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Response to Kamloops Residential School Graves Discovery

This information may be traumatic for residential school survivors. If you are feeling pain or distress because of your residential school experiences, please call the free 24-hour crisis line: 1-866-925-4419. You can also call the First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line at 1-855-242-3310. It's toll-free and open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

June 4, 2021

Grace and Peace to you.

Since the announcement of the discovery of the undocumented and unmarked remains of 215 children on the grounds of Kamloops Residential School, we have received many messages of sorrow, concern, and outrage from members of the church.

We share these feelings.

We have also been asked many questions about the United Church's intentions regarding burial sites and missing children, about the sharing of our residential schools records, and about our response to the [Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#).

Many biblical passages remind us of the importance of working together for peace and justice. We would like to take this opportunity to answer your questions so that together we can honour all those affected by the residential schools system, and live up to our obligations as a participant in it.

The United Church of Canada operated 15 of the residential schools covered by the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), accounting for approximately 10 percent of Indigenous children who were forced to attend them. A history of our involvement is available at the website [The Children Remembered](#), created by the United Church Archives.

Since 1998, our response to the role we played in this system has been guided by the wisdom of residential school and intergenerational survivors. In 2003, the Residential Schools Steering Committee (later the Committee on Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools) established [six principles of reconciliation](#), which continue to guide this work.

Among them is the principle of whole community involvement, the “acknowledgement that [the impacts of residential schools] are communal as well as individual and that they are intergenerational.” The committee also acknowledged that “the children and grandchildren of survivors are also living people who carry with them the burdens of the residential schools system.” The discovery at Kamloops, and the pain and trauma that it has reignited, make it clear that residential schools are not simply part of a historic event; it is also why we have been doing the difficult work of reconciliation, and must continue to do so.

United Church Response to the Kamloops Discovery

The principle of community involvement guides how we are responding. Indigenous Ministries Executive Minister Murray Pruden and the Moderator issued pastoral responses, along with a call to mourn and remember. This time of respect is required in order for any other actions we take to go forward in a good way.

As The United Church of Canada, we stated our commitment to the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission when they were issued in June 2015. This includes Calls to Action 73–76, which deal with burial sites and missing children. We have already worked with communities in commemorating known gravesites in Brandon, Edmonton, File Hills, Red Deer, and Regina.

These Calls to Action state very clearly that the Indigenous communities most affected must lead in the development of such strategies, and that their protocols must be followed. We are aware that unmarked graves may be found on United Church properties, and we are committed to working on them, and on known burial sites, following the principles laid out in the Calls to Action.

The General Secretary is convening a table of current and former staff to develop our response, and the ecumenical parties to the Settlement Agreement will also be meeting to discuss how to respond together to an issue that affects us all. The National Indigenous Council and Elders Council also continue to meet to discern the needs and response of the Indigenous church. These meetings are taking place in the next few weeks, and we will share more information with you as it comes forward.

We are grateful for the actions you are taking in your own contexts, whether they are vigils, times of prayer, support for Indigenous agencies, or donations to [The Healing Fund](#). Please know that any donations made to The Healing Fund in this time will be held until the Indigenous church, which oversees The Healing Fund, decides how best to share them given the needs that emerge in Indigenous communities.

Sharing of Documentation

It has been widely reported that many institutions have not fully shared their residential school records. This has understandably raised questions about what the United Church has shared.

During the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, United Church General Council and Conference Archives staff went through all records that were related to residential schools and created a substantial [Guide to Holdings Related to Residential Schools](#). These materials are available to researchers.

The materials were also turned over to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for its research. They have since been transferred to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, where they are available for research and have contributed to projects such as the [National Residential Schools Memorial Register](#).

We are currently undertaking a similar discovery process regarding our role in Day Schools, and will continue to turn over relevant material if and as it emerges.

United Church Response to the Calls to Action

We track United Church work on those [TRC Calls to Action](#) directed to the churches and the Parties to the Settlement Agreement in [this document](#), which is updated annually. We also support and participate in advocacy initiatives identified in other Calls to Action, such as those concerning child welfare and missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

As we do this work, we often find ourselves reflecting on this passage from 2 Corinthians 5:18–19: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself...and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

With this trust comes the onus to first seek and speak the truth. At this time, we recommit to truth-telling, to education, and to taking action for those things for which we hold responsibility. May God be our helper.

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Richard Bott
Moderator

The Rev. Murray Pruden
Executive Minister, Indigenous Ministries and Justice