

Churches want Ottawa to take lead on Indian residential school talks

By Janice Tibbetts

OTTAWA—Two churches that ran Indian residential schools on behalf of the federal government say Ottawa has been dragging its feet in dealing with a barrage of lawsuits alleging everything from sexual abuse to cultural deprivation.

The United Church of Canada and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops urged the federal government Tuesday to take a leadership role and set up formal talks to find an out-of-court solution, instead of fighting almost 1,200 lawsuits case by case.

"Most people are going to die before they get any compensation," said United Church moderator Bill Phipps.

"I would think the need to find an alternative is somewhat

urgent," added Gerry Kelly of the Catholic bishops.

The call follows a landmark B.C. court ruling last week that declared for the first time both the federal government and the United Church are legally liable for widespread sexual and physical abuse at a Port Alberni, B.C., school and ordered them to compensate about 30 former students.

Indian Affairs Minister Jane Stewart has minimized the national importance of the ruling, saying the decision is specific to the Port Alberni case in which former dormitory supervisor Arthur Plint was criminally convicted.

Stewart says the government is still dealing with other lawsuits individually, although she acknowledged recently she is looking for "a more human way."

Lawsuits against the federal government and several churches that ran the schools have been pouring into Ottawa at a rate of about 15 or 20 a week, prompted largely by Stewart issuing an apology earlier this year to students who suffered the tragedy of residential schools.

Ottawa also set up a \$350 million healing fund, but the money will go to communities to set up counseling initiatives rather than individual victims.

Phipps and Kelly say the churches are repentant for their role in the schools, which were established in the late 1800s to assimilate Indians into mainstream culture. More than 100,000 passed through the doors of about 80 schools in almost every province before the system was shut down in the 1980s.

The Catholic church ran about 60 per cent of the schools, and the United Church oversaw about 20 per cent. Between them, the organizations face hundreds of lawsuits.

Both institutions agree its time to start talking about compensation for the victims, a prospect the federal government has resisted.

"We're open to that possibility," Phipps said.

But they acknowledge that there are no easy answers since allegations vary so widely.

"Is there a one-size-fits-all approach? I would think not. I would think there would have to be regional responses," said Kelly, who suggested one possibility would be to deal with lawsuits on a school-by-school basis.

Federal officials have been meeting informally and periodically with church representatives, including a meeting this week.

But the churches say they're looking for more concrete action from the federal government, which they say has been slow to seriously respond.

Phipps said the Justice Department, which oversees litigation, needs to take a more aggressive approach.

About 200 have been settled out of court so far for undisclosed amounts of money.

Pierre Gratton, a spokesman for Justice Minister Anne McLellan, said she has asked the federal law commission to look into the problem of how to deal with multiple claims of institutional abuse. A report is due later this year.—CP—