

Confessing the Past: Mennonites and the Indian School System

"You will know the truth, and the truth will give you freedom."

-Jesus (Gospel of John 8:28)

Between 1870 and 1996, hundreds of thousands of Indigenous children in Canada and the United States were separated from their families and forced to attend Indian residential, boarding and day schools that were run by government and various Christian churches. The goal of these schools was to assimilate Indigenous children into settler society; as the head of the Department of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott, once put it, "to kill the Indian in the child" and "get rid of the Indian problem." Indigenous languages, histories, religions and cultures were routinely suppressed and condemned. Indigenous children were often beaten and sexually abused. Many ran away from the schools. Many died and their bodies were not given proper burial.

Mennonites (from various conferences and assemblies) were a part of this colonial education system. Though imbued with good intentions, we too were touched by paternalism and racism as we sought to bring a "civilizing gospel" to our host peoples. As one Mennonite leader regrettably said in 1963, "We feel that saving the Indian out of his squalor, ignorance and filth is step one in bringing him to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ."



Teachers and students at the Mennonite Boarding School at Cantonment, in Indian Territory (later known as Oklahoma) established in 1883 by the General Conference. The first Indian Boarding School began in 1879 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Dates

1880-1889: Mennonites begin the Darlington Mennonite Mission (Boarding School) among the Cheyenne and Arapahoe in Indian Territory (later known as Oklahoma).

1883-1901: Cantonment Mennonite Mission (Boarding School) is started in a former U.S. Military Base along the North Canada River among the Cheyenne, north of Canton, in Indian Territory (later known as Oklahoma).

1885-1896: Mennonites run the Indian Industrial School in Halstead Kansas. The school was started with 15 Native children brought from Indian Territory. In 1896 the government discontinued its contract with the Mennonites and the operation was closed.

1939-1945: During World War II, Mennonite Conscientious Objectors were placed as teachers in Manitoba Day and Residential Indian Schools.

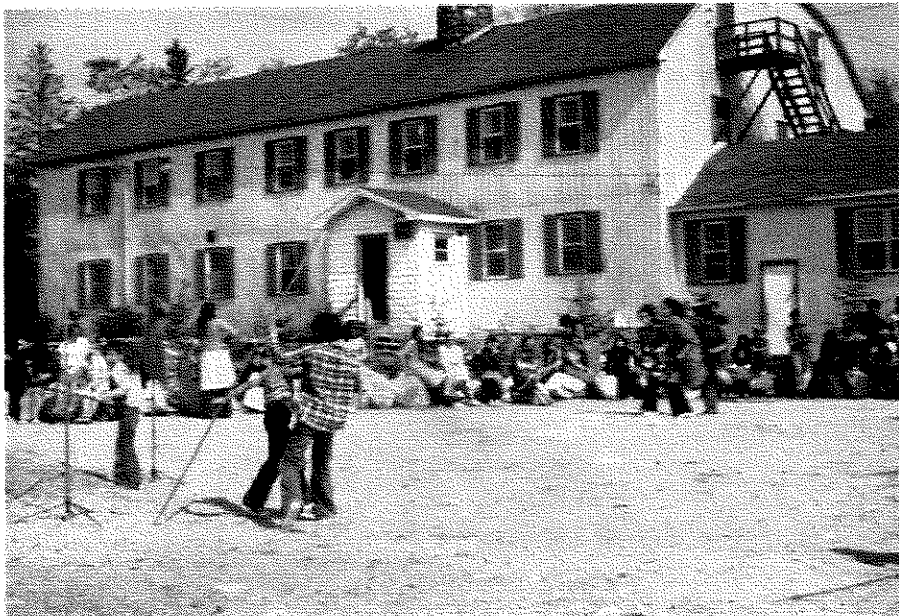
1948-1968: Mennonites operate Day Schools on the Sunchild Cree Reserve and at Fort Vermillion in Alberta, and in Pauingassi and Bloodvein in Manitoba.

1951: Mennonites establish a boarding school on the Hopi Reservation in Arizona.

1955: An official in the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs estimates that between $\frac{1}{3}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ of all teachers in the 'unorganized territories' (land located outside the boundaries of settler governance) are Mennonites.

1962-1989: In Northwestern Ontario three Residential Schools are operated by Mennonites: Poplar Hill, Wahbon Bay Academy/Stirland Lake and Cristal Lake. More than 600 children in 18 First Nation communities living in the far north were affected.

1973-1990: Mennonite volunteers serve at the Montreal Lake/Timber Bay Children's Home in Saskatchewan. The home was for indigenous children whose parents were away on the trap lines; children were legally bound to attend school by the Canadian government.



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A MENNONITE RESIDENTIAL

*Poplar Hill was one of three
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Ontario. The lives of more
than 600 children in 18
First Nation communities were
affected. These schools are
included in the Indian
Residential School
Settlement Agreement.*

CHAPTER FOUR [from *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry*, Herald Press 2013]

Small Steps Toward Reconciliation: How Do We Get There From Here?

