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Anglican Church vows to help address youth suicide crisis in Wapekeka First Nation; says it helped create ‘legacy of brokenness’

BY [ANDRÉ FORGET](#) ON JANUARY, 23 2017

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Archdeacon Michael Thompson, general secretary of the Anglican Church of Canada, says that the trauma former priest Ralph Rowe was responsible for still echoes in Indigenous communities. File photo: Art Babych

The Anglican Church of Canada has acknowledged that it played a role in creating the conditions that led to the suicides of two young girls in Wapekeka First Nation, a remote Oji-Cree community in Ontario, earlier this month.

In a January 20 [statement](#), Archdeacon Michael Thompson, general secretary, said the church “helped create a legacy of brokenness in some First Nations communities” through the actions of one of its former priests, Ralph Rowe, who abused many Indigenous boys in communities across Northwestern Ontario throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

The statement came in response to comments made by Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation during a press conference on January 19 following the deaths by suicide of 12-year-olds Jolynn Winter and Chantel Fox in early January.

Fiddler said the suicides, like a number of previous suicides, were linked to intergenerational trauma caused by Rowe’s predation, which has had a profound impact on the community.

Thompson said that Rowe’s abuse was “massive in its scope and horrendous in its impact,” and that the church has a “moral obligation...to support initiatives that address its continuing consequences.”

Thompson acknowledged that the trauma Rowe was responsible for still echoes in communities and that its impact is “intergenerational.”

He expressed the church’s “willingness, in spite of failings and false starts in the past, to renew our commitment to dialogue and discernment that will help us understand more deeply and act more effectively on our responsibilities.”

Rowe was convicted of 39 sexual offenses in 1994, and served four and a half years of a six-year sentence. Further convictions for sexual assault followed in 2005 and 2009, and in 2012 he was given a two-year conditional sentence to be served under house arrest. [Survivors Rowe](#), a documentary film released in 2015, estimates that Rowe had abused 500 boys.

Trained as a pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force, Rowe served as a missionary pilot before he was ordained in 1975. He also served as a scout master with the Boy Scouts of Canada.

Fiddler said the community had “reached out the Anglican church numerous times,” but that the church had “never acknowledged their role” in Rowe’s abuse or provided funding for community-based healing initiatives, nor had it apologized to the survivors.

In a tweet following the press conference, Fiddler said he expects “not just an apology but a commitment of resources to address harm [the Anglican Church of Canada] caused.”

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We expect not just an apology but a commitment of resources to address harm they've caused. #AnglicanChurchOfCanada <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/01/20/anglican-church-will-issue-apology-to-victims-of-former-minister.html> ...
9:34 PM - 20 Jan 2017

Anglican Church will issue apology to victims of former minister | Toronto Star

Pedophile Ralph Rowe is estimated to have sexually abused hundreds of indigenous boys.
thestar.com

Thompson told the *Anglican Journal* that he was unaware of any requests from Wapekeka First Nation, but noted that this does not mean requests were not made.

Fiddler was unavailable for comment at press time.

Thompson's statement notes that the Anglican Church of Canada has provided financial support for community-led healing projects through the Anglican Healing Fund in other communities affected by Rowe's abuses, including Wunnumin Lake, Sachigo Lake, Kingfisher Lake and Sioux Lookout.



Thompson said the church also supports two suicide prevention co-ordinators for Indigenous communities in the north who work with the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, the Centre for Suicide Prevention, and other government and tribal council partners.

His statement ends by noting that the church “looks to [Fiddler] and to others to help us direct our actions in ways that will help end the crisis in the communities he serves.”

Undated photo of former Anglican priest Ralph Rowe, who was convicted in 1994 of abusing Indigenous boys in communities across Northwestern Ontario in the 1970s and 1980s. File photo: General Synod Archives

Healing Fund co-ordinator Esther Wesley said the church did support one project in Wapekeka First Nation, but that the application originated with Tikinagan Child & Family Services in Sioux Lookout.

The project, a five-day healing and cultural camp held in August 2015, was based out of Camp Mishakamaayashinoonini-wug, on the Wapekeka First Nation territory, which promotes healing by reconnecting Indigenous people with traditional knowledge, skills and languages.

Both Thompson and Archbishop Fred Hiltz, primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, noted that Bishop Lydia Mamakwa, of the Spiritual Ministry of Mishamikoweesh (within whose jurisdiction Wapekeka First Nation lies) and her predecessor, former bishop of Keewatin David Ashdown, have issued personal apologies to some survivors of Rowe's abuse over the years.

But Thompson said now might be the right time for "a formal, national apology" for the church's involvement in Rowe's abuse.

Hiltz, however, said he would need to consult with Mamakwa about the appropriate timing and delivery of an apology.

"At some point, I do need to stand beside Bishop Lydia and say I am very sorry for what has happened here, and that our church...is deeply committed to trying to enable some healing for these individuals and their families," he said. He said that Mamakwa may want to talk with elders, survivors, and members of the community affected by suicide about the best way to move forward.

Mamakwa herself was not available to comment at press time.

When asked whether an apology would be accompanied by material support, Hiltz said he it would likely go hand in hand with a "commitment on the part of the church to provide some support for healing projects in the community."

Thompson said the national church is working to ensure that the Anglican Healing Fund will have money to continue its work [beyond 2017](#), and that the Healing Fund "is one vehicle that might be highly effective in addressing healing" for the Wapekeka First Nation community.