

October 11, 2000

The Honourable Robert Nault
Minister of Indian Affairs
10 Wellington Street 21st Floor
Suite 2100
Hull, Quebec K1A 0H4

Dear Mr. Nault:

Greetings!

The Executive Council of the Diocese of Keewatin met September 27, 2000 and passed the following statement:

The Diocese of Keewatin is committed to working with First Nations in their struggle to have their valid inherent rights recognized and respected. Consequently, we strongly urge the Government of Canada to enter into negotiations with Esgeenoopetitj (Burnt Church) First Nation in a spirit of mutual respect, honouring the treaty principle of sharing resources in a fair, just, and equitable manner and we assure all concerned that we will continue to pray and work for a peaceful resolution to this and all issues involving the inherent rights of First Nations.

As a Diocese we have committed ourselves to healing and reconciliation.....both of which first require justice. Those who do not have a voice must be enabled to tell their story. To gain the self-respect and self-esteem needed for healing, a person must be given the respect that befits the dignity of one who is made in the image of God.

The prophets such as Isaiah, Amos, Ezekiel and Micah constantly raised up the cause of those who were denied justice. They steadfastly proclaimed God's desire to see justice done. In recognition of this, Jesus made it a practice to search out those who were on the margins of society, who were weak and rejected by the powerful interests of their day. He was surrounded by lepers, the poor, women, foreigners, children and anyone else who was rejected by the political and religious authorities.

The church does not 'take sides'. But in its quest for justice it does have a special responsibility to stand with the poor and rejected and to make their voice heard when the powerful attempt to silence them. It was in this spirit, that our Bishop decided to honour the request that he visit Burnt Church First Nation in the midst of the lobster-fishing crisis. In doing so he was following in the tradition of the Anglican Church of Canada. Since 1969 the General Synod has consistently advocated for the recognition of and respect for Aboriginal inherent rights. We worked hard to persuade the Government to entrench these rights in the Canadian Constitution and we continue to advocate for the implementation of these rights today.

As a Diocese, we are deeply distressed by the violence, threats of violence and other intimidation tactics, such as the constant presence of helicopters circling overhead and the ramming of native boats, used by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans at Burnt Church. By traumatizing the community and endangering the lives of the people, these tactics undermined any possibility of establishing an atmosphere of trust in which real dialogue can take place. In order to create the conditions for such dialogue, the government and its agencies must refrain from such heavy-handed draconian measures. In addition, the government must take all necessary steps to prevent non-native fishers from engaging in vigilante activities and the threats of intervention, which figured so prominently in news reports of the day.

We also believe that the federal government, in keeping with the recommendations of Canada's Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, must without delay enter into peaceful, nation-to-nation negotiations with the people of Esgenoopetitj/Burnt Church to ensure an equitable sharing of resources between First Nations and the larger Canadian society.

The issues that face Burnt Church First Nation are not unique to that area. The just recognition of aboriginal inherent rights according to the treaties is one that affects every part of our own diocese (which encompasses all of your own riding. Situations exist here, which have the potential to escalate into the equivalent of that at Burnt Church.

As Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, it is your moral as well as constitutional responsibility to ensure that Aboriginal inherent rights are recognized at the cabinet table, respected within the bureaucracy of the federal government, and promoted in the wider court of public opinion. This is a very serious responsibility and how you exercise it will have a profound effect on the future of our whole country.

We want to assure you that we are prepared to work with you and support you in any way we can in fulfilling this responsibility in the hope that we may soon see the dawn of a new day in which justice will prevail and that all of us in a fair, just and equitable manner will share the bountiful gifts of a generous Creator. To this end, we are inviting you, as our Member of Parliament, and as the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development to meet with our Diocesan Council on Friday, October 20 at Keewatin.

We look forward to your early, and we hope, positive response to this invitation.

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The Venerable David N. Ashdown