By Neil Funk-Unrau

The dominant group in any nation state often resorts to nostalgia, to mental or cultural ellipses, and to general forgetfulness in search of meanings and definitions to serve its own ideological needs of the moment.

—Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett Jr., and Robert E. Hogan¹

Two very different peoples received special dispensation from the Canadian government in the early 1870s and were granted “reserves” of land in the open spaces of what was to become the Province of Manitoba. One group was pushed out of the path of oncoming settlers and onto small, relatively isolated patches of land, out of sight and out of mind. The other was welcomed with open arms and encouraged to find a place where they could sink roots and grow and prosper. Two different stories, two separate histories, mingled at their edges but remained very distinct at their cores; one increasingly marginalized in a rapidly changing society while the other grew and prospered.

I grew up on the northern edges of the “West Reserve” of southern Manitoba, the second area of land granted to the Mennonite newcomers. The West Reserve (west of the Red River) was given to the Mennonites as an additional land grant when the original Mennonite settlers realized how much more fertile this plot was than the original “East Reserve” grant. I grew to adulthood blissfully unaware of the parallel history of the people who were not given more fertile land when their own reserves proved to be inadequate for sustenance.

Only many decades later am I confronted with the dilemma expressed so well by the Mennonite poet, Di Brandt, who grew up in the same West Reserve:

It is impossible for me to write the land. This land that I love, this wide, wide prairie, this horizon, this sky, this great blue overhead, big enough to contain every dream, every longing. . . . How I loved you, how I love you, how you keep me alive. This stolen land, Metis land, Cree land, buffalo land. When did I first understand this, the dark underside of property, colonization, ownership, the shady



Quewich with his three children at the Qu'appelle Residential School, c.1900

¹ As quoted in Susan Dion, *Braiding Our Histories: Learning from Aboriginal People's Experiences and Perspectives* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 3.

dealings that brought us [Mennonites] here, to this earthly paradise?²

Today, we hear the call to reconcile across the wide gulf between these parallel histories. But is authentic dialogue and reconciliation even possible across this indigenous-settler divide? Can the settlers ever pierce the veils of nostalgia and forgetfulness to truly understand the perspective of those without our privileges? Can Indigenous peoples, with the strength of their knowledges, laws, and traditions, move past the societal, communal, and individual barriers they face to engage deeply with those who have all the advantages (certainly all the economic advantages)? And, if this is even possible, how can we get across the gap from here? This article represents my attempt to struggle with these questions and my belief in the importance of continuing this difficult journey, despite all obstacles.

Uncovering harsh truths

What does it mean to cross power imbalances and social divides to move toward reconciliation? One part of the answer lies in the capacity and willingness to hear and understand uncomfortable and unsettling truths. In the last two decades, Mennonite and other faith communities across Canada have begun to explore this concept and this practice. Slowly and tentatively, a dialogue is beginning. Slowly but surely, those who spent too much time and energy talking are learning to listen, while those who have been silenced too long are beginning to speak.

We are beginning to learn, to listen, and to hear the uncomfortable stories of past relations as we become more aware of the harm committed through the government- and church-run Indigenous residential schools. One of the most destructive expressions of the dominance of settler society over Indigenous society was the coercive imposition of an educational system designed to isolate Indigenous youth from their families, communities, and lifestyles in order to change them into exemplary Christian-Canadian citizens.³ By isolating the children from their families, communities, and cultures, the authorities of the day were also able to more easily isolate the next generations from the lands and resources cherished by their ancestors.

This imposed educational system—with devastating parallels in the United States and Australia—began with the development of church-run residential and day schools as early as the mid-1600s. After 1880, the

Canadian government took control of Aboriginal schooling and began a concentrated effort to get Aboriginal children into government-sponsored residential facilities. At the height of the residential school system, the Canadian government funded approximately eighty institutions; all run through the day-to-day administration of church agencies (primarily Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian, although a few Mennonite-run schools were also involved). Most of these schools continued to operate until the 1950s or later, with the last ones closing in the 1990s.⁴

The impact of the Indigenous residential school system extends far beyond the lives of the individual survivors. Many of these survivors returned home years later, completely alienated from their home communities and from the outside world, unprepared to thrive in either setting. Some communities lost entire generations to these schools—generations unable to pass on the ideals, the parenting skills, and the survival skills of their ancestors. The loss of these generations has had a profound impact through the decades, an impact that has been passed on from residential school survivors to their children, their grandchildren, and to their wider community networks. It exhibits itself through increased alcoholism, drug dependency, violence, suicide, and various patterns of abuse and family dysfunction.

One significant response to this devastating history, based upon the conviction that reconciliation is only possible through the courage to speak and to hear the truth about the pain and suffering, has been the creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁵ Since 2010, commissioners have crossed the country, gathering statements from residential school survivors and staff at large national events and smaller community gatherings, collecting documentation and doing research into this history, and presenting these truths through public conferences, presentations, and publications. For those who choose to tell their stories, this act of speaking out can become a first step toward healing. For those who hear these stories, many for the first time, the act of hearing can become the first step toward reconciliation.

