

Ecumenical Working Group on Residential Schools

Reflections to Spark Conversation on Christian Theology

April 2015

It has been 45 years since the formal participation of mainline Christian churches in the Indian residential school system was dramatically reduced, and more than 25 years since survivors began confronting those in the church with the disastrous consequences of that system on themselves, their families, their communities, languages and cultures. For a long time, the churches avoided coming to terms with this history and its legacy. The subject of residential schools has been shrouded in silence and justified by a veneer of “good intentions.” It only has been relatively recently that churches have begun to reflect in deep humility on the theological assumptions and interpretations that gave rise to the churches’ complicity in this evil. This paper proposes that theological colleges, learning centres, and scholars have vital roles to play in supporting deeper theological engagement with this topic.

This paper contends that our theologies of confession, repentance, and reconciliation are not yet sufficient to address the churches’ complicity in historical violence and injustice against Indigenous peoples, perpetrated in Christ’s name, or to confront the injustices that continue. We observe, moreover, that while there is a growing body of institutional confessions concerning what happened in the schools, there is little evidence of a deeply held and commonly understood sense of repentance among the members of the Body of Christ in Canada. Without such understanding, what will motivate Christian support for the kinds of acts of atonement and repentance that will be necessary to bring about justice and restore harmony in relationships? Theology and theological education can play important roles in helping the Church understand why transformation is required to foster reconciliation.

The churches’ experience with residential schools also calls for deep theological reflection and re-examination of core Christian beliefs about how God is acting in the world and how at both individual and institutional levels God’s call to work in the world is discerned—in particular the call to witness to Christ and engage in “mission.”

The Indian residential school system was a political tool of colonialism and assimilation. The motives of church participation were a combination of territorial outreach, educational ministry and evangelism, often expressed in terms of “saving souls for Jesus.” The assumptions underlying the role of the churches reflected those articulated in papal bulls, i.e. the Doctrine of Discovery and the concept of Terra Nullius, that the “new land” was unoccupied or alternately, that anyone residing there, unless Christian, was subject to dispossession, subjugation and/or conversion. These assumptions became foundational to ways of thinking, and were established in laws, systems, and structures that dehumanize Indigenous peoples and subjugate creation.

This “conquest” theology served the secular view of expansionism and justified a range of colonial practices and policies that have oppressed, and continue to oppress, Indigenous peoples, failing to respect their God-given identities and place on the land. Churches must be careful to reflect on their work in the residential schools within the broader context of their support for these policies and practices which were put into place by a predominantly Christian governing class.

Over the past few decades, a number of churches in “the West” have begun to revise what has been their predominantly Judeo-Christian outlook to recognize other spiritual paths and practices and acknowledge that God’s Spirit has been alive and at work throughout the world, throughout time. The word “mission” is now seen to be less about proselytizing and more about participating in God’s work in the world. Yet, to so easily redefine the word and meaning of “mission” in the context of how much damage has been done, and continues to have ramifications for so many, risks letting the churches avoid their own healing work. We suggest those of us in the church have not sufficiently unpacked our understanding of “mission” and its history, before presuming to use the word with “new” meaning. We don’t yet have that right.

But further, is “mission” with its current meaning what the church really should be about? Is it what the Gospel is calling us to be about? There is still an unsettling presumption that those in the church “know” the heart and will of God, and what God intends for the world. The mainstream of the churches continue to position themselves at the centre of mission, with mission radiating outwards to the margins. This presumption does not sit well with the humility that recognizes that our ancestors had a similar conviction about what Christianity looked like in their day. And they were wrong—as Indigenous peoples the world over can attest. How deeply do churches also understand themselves to be recipients of mission? How deeply do churches yet understand how to put aside the temptation to associate with power in society, notably the power and temptation to act in accordance with a dominant culture that the majority of us in the church share, to pay attention to marginalized voices, and learn from the strengths and gifts of the poor, the vulnerable, and the oppressed?

The view that only Christianity is the one true religion and those committed to it have an obligation to evangelize or “save” those who do not follow Christ led to some of the most tragic consequences of the residential school system. The “rightness” of this conviction was so firmly held that the effort to “save” was, at times, carried out with rigid discipline, if not violence. How else do we understand the willingness of so many church workers, including clergy, to physically and psychologically brutalize children “in the name of Jesus,” shaming them about their own culture and heritage? While not denying the personal criminal culpability of individual perpetrators, the pervasive extent of the harm and the overarching attack on the identity of Indigenous children across the residential school system speaks to a systemic evil. The consequences of this drive to evangelize must challenge our understanding of evangelism and cries out for examination.

