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# **The Native Residential School System and The Presbyterian Church in Canada**

by Peter Bush, Mitchell, Ontario

With simplicity and dignity, The Rev. George Vais, Moderator of the 120th General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada presented the church's Confession regarding its relationship with the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada at a service held in Winnipeg in 1994. First and foremost a confession to God; the church came seeking God's forgiveness of its sin and asking the Aboriginal peoples to also forgive. A section of the confession dealt with Native Residential Schools:

We confess that, with the encouragement and assistance of the Government of Canada, The Presbyterian Church in Canada agreed to take the children of Aboriginal people from their own homes and place them in Residential Schools. In these schools, children were deprived of their traditional ways, which were replaced with Euro-Canadian customs that were helpful in the process of assimilation. To carry out this process, The Presbyterian Church in Canada used disciplinary practices which were foreign to Aboriginal peoples, and open to exploitation in physical and psychological punishment beyond any Christian maxim of care and discipline. In a setting of obedience and acquiescence there was opportunity for sexual abuse, and some were so abused. The effect of all this, for Aboriginal peoples, was the loss of cultural identity and the loss of a secure sense of self. For the Church's insensitivity we ask forgiveness.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada was both late in becoming involved in ministry among the Native people of Canada and slow in developing that ministry. A statistical snapshot from 1919 will make the point. That year the Government of Canada estimated there were 106,000 Native people (not including Inuit) in Canada: 45,000 were Roman Catholic, 25,000 were Anglican, 20,000 were Methodist, and 3,000 were Presbyterian (less than 3% of the Native population). Two-thirds of the estimated 18,000 school-aged Native children were enrolled in one of three types of schools. The schools were operated by various denominations and funded and inspected the Federal Government's Department of Indian Affairs. In 1919, there were 225 day schools educating native children (four were Presbyterian). At these schools, usually located on reserves, students attended school during the day and went home at night. The schools tended to be small, one room affairs, averaging fewer than 35 students and one teacher.

There were 50 Native residential schools in 1919 (eight were Presbyterian). Students in these institutions left their home communities, travelling, in some cases, hundreds of kilometres to attend school; returning home only for Christmas and summer holidays. These schools had much larger staffs than the day schools. There was a principal, who oversaw the entire school operation; one or two teachers (these were often one or two room



schools, the average enrolment in 1919 in a given residential school was 42 students); a matron, who oversaw the running of the boarding portion of the school; a cook who might have had an assistant; a sewing room teacher/housekeeper, and a farm instructor (if land around the school was good for farming.)

The third type of school was the industrial school, a residential vocational training school for Native adolescents. In 1919, there were eighteen such schools in Canada, with an average enrolment of almost 100 students per school (none were Presbyterian). Some industrial schools taught printing skills, others exposed young people to the workings of the latest farm machinery, young women were taught the skills needed to be employed as household help.

Of the 12,000 Native young people who were in some formal educational institution in 1919, 4,250 (or 35%) were in a residential setting; the other 65% of Native children were experiencing their formal education through day schools. It is generally estimated that approximately one-third of Native children in Canada, between 1890 and 1970, were educated in the residential school system.

As far as I have been able to determine, the Presbyterian Church in Canada operated 5 day schools, 8 Native residential schools, and 1 industrial school between 1884 and 1969. There were day schools located at: Mistawasis and Makoce Waste both near Prince Albert, Saskatchewan; Moose Mountain in southern Saskatchewan; and Swan Lake and Portage-la-Prairie, both in Manitoba.

The school at Round Lake, Saskatchewan, which had its first beginnings in the fall of 1884, was formally opened in 1886 as a residential school. In the early 1880's, the Women's Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church in Portage-la-Prairie, Manitoba saw a need to educate the children of the Dakota people living near Portage. A day school was opened. It quickly became apparent that because of the distance to be travelled, a number of the students would not be able to return to their homes each day. A dormitory was added to the school and the Portage-la-Prairie residential school was born in 1886. In 1889, a residential school was opened at File Hills (near Balcarres), Saskatchewan. In 1891, the Albemni School was opened and in 1904 a residential

school was opened at Ahousaht; both of these schools were in British Columbia. In 1925, these five schools passed from Presbyterian hands and became the responsibility of The United Church of Canada.

The Birtle Residential School was opened in 1888 in Birtle, Manitoba. In 1900 the Cecilia Jeffrey School was opened at Shoal Lake, close to Kenora, Ontario. Both of these schools remained in the hands of The Presbyterian Church in Canada after 1925. It was not until 1969 that the church ceased to have any responsibility for these schools; that was when the Federal Government took sole responsibility for the schools.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada had a role in two other Residential Schools. In 1890, the Regina Industrial School was opened as a state-of-the-art vocational training school. By the 1910's government officials had

come to the conclusion that the industrial school model was costing too much. The Regina Industrial School was closed in 1912. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, a Presbyterian-operated

residential school was opened at Crowstand, Saskatchewan. It closed in 1923.

The residential school system was driven by four factors. First, the disappearance of buffalo ended the nomadic lifestyle of the prairie tribes. The threat of widespread starvation among the Native people of the plains was a concern voiced by government officials and missionaries. The Presbyterian missionary, Hugh MacKay, wrote with great sadness in 1885, "my labours are among a people that is becoming extinct." The transition from a nomadic, hunting society to a reserve-based, farming culture was doomed from the start, not because of Native laziness or their inability to learn farming techniques, but because of the government's failure to keep treaty promises. The loss of the buffalo and the poor transition to a farm lifestyle on the reserve meant that there was inadequate food on many reserves to meet the demand. Placing native children in residential schools, it was argued, ensured the continuation of the Native people into the next generation.