However, hearing and understanding new truths can only take us part of the way. The stories of the individual survivors and their communities must be seen as part of a larger story of colonialism and dispossession, a story that began before the schools were established and still continues today in more subtle forms. This struggle to connect

² Di Brandt, *So this is the world & here I am in it* (Edmonton: NewWest Press, 2007), 1–2.

³ For a more comprehensive summary of the history of Indigenous residential schools, see J. R. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), and J. S. Millroy, "A National Crime": *The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999).

⁴ It should be noted that tens of thousands of Indigenous children were also forced to attend Indian Day Schools. Though children could go home to their families each school day, they suffered similar forms of cultural genocide and physical/sexual/spiritual abuse in the classroom as the children in residential schools.

⁵ One common misperception is that the TRC is a government commission. It is not. The commission is an independent body financed from the legal settlement negotiated by survivors, mainline churches, and the government.

individual and communal hardships with the evils of a system of oppression was also evident in the work of what may be the most famous of all truth and reconciliation commissions, the commission that facilitated the transformation of South Africa from an apartheid state into a more democratic and open society. In the midst of the many stories and testimonies of the abuses of apartheid, commissioners struggled with the dilemma of how to take that step from truth about individual injustices to societal reconciliation.

A widely read cartoon of that time portrays the commissioners and their staff at the edge of a deep chasm, beside a sign-post labeled "TRUTH," clustered around a road map. On the other side of the chasm is another sign-post, labeled "RECONCILIATION." The unanswered question in the caption of the cartoon remains with us still: "How do we get there from here?"

Acknowledgement and responsibility

We cannot simply hear the harsh truths and then walk away from them untouched. Once received, the stories of past disposessions and impositions must be acknowledged and accepted as part of the settlers' story, as well as the story of the colonized. One public and at times ritualized way of doing this is through some sort of public expression of remorse and apology, a process that has become a widely accepted way of responding to historic wrongs and attempting to re-negotiate unjust social relations.

Such a public apology can represent a potential turning point in the relationship between Indigenous and settler societies, but the long-term impact of this attempted re-negotiation of relations is dependent on the extent to which the apology succeeds in fulfilling certain tasks. First, an apology acknowledges a particular situation as morally and politically wrong and unjust. Second, the event is named in terms that clearly indicate the apologizer's remorse and acceptance of responsibility for the damage done. Third, while naming the wrongdoing and taking responsibility for it, the apologizer offers assurance that the wrongdoing will not be repeated by expressing a commitment to changed behavior. Fourth, the apology may or may not offer some form of reparation or compensation.

In this context, a public apology provides the opportunity to re-tell and acknowledge the story of past disposessions to show that we as settlers can begin to understand the impact of historic losses. Through the public expression of remorse and acceptance of responsibility for the wrongdoing, the apology can affirm a mutually acceptable moral norm to show that this was wrong and must not be allowed to happen again. Then, the offering of some form of mutually acceptable amends through a process of restitution and reparation could also serve as a negotiated symbolic affirmation of the new understanding.

As general public awareness about the damage done by the residential school system and by the legacy of European colonialism grew, various faith communities and other public institutions responded with such statements of remorse and apology. Perhaps the best-known example of a Canadian faith-based apology for the church's role in the legacy of colonialism is the apology offered by the United Church of Canada (UCC) in 1986, but this was only one of a number of similar responses.⁶ In 1992, the Mennonite Central Committee acknowledged the 500 years since the arrival of Christopher Columbus with a statement asking "First Peoples" for forgiveness for centuries of conquest and domination.

As the silence about residential school abuses was broken and survivors began to demand compensation and justice, other churches and non-faith public institutions added their words of remorse and apology for these specific institutions. Among others, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a Catholic order, presented their apology in 1992; the Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada followed suit in 1993; and the Presbyterian Church of Canada issued their own statement of remorse in 1994. The Moderator of the UCC also presented another "Statement of Repentance" in 1997, drawing attention to their own specific role in the life and work of residential schools.⁷

All of these statements stand as more or less successful attempts. The words used and the ways in which these words were delivered to acknowledge the wrongs committed indicate remorse for the damage done and commit to building a new relationship with Indigenous society. But how much meaning can we really attach to these good words? While this form of public declaration can create the space for mutual vulnerability and reconciliation, it can also be distorted and misused, especially if their intent is to present a favorable self-image, and nothing more. In the words of one residential school survivor speaking on a reconciliation panel in the fall of 2011, "An apology can be a very good thing—for the apologizer. It really does nothing for me!"

