

Refusing to Repent

Former minister's residential school flick stirs up controversy

By AMANDA FARRELL

The issue of Canada's residential school system has long been a contentious one. For over a century, first nations children were removed from their homes and forced to attend church-run, government-supported schools designed to "assimilate" them into western society. Children were punished for speaking their own language or practicing their own faith, and stories of psychological, physical and sexual abuse have surfaced. The last school closed in 1996, and only recently has the Canadian government come forward with compensation packages for survivors. But despite the schools' long history, very little about these institutions has made it into the public sphere. That's something former United Church minister Kevin Annett and filmmaker Louie Lawless are trying to change with their documentary *Unrepentant: Kevin Annett and Canada's Genocide*.

"This story needs to get to a wider scope of people," says Annett, who has also written two books on the subject. "[Film] is a more powerful medium when you can see people's faces and look into their eyes. It's more meaningful than reading it in a book."

Unrepentant tells the story of Annett's time as a minister at St. Andrew's United Church in Port Alberni in the early 1990s. Annett claims he was fired from his post after opening his doors to aboriginal parishioners and bringing to light issues around residential school abuse and illegal transfer of first nations land from the hands of the church to private companies. The film contains moving testimonies from residential school survivors about their experiences and documents the persecution Annett says he suffered at the hands of the United Church after he was de-listed as a minister. The film is a shocking introduction to Canada's legacy of residential schools, a topic Annett says isn't even discussed much in the first nations community itself.

"They not only don't tell their kids, but a lot of them are under pressure not to talk about it at all," says Annett. "On a number of occasions [at screenings], a lot of young native people said, 'Why were we never told that this was done to us?'"

Lawless says he first heard of Annett a few years ago while working on a series for the *Globe and Mail* entitled "Canada's Apartheid". He interviewed Annett and was amazed by his passion when he watched the tape, he says. He then approached Annett about making a film about his experiences.

"I've been wanting to do a film for years, but I couldn't find the right person," says Annett. "This was a perfect combination."

But the film has been subjected to some harsh criticisms—and not just because of its controversial subject matter. Doug Goodwin, the Executive Secretary of the United Church of Canada's B.C. Conference, says Annett was not fired from his post in Port Alberni, but resigned—and they have the letter to prove it.

"He claims he's been fired and we have his written letter of resignation in our hands, so he can say what he likes," says Goodwin. "He ran into difficulty in his congregation, that happens. When that happens, the church starts investigating. Once that started happening, he simply resigned."

Goodwin also says the process where Annett was placed on the discontinued service list was well documented and fair, a claim Annett disputes at length in the film. Annett says the church is trying to discredit him to cover up what happened in the residential schools.

"It's a case of shooting the messenger," Annett says. "You can't kill him, so you have to discredit him. You have to tell people he's crazy so they can ignore the evidence."

Goodwin says the United Church has admitted to its role in Canadian residential schools and is doing its best to mend its bridges. "We've recognized for many years that the United Church was involved in a system that was unjust and sometimes cruel and was

one we regret taking part in," he says. "It's quite well known in the church itself, but it's not well known to the public so it might seem there is a secret here that is finally being exposed, but that's not the case . . . the problem with Kevin's stuff is the alarmist nature of it, that this is new and being covered up and he's the only one doing anything about it, when that's not true."

Some of the more disturbing allegations against *Unrepentant* comes from first nations people themselves. Jim Craven is a member of the Blackfoot nation who served as a judge at a 1998 tribunal into residential school abuses. Craven, who teaches economics at Clark College in Vancouver, Washington, and also goes by his Blackfoot name Omahkohkiaayo i'poyi, appears briefly in the film when footage from the tribunal is shown. He says he never gave permission to Annett to use his likeness and several others—including 71-year-old Harriet Nahanee, an elder who as arrested earlier this year during the Eagleridge Bluffs protests in Squamish and died shortly after spending 14 days in jail—didn't either.

"What he does is what he's always done, and that is to use native people and their cause as stage props for his own narcissism. He's using people who have already been horribly abused, marginalized and taken advantage of and using them as stage props," says Craven, adding that Annett has called him a RCMP and FBI agent—an allegation he says could get him killed in certain circles. "What percentage of the minutes are about poor Kevin, and how many talk about native issues and native people in their own voice?"

For Lawless, it was Annett's struggle that compelled him to make the film first and foremost. "The story that needed to be told was Kevin's," he says. "Here's this white man, this United Church minister, and the church turned against him because he sided with the poor."

Craven says he's far from an apologist for the residential school system, and has "accused the Canadian government of genocide to their faces." He's not disputing the factual content of the documentary.

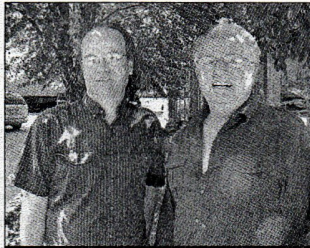
"My own mother is one of the victims, my own mother committed suicide. I've interviewed over 400 victims in preparation for litigation, and this is why I take serious exception, because it is a sacred cause," he says. "It is true, but because he stretches things and he can't be trusted, because he's an apparent pathological liar, now a sacred cause is tainted with his baggage."

Both Craven and Goodwin say they know of no first nations group that stands behind Annett's work, but Annett says he has the support of the majority of first nations groups that "aren't tied into government money." He also says he has been granted permission by residential school survivors to use their testimonies. The issue of not having permission was raised in a bogus manner, he says, during the 1998 tribunal.

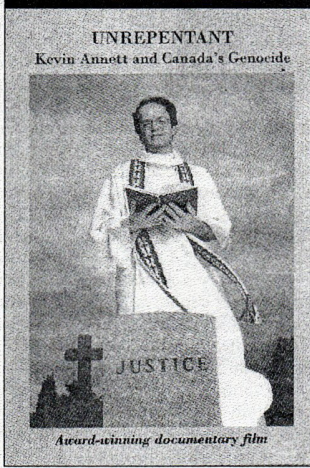
"One native woman on the payroll of the government called a press conference and said I didn't get permission to use the footage," says Annett.

While controversy swirls around the film, it still remains one of the few documentaries in existence dealing with Canada's residential school system—and it's been getting attention. So far, the film has won awards at the New York and Los Angeles Independent Film and Video Festivals and has screened in several venues in Canada, the U.S., and Europe. Lawless says they're having difficulty finding a distributor because of the subject matter, but says he hopes to get it in the running for the Academy Awards. Annett says he wants to eventually see the equivalent of a war crimes tribunal set up, and that films like his are necessary to set that in motion.

"This isn't going to be the definitive film about it, but it's a start and that's what we need," says Annett. "Young aboriginal people need to make their own films about it." M



Kevin Annett (left) and filmmaker Louie Lawless



Unrepentant
With both Kevin Annett and Louie Lawless in attendance
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