



**Canadian Friends Service Committee (Quakers)**  
**Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC)**

Update  
August 2011

**The TRC**

In the period from 1870 to 1996 the government of Canada funded over 300 church-run Indian Residential Schools (IRS) for Aboriginal children. The purpose of the schools was to assimilate Aboriginal children into Canadian society and to “Kill the Indian in the child”. Institutional assimilation resulted in loss of spirituality, culture and language and the fragmentation of families and communities. Children would often not see their homes for months or even years. Many children experienced different forms of abuse while attending these schools. The experience of residential schools left widespread trauma and intergenerational impacts affecting parents and children of attenders as well as the overall community. This is a part of Canada’s history that is not well known or understood by many Canadians.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), which was the outcome of a negotiated settlement to deal with the large amount of abuse claims made by residential school survivors against the government of Canada and four churches. The IRSSA was negotiated between former students, the churches and the government of Canada, the Assembly of First Nations and other Aboriginal organizations and was approved by the Courts and implemented in 2007.

The first commission chair stepped down in 2008 and in June 2010, Justice Murray Sinclair, an Aboriginal judge from Manitoba, was appointed the new chief commissioner. Marie Wilson, from the NWT Workers Safety and Compensation Commission, and Wilton Littlechild, an Alberta regional Chief, became commissioners.

The TRC is an independent body designed to provide a space for survivors of residential schools and those affected by them to come forward and share their experiences and participate in a process of truth, healing and reconciliation. The TRC differs from other Truth Commissions in other countries because it focuses specifically on children. It is also the first court ordered truth commission. The objectives of the TRC include; the creation of a public historical record of the policies and operations of residential schools, a record of what the children experienced, a public report to include recommendations to all parties of the Settlement Agreement, support of the Commemoration Initiative, the establishment of a National Research Centre and the hosting of seven national events. The TRC aims to, “Guide and inspire Aboriginal peoples and Canadians in a process of truth and healing on a path leading toward reconciliation and renewed relationships based on mutual understanding and respect.”

The national events are also aimed at providing a context and meaning for the Common Experience Payment, which was part of the IRSSA. The Common Experience Payment was an amount of money that each student who attended a recognized residential school is entitled to.

Truth and reconciliation is a type of restorative justice that focuses on healing the relationships between the parties, rather than aiming to punish the guilty, the way the customary adversarial justice system works. Seeking the truth and acknowledging what happened allows for mourning, forgiveness and healing of relationships.

### **Updates from the past year**

In the past year there has been several TRC events and actions. On June 11, 2011 Canada celebrated the third anniversary of the apology from the Government of Canada to the individuals, families and communities of students of the residential schools. Recent activities include implementation of a Missing Children and Unmarked Burial Project, as well as the creation of public education tools, and a call for research proposals to fund research on TRC related issues. In June 2010 The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues recognized the TRC as a model of best practice and inspiration for other countries.

On November 12<sup>th</sup> 2010 the Canadian government announced a reversal of position to now support of the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People*, after being one of only four countries to vote against this human rights instrument at the UN General Assembly in 2007. However, the federal government has said that Canadian laws do not need to be reviewed to ensure they are inline with the *Declaration*. The government's lack of full support does not mirror a true desire for reconciliation.

### **Northern hearings and National Event**

“The national events are a mechanism through which the truth and reconciliation process will engage the Canadian public and provide education about the IRS system, the experience of former students and their families, and the ongoing legacies of the institutions.” –Mandate of the TRC

Northern hearings began in March 2011 started a three month process that culminated in the Northern National Event held in Inuvik on June 28<sup>th</sup> to July 1<sup>st</sup> 2011.

Inuvik is located on an overlap of Gwichin (Dene) and Inuvialuit (Inuit) homeland in the Beauford Sea/ Mackenzie Delta in the NWT. There are 14 residential schools from the NWT that are names as part of the IRSSA. The population in communities in the northern territories and Arctic Quebec is usually less than a thousand people and the total population is about 120,000 people, for a land mass that is one third of Canada. Northern Canada has the highest number of residential school students per capita and children would travel as far as 4 000 km to attend the schools.

The second of seven national events brought Indigenous and Non-Indigenous peoples together to try and understand each other in a new way and to understand this chapter of Canada history. The event included sharing circles, hearing from community members and individual stories of survivors and built on the successes of the last national event held in the Forks, Winnipeg.

Despite the fact that Inuvik is in a fairly remote location, over 1000 survivors arrived by car, boat and plane to attend the Northern National Event. Since some people could not physically be there, there was a lot of media involvement and participation through website and live stream video.

Official honorary witnesses of the northern national event were welcomed from four continents. They observed the proceedings as keepers of history and they have the obligation to share their experiences of this significant event within their own communities.

