

If these Walls Could Talk: A Study of St. Stephen's Relationship with Indigenous People *Truth and Reconciliation Matters*

The Study

"As an outward expression of the Creator's love and in the spirit of reconciliation, St. Stephen's acknowledges that we gather on traditional Indigenous territory: Treaty 7 Region of Southern Alberta and Metis Nation, Battle River territory (Districts 1-6). Through our worship and outreach St. Stephen's moves forward seeking a new, honourable, and respectful relationship with the Original Peoples of this land."

Our church leadership takes Truth and Reconciliation as a responsibility. At St. Stephen's, Rev. Nicole and others of the parish thoughtfully believe we owe our congregation, current and past, a clear understanding of our Indigenous relationships, either supportive or harmful. We can then celebrate inclusive outreach and/or assess harmful interaction, if that occurred and then make sincere, appropriate amends. We will search church historic archives from our beginnings in 1906 to today to contribute to a meaningful dialogue about our connection with the Original Peoples.

From time-to-time essays will be published for your assessment as our research yields information and calls for action.

Essay One: Residential Schools in Canada

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was active from 2008 to 2015. The Commission's purpose was to document the harm and the lasting impacts of the Canadian Indigenous residential school system on Indigenous students and their families.

Residential schools were government-sponsored religious schools established to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture. The schools were created by Christian churches and the Canadian government. The schools were based on colonialism and class system thinking of the day which resulted in great harm, deaths, suicides and disruption to Indigenous lives and communities. The schools were established in 1880. The last school closed in 1996. An estimated 150,000 First Nation, Inuit and Metis children attended residential schools.

Since then, former students have demanded recognition and restitution. In 2008 Former Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered a formal public apology. Recently, Sept 2024, Dr. Josh Reimer Canadian Medical Association President offered a formal apology "...The racism and discrimination that Indigenous patients and health care providers face is deeply deplorable, and we are deeply ashamed."

The Anglican Church of Canada operated 36 residential schools.

In 1993 then Primate Michael Peers offered an apology on behalf of the Anglican church... “I accept and confess before God and you (Sacred Heart Circle, Minaki Ontario) our failure in the residential schools. We failed ourselves. We failed God.” The apology came after three days of emotional testimonials from residential school survivors.

In 2019, Archbishop Fred Hiltz further offered a formal apology... “An Apology for Spiritual Harms”.

In 2022, Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby visited several Canadian Indigenous communities and offered a sincere and emotional apology:

“I have felt shame and humiliation as I have heard of suffering inflicted by my people for the terrible crime, sin, evil of deliberately building hell and putting children into it and staffing it. I am more sorry than I could ever be, ever begin to express. I am ashamed. I am horrified. I ask myself where does that come, that evil? It has nothing to do with Christ”.

Our Calgary Anglican Diocese leadership has not to this date offered any commentary with respect to the harm to Indigenous people caused by the Anglican supported residential school system.

Treaty 7 was the last of the numbered treaties made between the Canadian Government and the Plains First Nations. It was signed in September of 1877 by five first nations: the Siksika (Blackfoot), Kainai (Blood), Piikani (Peigan), Stoney-Nakoda, and Tsuut’inna (Sarcee). The written treaty ceded 130,000 km² of land. Different understandings of the treaty’s purpose, combined with significant cultural and language barriers and deliberate attempts to mislead have led to ongoing conflict.

The attempted assimilation of Indigenous students left them disoriented and insecure, with the feeling that they belonged to neither indigenous nor settler society.

Between two worlds: Assimilation and Loss of Culture

“When an Indian comes out of these places (residential/industrial schools) it is like being put between two walls in a room and left hanging in the middle. On one side are all things he learned from his people and their way of life, which was being wiped out, and on the other side are the white man’s ways which he could never fully understand since he never had the right amount of education and could not be part of it. There he is, hanging in the middle of two cultures and he is not white man, and he is not an Indian.

They washed away practically everything from our minds, all the things an Indian needed to help himself, to think a way a human person in order to survive. “

(John Tootoosis, Residential school survivor)

Written and researched by Chris Bain

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Essay Two: The first Anglican Bishop of Calgary, colonial thinking and Indigenous relations