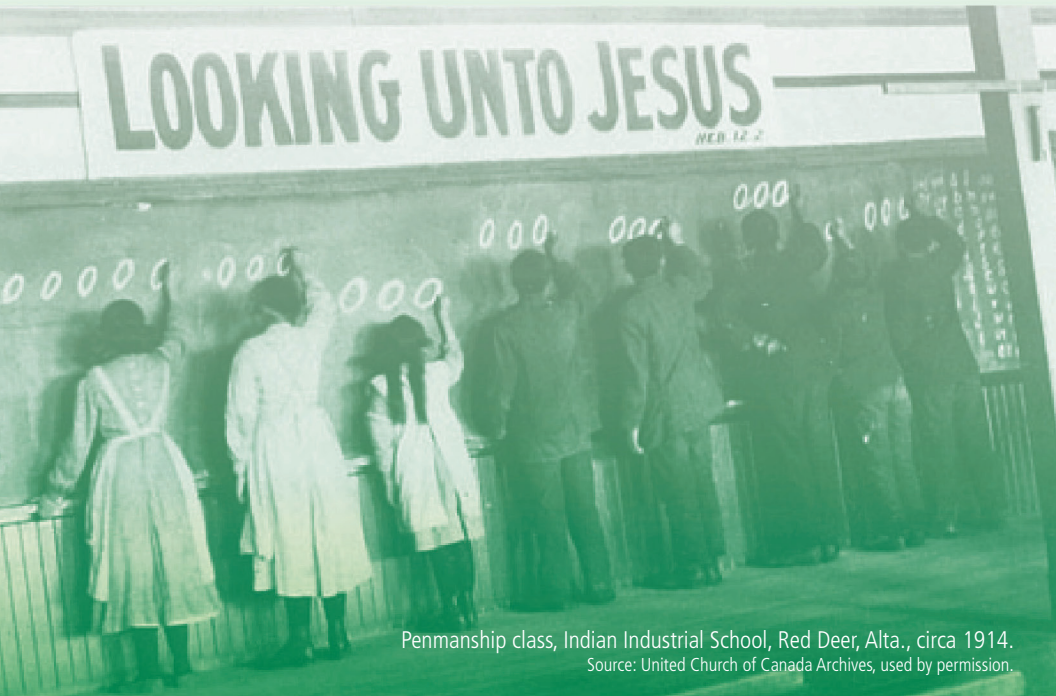




Mennonite Church Canada



Penmanship class, Indian Industrial School, Red Deer, Alta., circa 1914.
Source: United Church of Canada Archives, used by permission.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Mennonite Church Canada

Christians are familiar with stories of the persecuted church. Less well known are stories from across Canada where the church was a persecutor, or was silent on matters of abuse.

What is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

"This Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is about creating new relationships with the dominant society so that we are truly respected. This is not just about survivors sharing their pain. It's about mainstream Canadians changing their ways." –a Residential School survivor (Mi'kmaq)

Between 1870 and 1996, more than 150,000 indigenous children were separated from their families and communities and forced to attend Indian residential schools that were funded by the government and run by various Christian churches. The goal of these schools was to assimilate indigenous children into settler society, or, as the infamous 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 suppressed and routinely condemned. Indigenous children were often beaten and sexually abused. Many children died and their bodies were not given proper burial.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is an independent body – not a government commission – that was formed as a result of a class action lawsuit and subsequent court-approved Indian Residential Schools (IRS) Settlement Agreement. It was negotiated between legal counsel for former students, legal counsel for the implicated churches, the government of Canada, the Assembly of First Nations and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami.

The TRC of Canada was formed in 2008. The TRC web site states its purpose as a "sincere indication and acknowledgement of the injustices and harms experienced by Aboriginal people and the need for continued healing...a profound commitment to establishing new relationships embedded in mutual recognition and respect that will forge a brighter future." Among its goals are to acknowledge Residential School experiences, impacts and consequences; and to promote awareness and public education of Canadians about the IRS system and legacy. Through a storytelling process, the TRC hopes to change how Canadians understand this part of their history and their relationships with host peoples.

"Reconciliation is an ongoing individual and collective process, and will require commitment from all those affected, including former IRS students, their families, communities, religious entities, former school employees, government and the people of Canada. Reconciliation may occur between any of the above groups."

So far, the TRC has held four national events in Winnipeg, Inuvik, Halifax and Saskatoon, respectively. Four more will be held in the next three years in British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec and Ontario. All these events are open to the public.

For more information see www.trc.ca.

Why is the TRC important to Mennonite Church Canada Congregations?

*"For the church in Canada to have any integrity,
it must work to heal its relationships with host people and host land."*

—Willard Metzger, Executive Director, Mennonite Church Canada



Mennonites form a prayer circle at the Old Sun Campus – a former residential school in Alberta (Assembly, 2010).

Mennonite Church Canada has publicly promised to walk in solidarity with our host peoples:

- In 2007, leaders of Mennonite Church Canada boldly affirmed and signed on to the KAIROS Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives document, called A New Covenant. This pledge commits us to "the vision of a new relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Peoples, based on sharing, respect and the recognition of rights and responsibilities."
- In 2010 at its Assembly in Calgary, Mennonite Church Canada passed a resolution acknowledging and confessing our complicity in the failing of the Christian church and its role in the IRS abuse and in our denial of culture of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. We also committed as congregations and individuals to "seek renewed opportunities to work with Aboriginal people of Canada, opening our hearts, minds and ears to engage the pain resulting from the legacy of the Residential Schools..."

