

Background on Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church and the Spiritual Covenant
Spiritual Covenant Working Group
April 29, 2022

In the Spring of 2007, the idea of a possible Spiritual Covenant with churches came from a conversation between two elders at Six Nations - Adrian Jacobs and Rick Hill - as a possible tangible way for churches to address past and present injustices on the land. Adrian Jacobs had been hired by MCC Ontario at the time, to do education among Mennonite churches in the Haldimand Tract about land justice and the history of Six Nations on the land. As Adrian spoke to and worked with various congregations, he began to share this idea of a Spiritual Covenant with Six Nations. Stirling was one of those congregations. *(See the timeline of Stirling & the Spiritual Covenant below)*

In the ensuing years, amidst much learning, growth and work on various aspects of reconciliation, there has been continued interest from individuals and congregations in the Spiritual Covenant - but no formal uptake. Recently, issues around historical and current injustices in relation to land have taken on a sharper focus. When Adrian Jacobs issued an invitation to MCEC churches last Spring, to once again consider the Spiritual Covenant with Six Nations, Stirling Missions, Peace & Justice Ministry and Church Council agreed it was time for our congregation to seriously consider and respond to the call.

It is humbling to receive such a gracious invitation to enter into a covenanted relationship with the people of Six Nations. The Spiritual Covenant offers us a unique, promising and tangible opportunity to address some historic and current injustices on the land and to build relationships with some of the original peoples on this land

Timeline of Stirling and the Spiritual Covenant

Fall 2007	Adrian Jacobs invited to speak at Stirling in worship and in a FF class. Adrian shared the idea of the Spiritual Covenant with us for the first time
Spring 2008	A group of Stirling members were sent to participate in Justice for the Land – an MCEC series of workshops put on by Adrian Jacobs on land claim issues at Six Nations
Spring 2009	Stirling helped to host Shaping Justice – a second series of workshops on Aboriginal Land Claims issues
Nov. 2016	Josie Winterfeld, as a representative of Stirling, and leaders from within MCCO, were invited to attend a meeting at Six Nations with Adrian and Rick Hill to talk further about the possibility of pursuing Spiritual Covenant. Josie brought the proposal back to Church Council. We were unable to follow up at the time.
Feb. 16, 2021	Adrian once again presented the Spiritual Covenant with the MCEC TRWG Sacred Covenant series, again urging churches to consider this invitation.
Spring 2021	Church Council made a decision to set up a Spiritual Covenant Working Group to explore the Spiritual Covenant, tasked with helping the congregation engage
Fall 2021	Stirling has a 4-week Spiritual Covenant Worship and Faith Formation series, exploring the stories, history, and Biblical teachings which frame our relationship to land (in preparation for considering the Spiritual Covenant proposal)

Our Location

Stirling Avenue Mennonite church is located on the Haldimand Tract, which is traditional territory for the Neutral, Anishinabeg and Haudenosaunee (or Six Nations) peoples. The Haldimand Tract refers to the six miles on either side of the Grand River, from mouth to source, which Governor Haldimand declared dedicated to the Six Nations for their support and use in perpetuity. This land is also within the Dish with One Spoon Wampum, which governed use of the common hunting grounds. Both of these agreements precede the formation of Canada.

Grappling with History

Like Jacob grappling with angels, we are wrestling with difficult issues of justice and injustice; of land, place and ownership; of our arrival and settling

(past and present); with coming to understand Indigenous Anishinabeg, Haudenosaunee and Neutral displacement and dispossession in the areas in which we live and worship; and with figuring out how to live in a good way on this land.

How do we think of the processes and structures that displaced the Haudenosaunee in the Haldimand Tract, and from which we as settlers continue to benefit? In what ways do we think about and act with responsibility and accountability today when these issues seem like they were long ago? How does our faith speak into these issues and give us insight into how to respond in a faithful way?

The stories we tell about our history and relationship with the land continue to shape our understanding of who we are as a church today. As writer, Thomas King, notes, “The truth about stories is it’s all we are.” How we tell the story matters.

Thinking about Mennonite Responsibility

A big question that comes to people’s minds is what responsibility we have in the context of a history of dispossession and erasure of Indigenous peoples, cultures, and ways of life. People ask: what specific historical wrongs happened, and did we perpetrate them? If we are newcomers, are we less responsible? Is this not the responsibility of our government?

These are great questions and they point to the difficulties of thinking about a complex history with a simple victim-perpetrator lens. While there were victims and perpetrators there are also many others who are involved in keeping systems in place that continue to benefit some and harm others.

