

Truth and Reconciliation Matters

If these Walls Could Talk

A study of St. Stephen's relationship with Indigenous People

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, 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, 2024, highlights colonial thinking with respect to Indigenous peoples and describes the impact of that thinking on the residential school system with its stated goal of Assimilation and its devolution into maltreatment of indigenous children.

Essay Three, 2025, provides a view, based on examination of historical records, into the thinking and attitude of The First Anglican Bishop of Calgary toward Indigenous people. The purpose of understanding his mindset is to have a backdrop as to how his thinking and attitude as a Diocesan leader may have influenced and/or aligned with Anglican clergy thinking, particularly for this study, the clergy of St. Stephen’s.

Essay Four, 2025, explores the residential school legacy of two schools: St. Dunstan’s Calgary Industrial School 1896-1907 and Dunbow Industrial School St. Joseph’s Industrial School 1893-1924.

Essay Five, 2025 describes St. Stephen’s Land Acknowledgement: Treaty 7 Region of Southern Alberta, Metis Nation Battle River Territory, (Districts 1-6).

All essays are included on the church’s website (<https://www.ststephenyyc.com/truth-reconciliation/>)

Essay Six

- Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald: Culture of Dominant Euro-Canadian Society
- Doctrine of Discovery and Reconciliation
- Orange Shirt Day

Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonald: Culture of Dominate Euro-Canadian Society

Under the leadership of Sir John A. Macdonald, it became official policy to assimilate Indigenous peoples into European Canadian culture. Government and church leaders believed that children needed to be separated from the influence of their families to sever the passing of Indigenous cultures. This ideology, perpetuated by Sir John A. and numerous leaders to follow, was the driving force behind the residential school system in Canada.

In 1883, Macdonald reported to the House of Commons: *“When the school is on the reserve the child lives with its parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write his habits, and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. It has been strongly pressed on myself, as the head of the Department, that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men.”*

Starting in the 1880s, the residential school system expanded across Canada. The system included over 130 residential schools in total, with the last federally supported residential school closing in the late 1990s. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission tells us of the incredible rates of abuse, illness and death that occurred within these schools, as well as the intergenerational impacts that residential schools have on Indigenous families and communities. Our government’s actions cannot simply be excused by the times; there were plenty of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people along the way who spoke out against the residential school system, but their stories are seldom retold.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission provides 94 Calls to Action for us all to work towards a better future. But how will our next generation move forward from this dark past if we don’t even acknowledge how it began?

We need to take deliberate actions as a community to tell the truth, both good and bad, about Canada’s history.

Jocelyn Wattam ⁽¹⁾

Waupoos, Prince Edward County, Ontario

(1) Letter to the Editor, The Picton Gazette, 2020

Doctrine of Discovery and Reconciliation

The Doctrine of Discovery is a legal and religious concept used for centuries to justify Christian Colonial conquest. It advanced the idea that European people and their culture and religion were superior to all others.

The Doctrine established by popes in the 15th century set out a series of declarations. (known as “papal bulls”) that provided religious authority for Christians to subjugate non-Christian people and to claim land that was deemed vacant for their nation. Land was considered *terra nullius* (vacant land) if it had not yet been occupied by Christians. Lands could be defined as “discovered” and as a result sovereignty, title and jurisdiction could be claimed. Both French and English colonial powers in what came to be Canada used the Doctrine to claim Indigenous lands and impose their cultural and religious beliefs on Indigenous peoples. The Doctrine did not recognize long standing systems of Indigenous governance and sovereignty.

As colonial settlement spread over the territory that became Canada, Indigenous people entered treaty relationships defining how they would share the land with the newcomers. Influenced by the absolute claims to power and authority in the Doctrine, Canadian law interpreted these agreements as surrendering title and control, despite these concepts being alien to Indigenous cultures.

The racist assumption of superiority and dominance embodied in the Doctrine of Discovery underpins many aspects of Canada’s colonial history, including the *Indian Act* ⁽²⁾, the reserve system, the residential school tragedy, and the Sixties Scoop ⁽³⁾.

The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) recognizes that doctrines such as the Doctrine of Discovery are not legally valid. and that the continuation of colonialism is a crime which violates the Charter of the United Nations.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) in its report of 2015, called on churches and faith groups involved in the Indian Residential School system to act. TRC Calls to Action #48 to #61 specifically focus on church accountability, requiring apologies, implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius.

The Anglican Church of Canada formally repudiated and renounced the Doctrine of Discovery at its 39th General Synod in 2010, The United Church of Canada, 2012. The Lutheran Church in Canada, 2015, The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops Discovery and Terra Nullius, 2016, Mennonite Church of Canada, 2016, and the Vatican, 2023.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada recommended in its report to the 2019 General Assembly that the church should repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery. The PCC has not yet formally done so.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in its report of 2015 also called on Canada's government to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation.

