

# Film tracks minister's rift with United Church over treatment of aboriginal victims

## SCREENING

**What:** *Unrepentant*  
**Where:** Eric Martin Pavilion,  
 1900 block Fort Street  
 at corner of Fort and Lee streets)  
**When:** Saturday, 7 p.m.  
**Admission:** By donation

MICHAEL D. REID  
*Colonist staff*

ouis Lawless has made some scary  
 es during his Hollywood career.  
 ke *Manson* (1973) an Oscar-nomi-  
 documentary about Charles Man-  
 for example, or *Abducted: The*  
*ion* (1994), a horror flick with Jan-  
 ael Vincent and Dan Haggerty about  
 y mountain man who terrorizes sexy  
 ers.

othing compares to the horrors Law-  
 aced doing *Unrepentant*. The Pen-  
 i-born director's documentary  
 nts Canada's "dirty little secret" and  
 es on the price paid by controver-  
 lergyman Kevin Annett because of  
 usade to document cultural geno-  
 at church-run Indian residential  
 ls in Canada and to bring its perpe-  
 s to justice.

nnett, 51, was "delisted" as a United  
 ch minister in 1997 after serving  
 than two years at St. Andrew's  
 d Church in Port Alberni. He was  
 cked following his vocal denuncia-  
 of the church as being indifferent to  
 ginals, and his repeated claims that  
 covering up alleged abuse and mur-  
 of native students at Alberni Resi-  
 al School.

fter 24 days of hearings, a United  
 ch panel made up of two ministers  
 lay member ruled there was no evi-  
 e the church had avoided dealing  
 native issues. It accused Annett of  
 ting tension, confrontation and dis-

the film, based on his book *Hidden*  
*History: The Canadian Holocaust*,  
 it likens Canada's residential school  
 m to genocide, and compares the  
 n boarding schools to death camps.  
 hile the United Church has acknowl-



Former Port Alberni minister Kevin Annett allied himself with aboriginal protesters. His activism led to him parting ways with the church.

*Lawless images*

edged its involvement in the colonial  
 enterprise that it and Anglican, Catholic  
 and Presbyterian churches ran for the fed-  
 eral government, the whistle-blower  
 insists the church has fallen short of full  
 disclosure.

Annett, who had submitted his resig-  
 nation before being delisted, accuses the  
 church of withholding information about  
 the buried remains of native children in  
 unmarked graves. He says he was  
 expelled for documenting such horror  
 stories and daring to question the sale of  
 church land to McMillan Bloedel — land  
 he says belonged to aboriginals.

He also believes as many as 50,000  
 students died of abuse, deliberate expo-  
 sure to disease and other atrocities at  
 Canadian residential schools.

*Unrepentant*, winner of Best Director  
 of an International Documentary Film at  
 last year's New York Independent Film  
 and Video Festival, interweaves Annett's  
 saga with heart-wrenching first-hand tes-  
 timony from emotionally scarred aborigi-  
 nal survivors, pain etched on their faces.

Inspired by a story in *The Globe and*  
*Mail* on "Canada's Silent Apartheid,"  
 Lawless says he began work on the film  
 four years ago. He was eager to tell "the  
 story of a man who struggled to be hon-  
 est and truthful" but whose world would  
 fall apart with an ensuing divorce,  
 ostracism and physical threats. Annett  
 says he was also prevented from complet-  
 ing his PhD. "I'm always looking for a  
 great story and this — it's Shakespeare,"  
 says Lawless. "It's got greed, corruption,  
 lying, murder."

*Unrepentant* is tough sledding, as abo-  
 riginal survivors recall childhood horror  
 stories from this tragic chapter of Cana-  
 dian history. Tales are recounted of the  
 deaths of children like Maisie Shaw —  
 who witnesses claim was murdered at the  
 Alberni Residential School by its princi-  
 pal, Alfred Caldwell, in 1946 — and of  
 students being sterilized, sexually and  
 physically abused through methods from  
 starvation to electric shock, and deliber-  
 ately exposed to diseases such as tuber-  
 culosis and smallpox.

Virginia Baptiste, a survivor of St.  
 Eugene Residential School, recalls her  
 brother having his penis electrocuted until  
 he passed out. Another man recalls that  
 pencils were driven through a student's  
 hand to discourage him from carving.

Steven H., who attended St. Paul's  
 Catholic School in North Vancouver, says  
 that when he was six years old he saw a  
 girl dying in front of him after she was  
 kicked in the head by Sister Pierre, a nun  
 who told the class to step over the child.

Rick Lavalee recalls hearing his  
 brother scream out with pain while being  
 tortured with a cattle prod. Sylvester  
 Green, an elderly survivor of Edmonton  
 Residential School, recalls being used to  
 sexually satisfy a male school official.

As powerful and provocative as *Unre-  
 pentant* is, it is also aggressively one-  
 sided. United Church officials weren't  
 given an opportunity to refute Annett's  
 claims, he says, because the film wasn't  
 meant as neutral commentary.

"We made a choice not to do that,"  
 says Annett, who for years has been push-



ing for a war crimes-like trial for perpe-  
 trators and the kind of Truth and Recon-  
 ciliation Commission Indian Affairs Min-  
 ister Jim Prentice recently struck to deal  
 with the issue.

"Churches have had a big platform to  
 give their point of view, and the other side  
 hasn't been heard."

While recognizing *Unrepentant* might  
 offend some, Metis leader Jack McDon-  
 ald says it's a useful tool. "It's a story that  
 had to be told," says McDonald, who was  
 involved in getting the RCMP to investi-  
 gate the Alberni allegations.

"The point wasn't to offend anyone. I  
 think it had to be put down in print as well  
 as on video to record what people wit-  
 nessed, their personal experiences."

Annett says he can live with more heat  
 as long as *Unrepentant* encourages more  
 native people to have their stories heard  
 and to compel those responsible for abuse  
 to apologize, tell the whole story and take  
 responsibility.

"It's all about being accountable for  
 what we did and continue to do."