The Canadian government's apology to Indigenous residential school survivors, presented by Prime Minister Stephen Harper on June 11, 2008, provides a classic example of a statement that says all the right things on the surface but ultimately falls short due to the lack of concrete action designed to effect reconciliation with Indigenous communities. Harper's

⁶ The story of the development and delivery of this statement is told in Stan McKay and Janet Silman, "A First Nations Movement in a Canadian Church," in *The Reconciliation of Peoples: Challenge to the Churches*, eds. Gregory Baum and Harold Wells, (New York: Orbis, 1997), 172–83.

⁷ For a more complete discussion of the series of Canadian church apologies to Indigenous peoples, see Neil Funk-Unrau, "The Re-Negotiation of Social Relations Through Public Apologies to Canadian Aboriginal Peoples," *Research in Social Movements, Conflict and Change* 29 (2008): 1–19.

willingness to acknowledge and rectify the harms done through the residential school system represented an important step—the clearest federal affirmation of a painful history as the victims of that history have come to understand it.

However, the statement fell short of fully acknowledging the colonial history behind the residential school legacy by locating the oppression of Canadian Indigenous peoples as an event in the past, separate from the ongoing context of colonial violence and dispossession. Harper's statement attempted to articulate a clear, distinct break between the assimilationist policies of the past and the responses of the enlightened government of our time, thereby covering up the underlying, hidden connection between the past and the present.⁸ One year later, at the Pittsburgh G20, Harper took a further step backward when he pronounced that Canada, unlike the world's other great powers, had "no history of colonialism."⁹

The portrayal of contemporary Indigenous people in the apology is also limited by its portrayal of their culture as historically lost and disconnected. Nothing is said about Indigenous claims to land and resources, or to some form of Indigenous nationhood within (or alongside) the Canadian nation-state. Nothing is said about the continued situation of social and economic disparity, which, though partially caused and exacerbated by the residential school system, still exists despite the repudiation of this system. In the end, the statement paints a more benevolent picture of a Canadian state remorseful over its role in the loss of Indigenous culture, but also of a state that asserts control over a subordinate Indigenous population and over Indigenous lands, refusing to negotiate any more equal sharing of natural and economic resources and political power.

Reconciliation—how do we get there from here?

Every journey begins with a first few steps, but it only becomes a significant journey if those steps move in the right direction. This "right direction" may be difficult to determine when confronted with the term, widely used in public discourse today, "reconciliation." "Reconciliation" has been popularized and romanticized as the "happily ever after" ending of every dispute, and the almost painless answer to every interpersonal or

social conflict. In the end, we are still confronted with the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the ideal and the real, between the heartfelt words and the meaningful action. So, how do we really get there from here? Reconciliation is not the deliberate effort to forget the past, to let it all go and move on. Reconciliation is not simply a demand for an apology or an offer of forgiveness, as if a few well-chosen words can now negate a history of injustice. Reconciliation is a once-and-for-all settlement of accounts, as if each iota of pain and suffering can be added up and totaled to balance the ledger of loss and compensation.

It is much easier to visualize what reconciliation is not than what it is, but we can begin to visualize the first few steps in the right direction. These first few steps must include the courage to hear the stories and the painful histories that undergird current settler-Indigenous relations. These first few steps can include statements of remorse and acknowledgement, statements that create a space for new relations to arise. But this is still only the beginning of a new journey, and no one can know where and how we will continue to move forward as we seek to bring together our parallel histories to create a new and more enriching combined story.

So what would this combined story of reconciliation look like? Indigenous and Mennonite-Christian traditions all include rich images of living in peace and harmony with respect for all peoples and all things. I hesitate to lay out a detailed vision, however, because ultimately such a vision must be a mutual one, which arises out of a mutual commitment to deep dialogue and the renunciation of colonial barriers and privileges that we now take for granted. Before we can lose ourselves in some inspirational vision of two different peoples living together as sisters and brothers, each sharing from their unique gifts and abundance and each receiving with gratitude the gifts shared with them, we will need to commit ourselves to those first few steps.

As a small child, I loved the open spaces of the southern Manitoba Red River floodplain, the room to run and the clear, fresh air. As a more mature adult whose vision is blocked by city skylines and lungs filled with the smells of the city, I walk more slowly now. But I treasure the small steps that brought me closer to those who cherished this land before the settlers came. For me, these small steps included the opportunity to visit and briefly live within a few of the semi-isolated Indigenous communities of northern Manitoba. More recently, these steps led me to an inner-city university setting with ample opportunity to meet and get to know the Indigenous students and academics who congregate there. May these small steps continue to push me forward into closer and deeper dialogue as we acknowledge the painful past, take responsibility for our part in it, and together seek to discern the unknown shape of reconciliation in this, our time and place.

⁸ An excellent critique of the federal apology is found in Matthew Dorrell, "From Reconciliation to Reconciling: Reading 'We Now Recognize' in the Government of Canada's 2008 Residential Schools Apology," *English Studies in Canada* 35:1 (2009): 27–45.

⁹ The refusal to acknowledge the impact of colonialism within the apology statement is also noted in Pauline Wakeham, "Reconciling 'Error': Managing Indigenous Resistance in the Age of Apology," *American Indian Quarterly* 36:1 (2012): 1–33.

