



The Land We Stand On

A Territory Acknowledgement Guide

Images: Tara Evans, Ian Baldwin, Jasmin Schreiber on Unsplash

The Christian Reformed Church is called to live out Christ's words in Matthew 5:23-24. "So, when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come back and offer your gift." (NRSV) The apostle Paul affirms Christ's words in 2 Corinthians 5:18:

"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."

Faithfulness to Christ's words includes leading the Christian Reformed Church to pursue reconciliation with our Indigenous brothers and sisters in North America. In 2016, Synod repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery and the concept of 'terra nullius' as a heresy. (The Doctrine of Discovery and the concept 'terra nullius' were used by European Christians and nations to justify the brutal colonization of Indigenous peoples in North America and around the world. Learn more at crcna.org/ministries/initiatives/doctrine-discovery-task-force)

Recognition of the Indigenous inhabitants of the land on which you live is part of positive implementation and affirmation of Synod's rejection of the Doctrine of Discovery and is a testimony to your commitment to reconciliation with our Indigenous neighbours. The failure to recognize the historical and current presence of Indigenous people quietly contributes to the persistent power of the Doctrine of Discovery and the concept of 'terra nullius' in popular culture and social discourse.

The purpose of acknowledging territory in a classis/church setting is to change the common negative narrative to a positive one by recognizing Indigenous peoples as the first peoples of Canada. Despite years of prevalence of a narrative claiming that Indigenous peoples were not here first or have been assimilated, as Christians we wish to honour their past and continued presence. It is our prayer that such a statement will be part of restoring justice to Indigenous peoples and all the people that make Canada their home.

In thankfulness and with respect to Indigenous peoples who originally welcomed others as guests to their home (lands), an 'acknowledgement of territory' becomes a shared expression of gratitude. There is much to admire and emulate in Indigenous people's gratitude for all things, and by expressing gratitude to the original inhabitants of the land for their hospitality, we can both model this gratitude and honour Indigenous people's strong ties to the land. They identify with and to each other through a sense of place and where they come from. Land is a deep part of their identity—think of the Old Testament people of God, the Israelites, and their ties to the 'Promised Land' to understand how strong this tie to land is. In Indigenous cultures, if the original inhabitants of a place knew and invited their guests, they would be graciously welcomed.

The way we acknowledge territory is also significant. It is important to be honest about where you got your information. Was it from an Indigenous Elder or Knowledge keeper that was built upon a mutual relationship? How many Indigenous people have you asked? The acknowledgement is best done when it is more than an empty statement void of a genuine relationship. In this way, you are also able to understand some of the complexity or deeper story that may be a part of the land you are acknowledging. It could be a part of even greater acts of reconciliation when, for example, a classis might go as far as inviting the Elder or Knowledge keeper to say a welcome, to pray over the gathering and to stay for the meeting. This guest may even have the opportunity to share an 'acknowledgement of territory' that is specific to themselves.

Examples of Territory Acknowledgement

For reference purposes, here are two examples of territory acknowledgments:

A: By the CRC's Indigenous Christian Fellowship in Regina, Saskatchewan

Let us begin our time together by acknowledging that we are gathering on Treaty 4 Territory and the traditional homeland of the Métis.

B: By Emmanuel College in Toronto, Ontario

As we gather together (at Emmanuel College), we acknowledge this sacred land on which the University of Toronto operates. It has been a site of human activity for 15,000 years. This land is the territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations,

the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. The territory was the subject of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy and Confederacy of the Ojibwe and allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. Today, the meeting place of Toronto is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work in the community, on this territory.

We are also mindful of broken covenants and the need to strive to make right with all our relations.

(From: torontoconference.ca/right-relations/territorial-acknowledgements/)

Territory Acknowledgement Template

For reference purposes, here is a template that can be used to develop an appropriate acknowledgement of the Indigenous people who lived in the respective territory.

Let us acknowledge that the land on which we are gathering is the territory of Treaty _____.

Before the signing of the treaty, this land was occupied by these peoples:

_____, _____, _____ and _____,

If applicable, the following phrase should be added:

We are also on traditional homeland of the Métis People.

In summary, acknowledgement of traditional Indigenous occupants of a given territory should include reference to the following:

- A. The name(s) of the Indigenous peoples that traditionally inhabited the area

- B. The name(s) of the Indigenous groups that currently inhabit the area (Due to colonial and other historical incidents, there may be more Indigenous groups currently in the region and these may be different than the time immemorial groups)
- C. The name and or number of the treaty of the area you are in. (Please note that some treaties have both a name and a number, while others only have a number.)
- D. A explanation as to why it is important to share an acknowledgment of territory

Further Resources

These websites can help you to learn about land acknowledgment, but should not replace speaking directly with Indigenous people in your area.

native-land.ca/

usdac.us/nativeland/

The best protocol for territory acknowledgement is learning from a number of different Indigenous peoples from your area about the territory. Protocols are fluid and contextual to the different regions and cultures in Canada.

Want to help your congregation to think about the ministry of reconciliation and what it means for us in Canada today? You could participate in this [sermon challenge](#) for pastors to consider the biblical teachings about being a guest on the land and honouring covenants/treaties. Once people are encouraged to think in this direction, it is our hope that people will want to go the next step and acknowledge territory. (dojustice.crcna.org/article/canada-150-sermon-challenge-becoming-good-guests) Or read about The Road Church's experience with honouring their Indigenous neighbours on *Do Justice* (dojustice.crcna.org/article/guests-land-part-1).