

Canadian Baptists and Indigenous Peoples: Where to from here?

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The church in Canada is at a critical juncture in 2016. I would like to describe that juncture and what brought the church to this place. Next we will examine the distinctiveness of the Baptist journey in the context of the history of the church in Canada. Finally we will turn to the current context of modern Baptist work among indigenous peoples here in Canada and proposed patterns for moving forward.

As a nation, and as the Church, we have come through a seven-year Truth and Reconciliation Commission, like the Commissions held in South Africa at the end of apartheid and in Rwanda at the end of the genocide. The Commission covered a 150 year period from the 1870s to 1996, when the Canadian government mandated, and churches implemented, a residential school program where Aboriginal children were removed from their homes and communities and placed in schools that were often deliberately far removed from the influence of their families. The Commission concluded that the government of Canada and the churches who ran residential schools for the First People's of this land had engaged in cultural genocide.

While Baptist involvement in the residential school system was minimal, as Canadians and as members of the body of Christ, we bear responsibility for this atrocity with those churches that did run the schools. The Anglican Bishop for Indigenous Affairs, Rev. Mark MacDonald, speaks of the fact that we have a moral wound that we live with here in Canada. "In war, soldiers often return with what is now being called a 'moral wound'. This describes the structural diminishment of a person's capacity for moral thought and decision by participation in horrific evil...The morally wounded society and culture magnifies the misery of others while never addressing the insatiable hunger in its own painful universe of moral diminishment." The reality is that as a church and as a nation we bear a moral wound and it demands our attention.

During the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) hearings, I came across a Baptist colleague who had been listening for the last hour to testimonies of survivors of the Indian Residential Schools. He looked overwhelmed, and I assumed it was with empathy over the stories of abuse and hardship he had heard. As I approached and asked how he was doing, he responded, "I have either been lied to for the last hour or I have been lied to my entire life. I think what I heard this last hour was true. But it is going to take me some time to figure out what to do about 50 plus years of memories." For many of us here in Canada, we find ourselves like sleepers awakening from a dream, shaking our heads, and trying to stay rooted in the realities of the experiences of our indigenous neighbours, whose lives have been more nightmare than dream. Our lives have been lived in parallel, and yet there has been a practical apartheid at work in this country for a long time, and we are just beginning to walk into a shared journey of healing.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission

In 1865 a government policy was implemented to remove indigenous children from their homes, families and the influence of their cultures and to bring them to government funded and church run residential schools. The stated purpose of the schools according to the Department of Indian Affairs was to "kill the Indian in the child." With the outcome then of assimilating the indigenous population into the Canadian populis so as to no longer have financial responsibilities in keeping the treaties that had been formed between indigenous nations and the government of Canada.

This Commission stands out among other Truth and Reconciliation Commissions around the world due to the following facts:

- This Commission is a result of the largest class action settlement in the world.

- It covers the longest period of time (over 100 years) of any other commission.
- It is entirely oriented around crimes against children (other commissions deal with acts of the military against a population which may include children but children are not the primary focus).
- The church and government are the accused (again other commissions deal primarily with the actions of the state and military or para-military)

The churches named in the Settlement were the Anglican Church, various Catholic entities, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists and the United Church. Baptists did run a school in Whitehorse Yukon Territory for 20 years but the partnership between the church and government was on an individual basis with this particular school not with the denomination at large so Baptists are not named directly in the settlement.

6,750 statements were made by survivors of the Indian Residential schools over a period of 5 years in public hearings in 300 communities around Canada. All Canadians and churches in particular were invited to witness these statements and thousands of citizens showed up to do just that. Church listening circles were also set up so if survivors wanted to speak directly to representatives of churches they could do that.

Criminal charges were also laid in a disturbing number of physical and sexual abuse cases against clergy and teachers in the schools. The testimonies also turned up horrific practices that were implemented and normalized in the schools, including an electric chair rigged up as a tool for punishment of students, the piercing of students tongues with a needle that was left in their mouths if they were caught speaking their languages and the devastation wrought on communities when all the children were removed from villages. The conclusions of

the commission include the assessment that this was an act of cultural genocide though it meets the UN definition of genocide itself without the cultural qualifier.

The churches who ran schools and were a part of the court case against them have had a variety of responses to this process. Many have disavowed evangelism in any form, believing it was their evangelistic zeal that led them to the great harms they committed against indigenous peoples. Others have maintained that there were a few bad apples who committed egregious acts against the children in their care but for the most part the schools were not a bad thing at all. Yet others are trying to find a way to ask for forgiveness and forge new pathways for ministry and mutual respect as the church follows indigenous leadership. Perhaps the majority of churches however, continue to be ignorant of the realities and effects of the residential schooling enterprise and wonder why “they can’t just get over it and move on.” Blissfully unaware of the ways that this attitude is a product of the systemic racism that they have inherited and enjoy as the benefactors of such a system.

Regardless of the variety of impressions within the church and broader society in Canada there can be no doubt that the legacy of Indian Residential Schools is a very real and ever present dynamic in the day to day experiences of indigenous peoples. While the system of residential schools has come to an end there are many more ways in which systemic racism is enshrined in Canadian policies and practices and continues to oppress indigenous people.