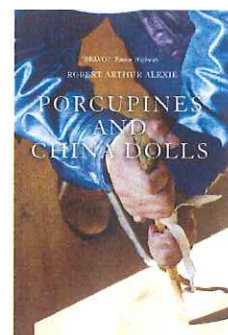
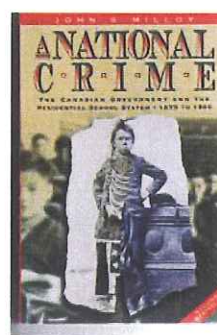
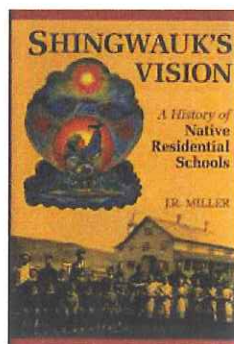
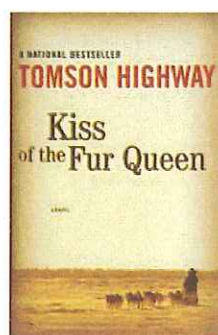
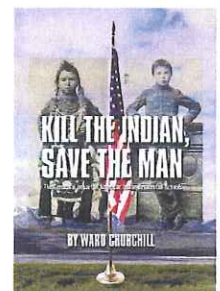
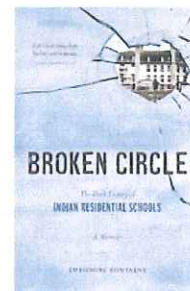
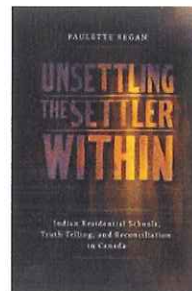
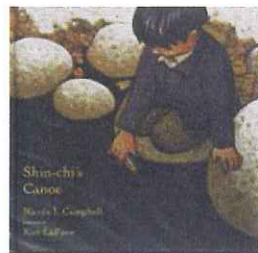
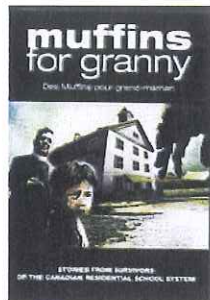
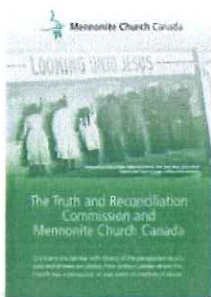
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Residential & Day School Reflections

from

my friends  **Intotemak**

Disturbed by what I have heard

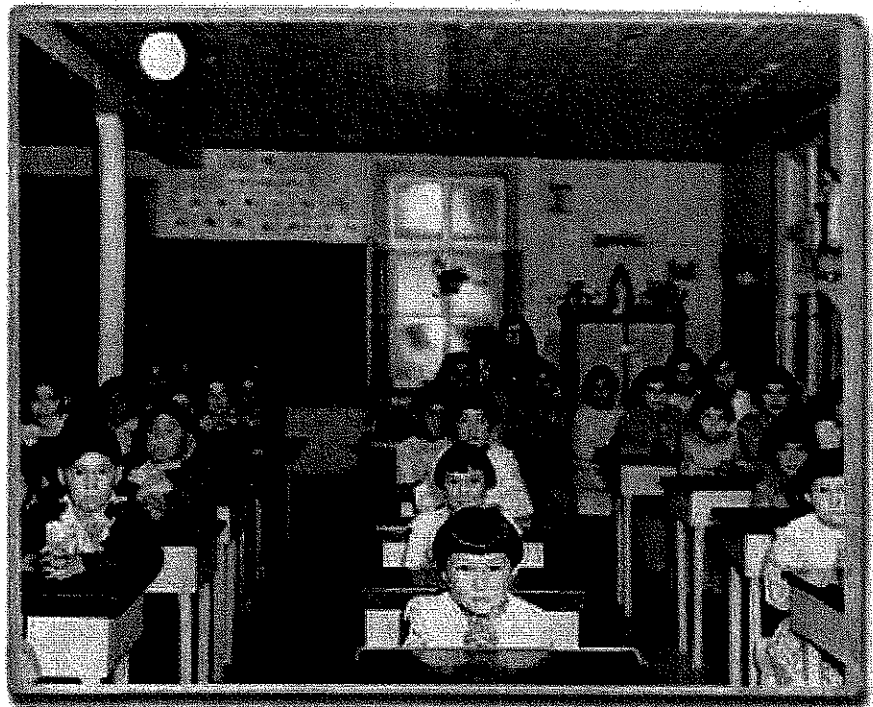
It was difficult to listen to the impact statements I heard at a recent Truth and Reconciliation event in Toronto ("The Meeting Place," May 31-June 2). To learn of such painful abuse endured by children at residential schools is disturbing – especially when those behaving abusively were representing the church.

