

If these Walls Could Talk: A Study of St. Stephen's Relationship with Indigenous People
Truth and Reconciliation Matters
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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: First published on Oct 5, 2024, described the Residential Schools of Canada; highlighted Anglican church leader apologies and illustrated the trauma experienced by Indigenous children and their families from the permanent harm perpetrated on them by Christian churches.

Essay Two: Colonial Thinking: Indigenous Assimilation/Residential Schools

This essay attempts to understand and recognize the colonial thinking and culture that allowed residential schools, set up by the Canadian government and administered by churches, to exist.

The school system had the nominal objective of educating Indigenous children but also the more damaging and equally explicit objective of indoctrinating them into Euro-Canadian ways of living and assimilating them into mainstream Canadian society.

Indigenous people were considered a threat to European settlement and expansion for industrial development and White settlement. With settler colonization came the framing of the “Indian Problem” ⁽¹⁾ --the belief that their traditional ways were “uncivilized and “immoral.”

The culture of assimilation and segregation of Indians was established and enforced by federal laws: the Indian Act, Treaties 1-7, Residential schools and the Indian Hospitals among other programs.

The Residential School program started in 1831 and reached its peak in 1931 when there were 80 schools operating in Canada. The most at any one time. Between 1831 and 1996, 138 schools operated in Canada. The Anglican Church operated 36 of the schools.

It seems then, that society acceptance of class superiority and of Indians being an “Indian Problem” justified the establishment of residential schools and ultimately the perverse treatment of children in the school operation.

The extensive archives of this period and even The Truth and Reconciliation Report do not fully describe how ordained Christian priests, educated in seminaries could rationalize their debauched cruel actions of dehumanization.

School leadership from the start quickly turned assimilation into elimination. Schools were led by clergy, most of whom, were not teachers and educators. With an attitude of eliminating Indigenous culture and the children themselves, obedience was demanded using corporal punishment, and depraved abuse. They were malnourished and vulnerable to disease because of poor nutrition and overcrowding. They lived an existence separated from family.

Schools were not well funded. Schools took in virtually any willing recruit. Background checks of potential employees were rudimentary. Wages were low. Oversight was lax. These conditions were such that child predators readily infiltrated the system. It is estimated that there were 5,000 child predators within the residential schools.

This massive disregard and devolution into abuse came to light in recent years with the discovery of mass unmarked graves (mostly found on the former grounds of these schools) for these children under the “care” of Christian leaders. It is estimated that 6,000 children died while in these schools.

Few abusers faced prosecution. One dormitory supervisor convicted in 1995 was described by the judge as a “sexual terrorist” who had exploited a system that was “nothing more than institutionalized pedophilia.”

St. Stephen’s was established in 1906. By that time, assimilation was well underway. Our St. Stephen’s leadership and that of the Diocese would have been aware of the program, perhaps only peripherally to some, due to a culture of secrecy⁽²⁾ around sexual predators aimed to protect the reputation of church-run facilities.

The first Anglican Bishop of Calgary was William Cyprian Pinkham. He was a staunch supporter of residential schools. He was Bishop of Saskatchewan and Calgary Dioceses from 1899 to 1903 and from then to 1926, solely Bishop of the Calgary Diocese. His influence over St. Stephen’s was present for twenty years and the society and church accepted assimilation culture was further present for a period of seventy years from 1926 to 1996, when the last school closed.

Did colonialism, societies' acceptance of colonialism and assimilation and Anglican participation in the operation of the schools have an influence on St. Stephen's from its beginning in 1906 to when the last school closed? As we examine St. Stephen's archival records, we will search for our church relations with Indigenous peoples.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final report in 2015. The TRC labelled the residential school system as a case of "Cultural Genocide." In the same year the Canadian government launched an inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). The final report released in 2019 used the term genocide to characterize the pattern of violence against Indigenous women and Girls in Canada. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau accepted the inquiry's conclusions on behalf of Canada, saying "...we accept the findings of the commissioners that it was genocide."

The description of "**cultural genocide**" in the TRC report has now been generally accepted as "**genocide.**"

Generational Trauma

Because they were removed from their families many students grew up without experiencing a nurturing family life and without the knowledge and skills to raise their own children.

Testimonial

"It takes 5 or 6 generations for an original trauma to be healed. My kids have to deal with this sort of, sometimes crazy, sometimes an unstable mom because I didn't have parents because they were in residential school."

Suzanne Stewart

Professor of Public Health, University of Toronto

Yellowknife Dene First Nation

Her parents suffered the trauma of residential schools. She was taken from them and raised by other people in and out of foster care, which had an enormous impact on her when she became a mother herself.

Testimonial

The schools were meant "to take the Indian out of the child" and to assimilate them into "white" mainstream.

"The root cause of the violence within Aboriginal communities today - domestic abuse, physical abuse, and sexual violence, even murder-was caused by the violent history in those schools and the large number of Indigenous children abused there."

“In our community today, there is lots of violence happening and I think that must be contributed to the residential schools. We never really had the teaching of being a parent. We became aggressive in bringing up our children, and in turn we teach our children to be aggressive.

Because of that experience, us survivors never learned how to live as a loving family because we were separate from our family. We didn’t know how to love because we were never treated like a child at home. Because of the treatment we received we became violent in our growth.”

Andrew Wesley

Residential School Survivor: Cree, Fort Albany, Ontario

Invitation

This forum is open to all at St. Stephen’s and our extended community. Some of you, especially our senior members, may have insights, opinions and knowledge of the Residential School system. Submissions are welcome.

Endnotes:

⁽¹⁾ The term “Indian Problem” is attributed to Duncan Campbell Scott Canadian Department of Indian Affairs. In 1918 he said, “I want to get rid of the Indian problem, I do not think... that the country ought to continuously protect a class of people who are able to stand alone...Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian department.”

⁽²⁾ The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, has resigned amid allegations he did little to stop a church leader from abusing as many as 130 boys over four decades. On his resignation Bishop Welby said (of the internal Anglican investigation) ... “it has exposed the **long-maintained conspiracy of silence** about the heinous abuses...” -*The Globe and Mail: November 13, 2024*

Upcoming Essays

Bishop Pinkham and Residential schools

Calgary: St. Dunstan and St. Joseph’s (Dunbow) Residential Schools