Mennonite theologian Ched Myers states: "It would be easy for us as people of relative privilege to ignore the TRC and the call of the indigenous to engage this colonial story. . . to simply lament what happened in the past to poor Native peoples, and finally to dismiss it as 'not our issue.' But Jesus specifically asks us to 'take and eat' the work of remembering.. . to be with the very ones who have been dismembered. It's a lot to stomach. But this is what communion requires."

The TRC is a kairos moment: How will we respond?

Many of us in Mennonite Church Canada came to this land as part of refugee families. As refugees we experienced loss and persecution, sometimes because of our identity and/or religious practices. We are thankful to God for the freedom to continue many of our cultural and language practices, for opportunities we enjoy and for the land we share in Canada. Unfortunately, many of us are unaware of the promises made to and the reality experienced by our indigenous sisters and brothers of this land. Much of this suffering was based on having a different identity and/or religious practices. The IRS system operated for seven generations, with some families experiencing more than 125 years of collective schooling in this system, seriously impacting their identity, family, language, culture and well-being. Today, the Indigenous are the most oppressed community in Canada.

As a family of congregations that shares a vision “that God’s healing and hope flow through us to the world” it is essential for us to know the painful truth of our shared history on this land. It is important that we respond to this truth in a commitment to reconciliation. And it is vital that we cultivate personal and congregational relationships with indigenous persons and communities that can share in this common commitment.

Canada’s TRC is coming to our neighbourhoods, both in the form of large national events as well as smaller regional events. These offer excellent opportunities to hear and experience the truth as well as the opportunity to connect with others who are on the journey towards reconciliation. Our active participation in these gatherings will only enrich us as persons and congregations, and will also serve to help us to be the church with a “true evangelical faith,” one that does not lie dormant, but becomes all things to all people.

What an opportunity for a church that preaches peace and reconciliation!



We are tied to one another

The health of our Mennonite family is deeply connected to the health of the Indigenous peoples on whose land we live. The apostle Paul, one of our ancient early church elders said, “When one part of the body rejoices, the rest rejoice too; but when one part of the body suffers, the rest suffer too” (1 Corinthians 12:26).

The rest of the body suffers, when it sees one part crying out for healing and justice. And the rest of the body suffers when it is wholly unaware of what has happened to that other part. And we all will suffer and lose strength and wholeness, for in this body – native and non-native, you and I – we are all bound together in an inextricable web of mutuality. Martin Luther King Jr.’s words focus it this way: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Mennonites* were part of the “Indian school system”



Healing relationships with Canada’s indigenous people is not just an issue for other churches. It is also a broader Mennonite issue.

Mennonites were both actively and passively, officially and informally, involved in a system imbued with good intentions but touched deeply by paternalism and racism. 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.” The system included residential schools, day schools and boarding homes.**

Photos, top left: Justice Murray Sinclair addresses the audience at a 2010 Truth and Reconciliation event in Winnipeg. Bottom & right: Mennonites have a long history of working with Indigenous children via camp programs. – Mennonite Church Canada photos

*In the context of this document, “Mennonites” describes the broad Mennonite church community rather than a specific Mennonite assembly or conference.

** Day schools and boarding homes have not been included in the TRC settlement, though there is a movement to include such in future reparative processes. Métis schools have also not been part of the TRC settlement.

Mennonites and the School System

Mennonites were latecomers, but we too were a part of the “Indian School system” that included residential schools, day schools and boarding homes.

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

1950s and 60s: Mennonites were running ‘Indian’ schools and homes in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario.

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

1955: the Department of Indian Affairs estimates that between $\frac{1}{3}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ of all teachers in the ‘unorganized territories’*** are Mennonites.



Poplar Hill residential school, Northwestern Ontario.

1962 – 1989: In Northwestern Ontario three Residential Schools are operated by Mennonites: Poplar Hill, Wahbon Bay Academy/Stirland Lake and Cristal Lake. During this time, the lives of more than 600 children in 18 First Nation communities living in the far north were affected. These schools are now part of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement.

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.

*** “Unorganized territories” refer to land within the Province that was/is located outside the boundaries of any present local governing bodies.

What is Mennonite Church Canada doing?

- Maintaining a strong commitment to Indigenous Relations (formerly Native Ministry) through a newly renamed program.
- Providing education and resources to congregations.
- Working with congregations, area churches, Anabaptist and indigenous partners on local relationships and initiatives.
- Sharing stories of reconciling relationships and dreaming of ways to involve more people and congregations.

Get involved



- Learn more online www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/899
- Read the top 12 TRC Resources www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1735
- Subscribe to Intotemak, a newsletter for those learning to walk in solidarity www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/66.
- Attend a National or Regional TRC event:
Winnipeg, MB - June, 2010
Inuvik, NT - June 28 to July 1, 2011
Atlantic National Event, October 26 - 29, 2011
Saskatoon, SK - June 21 - 24, 2012
Montréal, QC - April 24-27, 2013
Vancouver, BC - September 18-21, 2013
Edmonton, Alberta - March 27-30, 2014
There will be a national closing ceremony in Ottawa.
- Discuss and pray with your congregation and Area Church

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