For Mennonites, it may be helpful to think about our implication in *processes* that harm rather than being direct *perpetrators* of harms.

We are implicated when we:

- are aligned with power and privilege, but are not direct agents of harm;
- contribute to, live within, inherit or benefit from regimes of domination but do not control nor initiate them;
- participate in histories that generate victims and perpetrators, yet do not occupy such clear-cut roles.¹

Settler colonialism was not just a historical process, the legal and political structures established during colonialism continue to reinforce settler ownership and rights over and against Indigenous understandings of, and claims to, land. Most of us at Stirling live within, inherit and/or benefit from the land acquisition of the Haldimand Tract specifically, as well as other Indigenous lands that became Canada. (The history of Block 2 is discussed below.)

An example of a way Mennonites are implicated in Indigenous dispossession is when Mennonite history erased meaningful Indigenous presence and claims to land in the area. Consider this historical narrative from 1957 in a Mennonite history book:

“Two men and their families, Joseph Schoerg and Samuel Betzner of Franklin County, PA, were the pioneers in this settlement, located near what is now Kitchener, but then merely a howling wilderness. This whole region had just recently been vacated by the Indians and was still unsettled except for a few wandering fur traders” (Smith Story of the Mennonites 1957, p. 560)

Reading this history, you can see how Indigenous presence is dismissed as part of nature, and wilderness, and thus the land is seen as vacant. Yet, the land was not vacant.

The Haldimand Proclamation and Some of the Issues with Block 2 Waterloo Township

The history of the 1784 Haldimand Proclamation and Tract is explained in the resource [Six Miles Deep](#)

In 1796, Joseph Brant was given Power of Attorney from the Haudenosaunee Council of Six Nations to Surrender “In Trust” to the Crown, Blocks 1, 2, 3 and 4 to secure an annuity which would pay 999 year lease payments for the

perpetual care and maintenance of the Six Nations People (*A Global Solution*, p.16)

The Crown was to hold in trust all funds for Six Nations. The Haudenosaunee understanding was that the lands could be “sold” as leases for 999 years; these lease payments were what would help support the Six Nations people as their land base got smaller and smaller. The Haudenosaunee never believed they relinquished all rights to this their ancestral land.

Mennonites operated in good faith. They paid for the land believing they had secured clear title (and according to British law they had.) However, while Mennonites did pay for the land as the following visual details, Six Nations monies were not credited to the Six Nations Trust accounts and no discharge of mortgages were located. Instead, it appears that government agents used the monies on our behalf for other purposes.

Underlying all of this, of course, is a clash of European and Indigenous understandings of relationship to land. Europeans see land as a commodity. Indigenous people see land as something one cannot “own”, but as a spiritual entity to which we are all deeply connected as one is to family. (Perhaps this view is closer to the Old Testament understanding of land as belonging to God.)

LAND RIGHTS
A GLOBAL SOLUTION
FOR THE SIX NATIONS OF THE GRAND RIVER

11

BLOCK 2 WATERLOO TWP. • 94,012 acres

- “Nov. 2, 1796, Brant Power of Attorney”
- Feb. 5, 1798, Letters Patent issued to Richard Beasley, James Wilson & St. John B. Rousseau
- May 10, 1798, joint mortgage executed
- Aug. 12, 1802, Six Nations were induced to release Beasley & Assoc. from mortgage & the block was to be subdivided & separate mortgages executed

• All the required principal and interest paid by the purchasers of Block 2 was not credited to Six Nations Trust Accounts and no discharge of mortgages can be located. Also, the proceeds from Block 2 were used to run Canada

“Six Natives die from each side of the River beginning on Lake Erie and extending to the mountains to the Head of said River, which ‘Them and their Descendants are to enjoy forever.”

From [Land Rights: Global Solutions for the Six Nations of the Grand River](#) For a more detailed account, see the [Video recording of Phil Monture’s presentation](#) (in which Block 2 is discussed in detail)

What Now?

Although the history is complex and although Mennonites acted in good faith, it is clear now that there have been and continue to be inequities. We know more now than we knew then. We know that our Indigenous neighbours were not treated fairly by the government at the time of the land transactions, and that, since then, we Mennonite people have and continue to benefit from the colonial systems of land ownership and our government’s misappropriation of funds. What do we do with this new found knowledge? What is Six Nations inviting us to do? We invite you to join us as we prayerfully consider entering into the attached Spiritual Covenant with Six Nations.

¹ (This definition of implicated subjects comes from Michael Rothberg. 2019. *The Implicated Subject* (CA: Stanford University Press), 1.)