together is more important than the pole itself. Attitudes change and healing happens when we work together”*

Brander McDonald – Indigenous Relations Coordinator for Mennonite Church B.C.