

Apology from Anglican Church over legacy of Ralph Rowe is very important, Bennett says

It was determined during court proceedings that Rowe preyed upon hundreds of children, Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler says.



Former Anglican minister Ralph Rowe was convicted of sexually abusing boys in northern Ontario during the 1970s and 80s. (THE SURREY-NORTH DELTA LEADER)

By The Canadian Press

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OTTAWA — A long-awaited public apology from the Anglican Church for the rampant sexual abuse perpetrated by former priest Ralph Rowe in the 1970s and 1980s will be vital in helping victims heal, Canada's indigenous affairs minister says.

The Anglican Church of Canada acknowledged last week the tragic legacy of Rowe, a former Boy Scout leader who abused countless children during the two

decades he spent travelling between remote First Nations communities in northern Ontario.

Indigenous leaders have suggested a link between that legacy and the recent suicide deaths of two 12-year-old girls earlier this month in Wapekeka First Nation, a fly-in community about 600 kilometres north of Thunder Bay, Ont.

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The church's statement said Archbishop Fred Hiltz is taking part in an engagement process with other stakeholders as they work toward a formal national apology to victims and communities.

"It has been very clear from the survivors how important this is to them and their families in that ... it is an acknowledgment of the harm that was done and a way forward," Indigenous Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett said in an interview.

"I think that what we learn so often is that when people have recognized the fact that harm was done and they didn't deserve to be harmed, that it goes a long way in the healing journey."

Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler, who represents 49 First Nations communities in northern Ontario, urged the church to provide not just words, but resources to help foster long-term healing.

The intergenerational legacy of long-term historical sexual abuse includes suicide and drug and alcohol addiction, Fiddler added.

Rowe pleaded guilty at trial in 1994 to 39 counts of indecent assault involving 19 boys; he was sentenced to six years under a plea agreement that ensured he wouldn't serve additional jail time if convicted of other similar offences.

He was released on parole after serving just four-and-a-half years.

Bennett's husband Peter O'Brian, a TV producer and himself a victim of childhood sexual abuse, produced a documentary released in 2015 entitled "Survivors Rowe," which alleges Rowe left an estimated 500 victims in his wake.

If and when the church does apologize, it will affect victims differently, depending on their experiences, Fiddler said, citing the experience of residential school survivors when former prime minister Stephen Harper apologized in 2008.

"Some, I assume, might well consider accepting the apology," he said, adding that Nishnawbe Aski will be pressing the Boy Scouts of Canada to issue an apology of its own.

"Some will reject it. Some, it will help them in their own healing ... But I think it will be good for the church to do this, to finally acknowledge its role and to apologize."

Bennett said she and O'Brian have tried to do their part to raise awareness about the Rowe story, one she calls a teachable moment for Canada about cycles of violence.

"From the time I first heard the Ralph Rowe story by former (Assembly of First Nations) regional chief Stan Beardy, I felt the story needed to be told," Bennett said.

"I thought that it really was the equivalent of Jack the Ripper. It was so horrendous and horrific and the effects that have happened ... 500 boys, probably 100 of whom were dead by suicide or overdose or violence of one form or another."