One set of impact statements I heard in Toronto have deeply penetrated me. A sister and brother took the stand together to tell their story. The older sister detailed how life was good before they were taken to the residential schools. As most children they had no idea what was going on and that their childhood was being stolen from them. She described how she was routinely punished for waving to her younger brother. She was not allowed to even acknowledge her little brother. Despite the beatings she felt responsible for him.

After multiple punishments she was awakened one night at 11:00 p.m. and told to quickly accompany the teacher because her little brother was ill and needed help. She responded immediately but was led into a room and blindfolded. Instead of being taken to her brother, she was sexually assaulted by the teacher. She was raped once every month by him. As the older sister told her story her haunting eyes gazed across the room. Her brother sat beside her wearing dark sunglasses and a baseball cap.

"Eventually I started feeling something grow in my stomach," she explained. "So once again one night at 11:00 p.m., they came and took me to the hospital and removed the baby." She gazed the room, eyes filled with pain, "they told me the baby was dead, but I think she is alive. Sometimes I hear her cry."

The younger brother told his story, with equally disturbing detail. He explained how another little boy had become sick with a high fever. Yet at



Aboriginal children in class at the Roman Catholic Indian Residential School, Ford George, Quebec, 1939.

I choked on my emotions. What a contrast of brutal cruelty and gentle tenderness. I begged God for forgiveness. I felt ashamed of those who misrepresent God's love.

lunch time, the sickly boy was still forced by a teacher to eat. The little boy vomited into his soup bowl and onto the floor. The teacher came over and repeatedly slapped him, making him wipe up the mess on the floor. Then as she left the room she grabbed the boy and said; "And you better finish eating everything in your bowl!"

The brother paused and said; "You know you grow close to the other children in the school. You knew they were not to blame. We were all suffering the same abuse." Then from underneath his baseball cap and behind dark glasses, he explained how the boys silently passed the bowl among themselves and each took a spoonful until the bowl was emptied.

I choked on my emotions. What a contrast of brutal cruelty and gentle tenderness. I begged God for forgive-

ness. I felt ashamed of those who misrepresent God's love.

In her closing summary, Commissioner Marie Wilson said; "We have heard some harsh truth. We have shared what we have shared. We have heard what we have heard. This day should mark us all. We can never back away from this honesty."

*Willard Metzger,
Executive Director
Mennonite Church Canada*



Connecting the Colonial Dots: The TRC and Indian Residential Schools

I wanted to shout "Amen!" when George Erasmus said what he said. On the second day of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's International Forum, held in Vancouver on March 1 - 3, 2011 - a forum exploring how a future National Research Centre might tell the devastating account(s) of Canada's Residential Schools - the former national chief of the Assembly of First Nations put forth this much-needed word:

"The story of the Indian Residential School (IRS) System is not restricted only to the ... schools themselves." The IRS story "must be connected to the greater narrative of Canadian colonialism ... to the dispossession of lands, disease, broken treaties, unjust laws ... fetal alcohol syndrome, adoption, and child welfare." [This quote is what I wrote down in my notebook while listening to Mr. Erasmus. I trust it is "near" word for word.]

Erasmus' word is not an easy one, especially for us non-natives who are deeply influenced by the myth that Canada is, and has always been, a peacemaking nation. Yet his call to connect the IRS story to the broader Canadian story of colonialism is a true and ultimately life-giving word that we must heed. Many of us who are aware of residential schools - the latest stats suggest that it's around 50% of Canadians - acknowledge that these institutions were birthed by paternalistic ideologies, and that they've wreaked profound havoc on Indigenous lives. But despite this (quite recent) recognition, I'm not convinced that most of us have a clear idea as to how this horrific piece of history is just one part of that larger colonial story and colonial system ... a system that has comprehensively assaulted Native communities, while privileging settler society, both past and present.

A prime example of such un-awareness (perhaps willful in this case -- I say "willful" since Canada was refusing to accept the UN's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at this time, only to endorse a version with severe qualifications in 2010) is the

Truth and Reconciliation Commission: National Events Schedule

[all dates subject to change, due to facility scheduling]

June 28 - July 1, 2011	Inuvik, NWT	May 8 - 11, 2013	Edmonton, AB.
November 15 - 19, 2011	Halifax, NS	July 31 - August 3, 2013	Saskatoon, SK
March 13 - 17, 2012	Vancouver, BC	June 28 - July 1, 2014	Ottawa, ON
June 20 - 23, 2012	Montreal, QC		

apology that Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Federal Government gave back in June 2008. The apology openly acknowledges that the schools were part of a state-sponsored agenda of assimilation. It explicitly asserts that this attempt to "kill the Indian, but save the child" wrought severe harm - loss of language, religion, culture, and so on - that continues to reverberate sickness and sorrow through the generations. It then concludes that there is no longer any place in Canadian society for the attitudes which inspired such a disastrous project, and that the government - along with mainstream Canada - is now committed to joining the Indigenous people on their walk toward restoration.