The history of residential schools also presents an opportunity for deep learning about forgiveness, with potential to enrich deeply our theological understanding of what it means to forgive, to seek forgiveness, and to accept forgiveness. The dynamics of confession, forgiveness, repentance, atonement and reconciliation in the context of residential schools apply between individuals, within families, within and between communities, and between individuals and groups of individuals and institutions, i.e. churches. Communal acts of repentance that reflect acknowledgement of institutional evil may be required. How these dynamics operate at an interfaith level also requires exploration.

Indigenous wisdom—spiritualities and theologies—was aggressively suppressed during the residential schools period, as were spiritual and liturgical practices that upheld or integrated

traditional Indigenous ways. We are very aware that Indigenous Christians continue to offer new insights into the Bible and our shared faith by reading texts and theologies through their own experience as Indigenous peoples, including through the lenses of their cultures and spiritualities. Traditional Indigenous Elders also have much to teach in regard to the work of God's Spirit in the world, what those of us in the church would call the Living Word of God. The Church's understanding of God is being enriched by these means of deeper spiritual dialogue and engagement with Indigenous peoples. Yet, these encounters are as yet on the periphery and their potential contribution to our theological thinking is not fully known or owned throughout the whole of the Church. Neither are rich spiritual practices, integrating Indigenous ways, fully embraced across our churches.

The theological challenge is very significant and goes to the core of our Christian faith. It touches on concepts of mission, confession, repentance, atonement, forgiveness, reconciliation and justice, but also on our understanding of Creation, Christ, and the very nature of God. Perhaps our theological colleges and learning centres can use the experience of the residential school system as an opportunity to draw the church and broader community into deep discussion, reflection and discernment on what that history has to teach us, beginning with the humility to acknowledge how little we know.

In engaging in this discussion, we offer the following possible questions for initial discernment of the ways theological colleges and learning centres might support the journey of reconciliation in Canada and enrich our theologies in the process:

- Are our current theologies and practices of confession, repentance and reconciliation up to the challenges posed by the residential schools reality? What deeper understanding is required? An Indigenous question: What reconciliation/forgiveness protocols and practices could restore balance and equity to the Indigenous-settler relationship?
- What theologies of institutional healing might be needed that will allow us to heal from our institutional complicity as the Body of Christ in systemic evil? An Indigenous question: How does the Indigenous treaty understanding contribute to restoration of the Indigenous-settler relationship?
- What do our theologies tell us the churches should be doing in Canada in the 21st century in response to our history in residential schools? What new theologies may be needed? An Indigenous question: How do Indigenous spiritualities contribute to the dialogue of reconciliation?
- Recognizing the potential movement of the Spirit in our recent journey of confession in relation to residential schools as a call to reflect on our practices of mission today, what have we learned about mission? An Indigenous question: In light of the current renaissance of Indigenous culture and nationhood what do Indigenous people want the church to understand?
- What work might be done to examine our mission praxis specifically in relation to what it means to witness to Christ, including but not limited to the work of "evangelism," in relation to Indigenous and other peoples today? An Indigenous question: How can we facilitate dialogue concerning the sharing of gifts between Indigenous peoples and the church?

- As Christians, how do our theologies challenge or support the current reality of the non-Indigenous population having so much of the nation's power and resources in relation to that of the Indigenous population, particularly in light of the fact that the dispossession of Indigenous peoples resulted largely and directly from unjust government policy based on Euro-Canadian assumptions of racial and spiritual superiority? An Indigenous question: What do Indigenous theologians have to say about this current reality?
- How do we understand the Word of God to be revealed through the wisdom and experience of Indigenous peoples? An Indigenous question: How can Indigenous "original instructions" dialogue with the Bible?
- What challenges do we face in sharing these theological insights with the entire Body of Christ and how might theological colleges and seminaries assist in overcoming these challenges? An Indigenous question: How can Indigenous spiritualities be made known in the churches, theological colleges and seminaries in a respectful way?
- What support do Indigenous Christian theologians need in advancing this work and who might provide this support?
- In a pluralistic society, how might theologians and churches work together with Indigenous spiritual leaders as well as leaders of other spiritual traditions to advance the work of reconciliation particularly in relation to issues of mutual respect among peoples of faith?

Related Publications

Chapter 4: Mission and Power in *Edinburgh 2010 Vol. II: Witnessing to Christ Today*, Balia, Daryl and Kim, Kirsteen eds, Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International, 2010. (Also available at http://edinburgh2010.org/en/study-themes/main-study-themes/mission-and-powera66a.pdf?no_cache=1&cid=32203&did=21219&sechash=c12f74fd)

MacDonald, Mark and Ransom, Lori, *Systemic Evil and The Church: How Does a Church Repent?* in Forum Mission, 10/2014, p. 72-85