Canada adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), 2021 and declared that *terra nullius* never applied in Canada,

The Supreme court of Canada however in Court Case, 2014, left the Doctrine of Discovery in place by granting the sovereignty-restricted Indigenous ownership 'Aboriginal title' to their traditional lands. The Doctrine of Discovery still influences Canadian land title cases.

The Vatican repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery (see above: Vatican, 2023) while symbolic and not legally binding has generally been received as a positive step toward reconciliation.

What does the Vatican's statement mean in the Canadian context? Tamara Baldhead Pearl, who is from One Arrow First Nation and an assistant professor at the University of Alberta, believes the repudiation of the doctrine may not lead to significant changes to Canadian law but that it will have a significant impact on those who make changes in the law distancing from the Doctrine to using the treaties and the nation to nation relationship confirmed in the Royal Proclamation of 1763.⁽⁴⁾ The Truth and Reconciliation Call to Action #58 specifically targeted the Vatican because the Roman Catholic Church was a major, institutional co-author of the residential school system, running roughly 60% of them. It demanded a formal, personal apology from the Pope—as the head of the church—delivered in Canada, for abuses in Catholic-run schools.

Pope Francis visited Canada in July 2022 on what he termed a "penitential pilgrimage," visiting Alberta, Quebec and Nunavut.

On July 25, while in Maskwacis, Alberta, situated on Treaty 6 territory, traditional lands of First Nations and Métis people, Pope Francis recognized the abuses experienced at residential schools that resulted in cultural destruction, loss of life, and ongoing trauma lived by Indigenous Peoples in every region of this country.

In May 2022, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby visited Canada and offered an apology for The Church of England's legacy of colonialism and the harm done to Indigenous peoples.⁽⁵⁾

Murray Sinclair, Chair (TRC):

“Reconciliation is not a spectator sport. You have to become involved. You have to be engaged. And people have not yet embraced that idea”.

Endnotes.

(2) The Indian Act 1876 still in effect today with amendments governs “Indian status”, bands and reserves.

(3) The “Sixties Scoop” refers to a large-scale removal or “scooping” of Indigenous children from their families through the 1960's and their subsequent adoption into non- Indigenous families.

(4) The Royal Proclamation was the first legal recognition of aboriginal title, rights and freedom.

(5) Archbishop Welby's apologies follow those of the Anglican Church of Canada given by Archbishop Michael Peers and Archbishop Fred Hiltz in 1993 and 2010 respectively. Justin Welby resigned as the Archbishop of Canterbury on November 12, 2024, following intense pressure and a damning independent investigation that found he failed to properly report the serial physical and sexual abuse of over 100 boys and young men by John Smyth. The report concluded that the Church of England, under Welby, had covered up "abhorrent" abuse, with Smyth operating for decades.

Orange Shirt Day

In May 2013 residential school survivors and their families came together at Williams Lake, British Columbia in an event that was the initiative of Esk'etemc (Alkali Lake) Chief Fred Robbins. His vision was to bring witness to the residential school experience as a way to honour survivors, help in the healing, and contribute to reconciliation.

Among those who spoke at the event was Phyllis Webstad, a Northern Secwepemc (Shuswap) woman. She said that in 1973 she was living with her grandmother on the Dog Creek Reserve, in the Fraser Valley, in central British Columbia. When she was six years old, she and her grandmother went to the local Robinson's store to purchase a new outfit to start school. Phyllis was proud of her bright orange shirt that laced up at the front.

Like her grandmother and mother before her, Phyllis was sent to a residential school. Immediately upon arriving, she and the other kids were stripped and forced into different clothing. She never again saw the orange shirt. She later stated, *"I didn't understand why they wouldn't give it back to me, it was mine! The colour orange has always reminded me of that and how my feelings didn't matter, how no one cared and how I felt like I was worth nothing. All of us little children were crying, and no one cared."*

From the Williams Lake event and Phyllis Webstad's speech came the idea to adopt the orange shirt as a symbol of remembrance, teaching and healing. The organizers of the Williams Lake event initiated annual Orange Shirt Day as a way to invite others to join conversations about the legacy of residential schools.

In May 2021, 215 unmarked graves were discovered beside an old residential school at the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation, near Kamloops, British Columbia. In subsequent weeks, more potential unmarked graves were found beside other abandoned residential schools. The grisly discoveries renewed calls for a national holiday. September 30th was established by the Federal Government as new national statutory holiday: National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.

The message and slogan of Orange Shirt Day became **Every Child Matters.**