On first read, this is a wonderful apology, imbued with a spirit of repentance. It openly names many of the evils of the IRS system, it even names the system itself as misguided, and such confession has the potential to bring about a measure of healing and respect. But the apology doesn't go far enough. It doesn't do what Erasmus and other TRC advocates long for and demand: to fit this genocidal school experiment within the larger, meta-story of Canada's colonial oppression of the Indigenous.

To use an analogy, it's kind of like a doctor naming one symptom of sickness in the body ... a very severe symptom, yet missing (or ignoring!) lots of other symptoms, and most importantly, failing to diagnose the deadly disease causing all of this chaos. So while the government rightly names the IRS system as a sickness in need of healing, other foundational and related injustices - like the massive dispossession of land, which was facilitated by the presence of residential

schools, especially in treaty-less British Columbia, which had an inordinate amount of schools - are passed over in utter silence.

The government has simply failed to connect the colonial dots in Canada's unjust relationship with the Indigenous. And since the apology fails to connect these critical dots - a failure that's repeated in much other IRS talk - an honest historical picture is not articulated. Without connecting this significant part of Canada's shady history to the greater colonial whole, we're missing some Truth for Reconciliation, and it's difficult to see how the apology is capable of fostering the future of wholeness that it so eloquently proclaims. Moreover, it lets most Canadians off the hook of responsibility.

My sense is that a good chunk of Canadians are willing to affirm the government's apology, but they still remain largely in the dark as to what it means - if anything - for them: "Yeah, that's really too bad what happened to those Native people, way back then." That's it. We "colonizers" are ignorant (generally speaking) as to any real links between those schools and our present lives (unless we have Native friends ... and regrettably, hardly any of us do).

But it does connect to our present, in urgent, real-life ways. And we can all help each other see such concrete connections if more of us seek to tell the IRS story in ways that push it beyond "just a few bad apples in a well-intended school system" ... or "just a bad school system in a well-meaning, but paternalistic society" ... and into the facts of the matter - "a racist school system that was situated within a colonizing state power." That's where the IRS belongs.

Back in August 1889, in the thick of those residential school days, there was a superintendent of the Methodist Church by the name of Alex Sutherland who didn't hesitate to name the link between missionary education and Canada's broader colonial agenda of a "land without a [Native] people." With brazen Euro-centric arrogance, he told his colleagues who were working with the Indigenous in Western Canada to "Make the savage a Christian and he will settle peacefully on reserves. Teach him the scriptures and he will give up his claim to the land that we require" (INAC RG 10 Series R 7733).

Now I'm sure that the vast majority of Christian workers involved in missions and the IRS were not after land. Their hearts' desire was simply to civilize the 'savages' into the salvation of Jesus Christ. And yes, many of them truly loved their Native neighbours, and some of them even saw their Aboriginal neighbours as equals, with original and abiding rights to the land (Amen!). That doesn't, however, negate the fact that the schools and the missionaries were still used by the government as one means among many to accomplish its overall colonialist agenda of conquest – assimilating the Indians and "inheriting" their land.

If Canadians and Christian communities living on this part of Turtle Island want to talk "reconciliation" – such a huge and too easily abused word – we have got to connect the dots. Until our Indigenous sisters and brothers are joined by a significant number of settlers who courageously situate the IRS story within our nation's dominant colonial narrative, talk of reconciliation is premature and somewhat abusive in itself.

Yet, if we do connect the dots, what hope, and what promise! On that day, Native communities struggling to live lives of resistance against colonial governments and corporate interests will drum the song of liberation! And maybe then, on that day, Creator will utter that blessed benediction on all God's children -- "the truth has set you free." May that day come soon! Until then, let's do our part and pursue that truth.

Steve Heinrichs, Maple Ridge, BC



TRC Commissioners & representatives of those bodies that gave expressions of reconciliation, including Mennonites.

Mennonites offer Expression of Reconciliation to Residential School Survivors

This past June, at the Saskatoon Truth and Reconciliation Commission, MCC Saskatchewan and Mennonite Church Saskatchewan offered up an expression of reconciliation, which they put into the bentwood box. The box holds the confessions and commitments that various bodies are making towards more peaceable indigenous-settler relations.

We are humbled to be invited to this circle. We want to acknowledge that we are meeting on Treaty 6 Territory.

We watched with reverence the elders at the lighting of the Sacred Fire and walked behind the survivors on their lonely procession to the opening ceremony. We heard courageous and gracious words from speakers and we read the panels giving the history of the residential school movement from its beginning to end.

We observed as people lined up to receive their Annuity Payment from the Crown – a reminder that we are, indeed, all Treaty people.

And we have heard some of your life stories. We've added our tears to the countless that have already fallen. We acknowledge that there was – and is – much hurt and much suffering.

Many people from the Mennonite community have come to this gathering to volunteer, to listen, to learn. We are on a path leading us to greater understanding.