Courage was chosen as the theme for the second national event due to the stories and experiences of the over 550 survivors who participated in the hearings earlier in the year.

Each morning individuals, communities and church groups participated in expressing Reconciliation. These leaders talked about building new relationships between Aboriginal peoples and all Canadians.

“These kinds of expressions signify the importance - and beauty - of what is happening,” said Justice Murray Sinclair, TRC Chair. “What is significant about this whole process is that we now know the issue of reconciliation is not just an institutional question, it's also a family question. So we need to ensure the discussion about reconciliation continues at all levels, and opportunities are provided at all levels for individuals to share those gestures of reconciliation.”

### **Gestures of Reconciliation:**

Residential Schools are a part of the shared history Canadians have with Aboriginal people. Healing the relationship between Canadians and Aboriginal peoples will require education, awareness, and increased understanding of the legacy and the impacts of the IRS. The TRC mandate also includes the education of **all** Canadians about the IRS system.

Quakers can get involved and support the TRC process in different ways.

- 1.** Learn the history of European invasion of North America, specifically within the Canadian context. Learn current and traditional names, locations and histories of Aboriginal groups and natural features in your region. KAIROS has an excellent resource called "The Blanket Effect" that is done in a group and is both educational and experiential.
- 2.** Educate yourself about the Residential School System and the impacts on communities. Research the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A good place to start is by looking at the TRC website and educational materials, available online at [www.trc.ca](http://www.trc.ca)
- 3.** Sign the virtual “It Matters to Me” Ribbon, where you can add a personal message about why truth and reconciliation matters. (Available soon on the TRC website)
- 4.** Lobby for changes to the elementary school curriculum to include information on the Residential School System, its impact as well as the inclusion of Aboriginal heroes – highlighting Aboriginal peoples’ contributions to this country and internationally.
- 3.** Join with Indigenous peoples in common issues around fishing, logging, land appropriation, housing, health, etc, by going to demonstrations, protests, and meetings organized by Indigenous organizations. Write letters of support to newspapers, web sites and blogs. Add your email to listserves for issues that are important for you. For example, in New Brunswick, the issue of the misuse of water, and possible poisoning of pure water sources recently brought together over 200 activists from both the Indigenous and allied environmental organizations. Many who had never attended an Indigenous ceremony came because of the shared environmental concerns.
- 4.** Look for local cultural events such as theatre, music, Pow wows and sporting events. Often websites that announce the events such as Pow wows will have 'protocols' for previous non-attenders, or if feel free to ask anyone at the event. If advertised in public places, Aboriginal people WANT

non-aboriginal people to be involved. They understand that you need to find out how to do so respectfully. So, go with a friend, ask others, and be willing to learn are all good ideas of how to become involved.

**5.** Check with local churches to determine if they already have a working partnership with Indigenous peoples in the area. Join their groups or suggest forming an ecumenical group, KAIROS may have regional ecumenical solidarity groups in your region. Other churches may also have resources to share and/or adapt for within Friends.

Be patient with other organizations' procedures as they can have complex structures. However, many want to develop 'right relationships' with Indigenous peoples, so keep asking in a variety of ways to find how to work best with the other groups.

For Truth and Reconciliation, "Equipping Ambassadors", is a workshop geared to bring settlers and Aboriginal peoples together and learn how to share Truth and Reconciliation processes. Attending gatherings such as this is one way to familiarize church and non-church folk about the history of residential schools, learn Indigenous ways, and meet people committed to the issue formally and informally.

**6.** Check TV schedules and web sites of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), and other channels/stations for Indigenous programs. QAAC supports an Ontarian based radio program: Smoke Signals. Read, listen or watch other creative works by Indigenous artists and make your own reading list, organize a book discussion series, or find Aboriginal films for free on the National Film Board site and host a shared viewing.

**7.** Web sites and blogs provide opportunities for interactive dialogue, for example Turning Point (<http://www.turning-point.ca/>) Most national and local news organizations carry stories of First Nation and Indigenous peoples, check for places to leave comments or to read discussions about the articles.

**8.** If there is a Truth and Reconciliation Commission event in your region, plan to attend as a witness and as a citizen of Canada who has benefited by settler invasion, occupation of Indigenous territories, usurpation of resources and oppression of Indigenous peoples. Offer accommodation for visitors to the gatherings if you are able. If none is planned in your area check the TRC website and consider working with allies to create a TRC community event.

*For questions, comments and suggestions please contact Quaker Aboriginal Affairs Committee by email at [jennifer@quakerservice.ca](mailto:jennifer@quakerservice.ca) or by phone at (416) 920-5213*