In my own church community which met out of doors or in borrowed spaces that were offered to us I often heard indigenous friends, hungry for the gospel say, I am so glad I can come to church but not in a church building. My _____ (aunty, grandma, mother, father, uncle, sister, brother) would roll over in their grave if they knew I was in a

church building. I have been with many an indigenous friend who has a visceral response to religious symbols like a cross or stained glass windows as they trigger a memory of trauma.

The TRC report made a series of recommendations, some to the church, some to government and government organizations and some to Canadians in general. There are some very clear asks which we as Baptists have opportunity to respond to or not. How we respond will, in large part determine how indigenous communities respond to us as we move forward as well. Commissioner Murrey Sinclair said, “There is no question in my mind that Indigenous peoples are on the road to recovery of their sense of identity, be that collectively or individually, and that they are beginning to stand up on their own two feet. And that might take a few generations to put in place. So the question really becomes, now, “what kind of relationship do churches want to have with this new found, prideful, group of people?”

Baptist Distinctives

Three Baptist distinctives have us positioned in a unique place in this story as it unfolds across Canada. I would like to explore how and why these distinctives position us uniquely.

Soul Liberty

The understanding that faith is a matter between an individual and God and is a result of the stirring of the Spirit and not an affect that can be reached by coercion or punishment or the withholding of benefits.

During the period of residential schooling for indigenous children the Area Minister of Manitoba said, “This unholy union of church and government is producing neither good

converts nor good education for it has all been muddled up so.” Through the lens of soul liberty Mellick understood the residential school project to be coercive.

This is one of the distinctives that largely kept Baptists out of the residential school project. In moving forward it is one that we can draw on in our understanding of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People’s Articles 11 and 12 which speak to allowing Indigenous people a right to their own spirituality. It is only through this practice that the gospel has the capacity to come not as a coercive truth to be adopted but as an incarnational reality that transforms from within.

Separation of Church and State

Similarly the conviction that separation of church and state keeps the state from co-opting the church, protects soul liberty and allows the church to stand with enough distance to critique power has served us in the past and can continue to in the path forward. Interestingly enough, our Baptist conviction about the efficacy of separating church and state power is similar to Indigenous struggles for sovereignty in its relations with the government of Canada and its dealings with churches.

There is room for us to connect on this common ground and support indigenous peoples in their struggles for sovereignty and their right to protest.

Congregational Polity

Both a gift and a challenge in our ways of moving forward in right and just relations with indigenous people is our congregational polity. Unlike the churches that ran residential schools we as Baptists cannot issue statements from our leadership to adopt the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People or renounce the Doctrine of Discovery. This must be handled at a

congregational level with our communities coming to a deeper understanding of what these things mean and committing to living them out. This can be a slow and lengthy process but one that I think will serve us well on the road.

Similarly it is congregation by congregation that we must find ways of living into right and just relations with our indigenous neighbours.

Modern Baptist Works

Currently across Canada there are more Baptist initiatives engaging with Indigenous Peoples than ever before.

Winnipeg Aboriginal Fellowship Winnipeg MB

Begun in the 1970s in order to minister to the needs of the urban Aboriginal community in downtown Winnipeg this church has operated both as a worshipping community and a community that serves to be a charitable presence among the most vulnerable in the larger Aboriginal community in Winnipeg. They have maintained this work up until the present day.

New Life Community Church Duncan, BC

New Life, geographically located on the edge of a reserve on Vancouver Island started both an outreach Vacation Bible School program for kids on the reserve as well as initiating workshops called “Understanding the Nations” aimed at educating churches about local First Nations history and culture as a pathway to reconciliation.

God's House of Many Faces and Musqueam Church Plant Vancouver, BC

Both are highly contextualized, predominantly indigenous churches seeking to express the gospel in culturally relevant ways and to contribute to the healing of relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous churches.

A Pattern for Moving Forward

Committing to a Human Rights Framework

As per the recommendations from the TRC looking to adopt and understand the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Looking Back to Move Ahead

Ensuring that communities keep a humble account in mind of what happened through residential schools and move forward in light of those realities.

New Theologies to Emerge

How do we understand and repudiate the ways in which we have used theology to justify racist attitudes and actions? How then do we re-articulate our theologies about things like evangelism and mission in ways that are congruous with our understandings of how that works out across cultures and power differentials.

Conclusion

“I am doing a new thing among you, and don't you perceive it?” So spoke the prophet Isaiah at a critical transition point in the people of God's self-understanding in light of the exile. In Canada today, it seems to those with eyes to see that God is indeed doing a new thing as well. Perhaps like the Israelites our history makes it difficult to embrace the present. For Israel

to imagine a faithful spirituality disconnected from land and temple worship seemed impossible. In Canada many wonder whether the church can make it past our legacy of involvement with Indian Residential Schools? Do we distance ourselves from that legacy or embrace it and beg for God's mercy to transform us?