We regret our part in an assimilation practice that took away language use and cultural practice, separating child from parent and people from their culture.

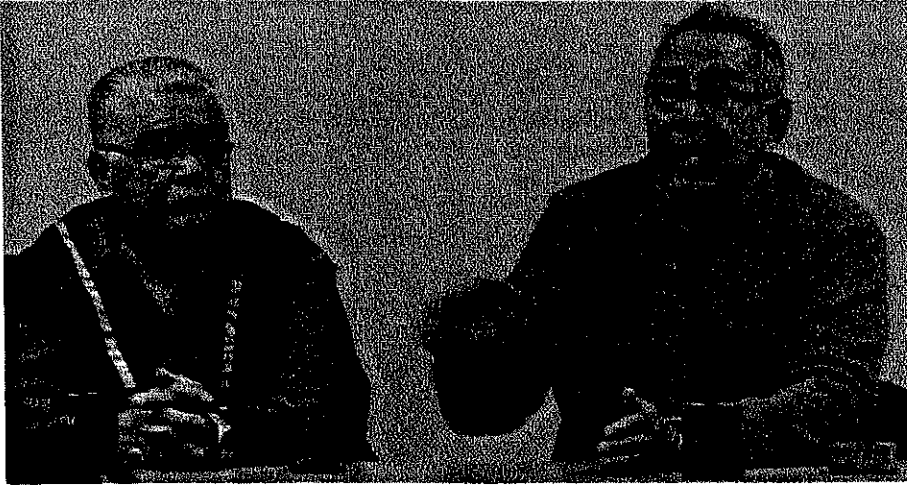
We repent of our participation in the destructive acts of the dominant society.

We thank you for your welcome to walk this path together as we move to a healthier and more just tomorrow.

We commit ourselves to walk with you – listening, learning and walking alongside.

Thank you.

Claire Ewert Fischer
Executive Director, MCC Saskatchewan



Mennonite Church Explores Involvement in Indian Day Schools

On November 26, staff and members of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church Manitoba met with leaders of Spirit Wind – a volunteer indigenous advocacy organization established in 1986 – to learn of the issues surrounding Day Scholars in the Indigenous Community.

Day Scholars are Indigenous children who attended (often by force) schools that were funded and run by the Canadian government and a variety of Christian denominations. These children endured many of the same abuses that survivors of the residential school system suffered; the main difference being that Day Scholars were able to return home at the end of each school day. Like their residential school sisters and brothers, they still suffered the harsh assimilationist policies of Canada's Department of Indian

Affairs which sought to eliminate native language and culture. In the infamous words of Duncan Campbell Scott, former head of the DIA, the goal was "to kill the Indian in the child." Day Scholars also suffered tremendous spiritual, sexual, physical and emotional abuses.

Ray Mason and Garry McLean – president and vice-president of Spirit Wind – along with Irwin Kehler – publisher of Weetamah newspaper – spent over two hours powerfully describing the history and impact of residential and day schools. They also explained how Spirit Wind is actively pursuing a class action law suit on behalf of day school survivors. Past class action law suits led to an out of court settlement in 2006 between the government, the implicated churches, the Assembly of First Nations and the Inuit. This settlement recognized the suffering of residential school survivors, offered compensation to victims, and birthed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools. Yet a majority of survivors were left out of the settlement – those residential survivors whose schools did not make the settlement list, and more than a hundred and fifty thousand day school survivors. One of the reasons for this exclusion is that many school buildings were not owned by the government; classes were held in

church buildings and basements.

In order to pursue justice and fair compensation on behalf of day scholars, Spirit Wind has initiated a new class action law suit. This suit, filed in 2009, has over 11 000 signatories, but requires \$300,000 in order to be certified. "The government can ignore it," said Mason, "until it is certified."

Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church Manitoba have a long history of connecting with Indigenous communities dating back to the 1930's. During World War II some Conscientious Objectors were placed in residential and day schools as principles, teachers and support staff. They also ran day schools in Pauingassi and Bloodvein in the 50's and 60's. Two former teachers in these schools were present at this meeting.

Some of the staff partaking in this conversation were very familiar with these issues as they had participated in a Day School Conference, hosted by Spirit Wind, this past May. For others this was new information. Though most in attendance had some familiarity with the Indian Residential School Survivors Settlement and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, many had not been aware of their connections (or lack thereof) with this matter of day schools. Some asked questions of clarification and others asked questions of how we can work together for justice.

Mason, McLean and Kehler thanked the group for entering into this dialogue, and encouraged Mennonites to support their efforts for healing and reparations. "Come and join us," said McLean. "What [the day scholars] need is help to certify this class action. "What would happen, Kehler asked, "if Mennonites helped?"

(Note: As registered charities, congregations and Church bodies cannot receive or grant money to organizations that are not charities. As of this writing, Spirit Wind is in the process of seeking charitable status).

*Ken Warkentin, Executive Director
Mennonite Church Manitoba*