Second, many educators, working in Native day schools, were frustrated by inconsistent school attendance. Kate Gillespie, a Presbyterian teacher in Saskatchewan described this challenge,

***The transition from a nomadic, hunting society to a reserved-based farming culture was doomed from the start, due to the government's failure to keep treaty promises.***

...the attendance was irregular and not punctual and on bad days in order to secure anything like progress I had to walk up the road...go into [each] house, and hear and set lessons. In the afternoon return, correct exercises of the work, hear and set fresh lessons. The children could not come to school...I had to go to them.

The day school, it was argued, was ineffective, since weather, the hunting season, or any number of things prevented children from attending school. The residential school had a captive audience, students had nowhere to go but to class. Gillespie and other educators failed to realize, that taking the school to the home was a culturally appropriate method of Native education. Adopting such an educational model, however, required a shift in thinking that was too difficult to make.

Residential schools had a third purpose: to assimilate the next generation of Native people into the dominant white Canadian culture. The Rev. F.E. Pitts, principal of the Birtle school in 1923, wrote,

...the Boarding School...tries to teach them new conditions of living....to eat different food, to sleep in beds, to dress, wash, bath, to bake their bread, to cook their food, keep their houses and make a living on farms etc., – not like their parents have done but in a manner that shall enable them to live in civilized conditions...

By enforcing the use of English, teaching farming techniques and instructing Native children in Euro-Canadian household patterns, the schools sought to turn out productive members of the white society. It was hoped, with much of the Native culture scrubbed off, the students would return to the reserves to become leaders who supported the dominant, white culture. Seven of the schools operated by the Presbyterian Church were started in the decade following the 1885 Riel Rebellion. There was great fear that the Native population might again rebel. The residential school was a defence against such a rebellion.

Fourth, the residential school fit the missionary goals of the church. By reaching Native young people with the good news about Jesus Christ, it was believed that the newly converted believers would return to their homes, becoming missionaries to their own people. This was a missionary model the church used in a variety of contexts. Boarding schools were one of the primary activities of Christian missionaries in as diverse locations as Taiwan, India, and East Africa. Young people living in a Christian environment were not only taught the gospel, hopefully it was also being caught. The children

and teenagers were exposed to teachers and other school staff who lived their Christian faith on a day to day basis.

As time passed it became obvious that none of the motivations that led to the establishment of the residential schools were being realized. The government did not provide the financial resources necessary for the schools to function effectively. The government was unwilling to provide even the basic necessities to the schools; at the File Hills School in Saskatchewan the older boys spent two winters using tents pitched outside as their dormitory.

The quality of education in the schools was poor. Indian Affairs directed that Native children in the residential schools were only to be in class for a half day, the other half day they spent helping around the school. These tasks included: sewing products that were sold in the nearby towns, tending gardens to provide food for the school, cutting wood for the schools' heating needs and to be sold to people in town, and similar activities that made money for the school or reduced school costs. It was imperative for principals to find ways of supplementing the inadequate financial support provided to the schools. Students had to "earn their keep" if the schools were to function. It was argued that having students work for the school gave them the skills they needed for everyday life on the reserves.

There were many critics of the half-day system. Former teachers raised questions about educational outcomes, noting the tiny handful of Native young people who went on to university proved that Native people were capable of the rigours of higher education. Most children did not attend the residential school until they were 6 or 7 years old, the half day system meant it took two years to pass a grade level. Students were 15 or 16 years old taking the grade 5 curriculum; a curriculum designed for children 5 years younger. Not surprisingly many students were bored and lost interest in the educational process. Some principals and teachers defied the Indian Affairs Department directives, introducing full days in the classroom for Native children in grade 4 or higher.

In purely statistical terms the schools were not effective evangelistic tools. If they had been effective in turning out missionaries for the faith, then a larger number of Native people should have been Presbyterian. In 1919, approximately 15% of the residential schools in Canada were run by the Presbyterians, and they had been running that number of school for over two decades. But only 3% of the Native population identified itself as Presbyterian.

The students were not going home to proclaim a Presbyterian understanding of the Christian faith.

Thus the only achievable goal left to the schools was the assimilation of the students into the dominant culture. The growing view in the church was that the goal of the schools was to make Native people into good whites. The mandate of the schools became the assimilation of Native people, and the dominant message became the gospel of Canadian social religion. But even here the schools' success was questionable. To a number of church and government leaders a disturbing number of residential school graduates slipped back into the cultural and social mores of the reserve upon returning home. Not only did they fail to be missionaries for the gospel of Jesus Christ, they also failed to be missionaries for the gospel of hygiene, industriousness, and economic self-sufficiency. The gospel of Canadian social religion had not taken hold of their lives.

Even though the schools were failing to achieve the goals that had been set for them, they proved impossible to change. The church through the Women's Missionary Society continued to manage the personnel and funds going into the school. As the government carried more and more of the financial weight, it became increasingly difficult to challenge the government's lack of commitment to the schools. The government on the other hand, saw itself as getting good value for its money. It could not run the schools as cheaply as the churches could, and Native children were getting an education of some sort. Also from the government's perspective, the historic mission churches (Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, United) had been doing the education thing for a long time, and to call on them to make fundamental changes would potentially alienate a large and politically vocal constituency.

The Residential Schools were hard on many of the students who attended the schools. As has been well documented, there was abuse in the schools run by the churches, including those operated by The Presbyterian Church in Canada. The boarding school environment, with its 24-hour living experience and long evenings that needed to be filled in somehow, gave opportunity for inappropriate behaviour to take place. Teachers and other staff had total control over these children and young

people who had been entrusted to their care, and some staff took advantage of the power they had been given. This power when mixed with the racist attitudes that were common in Canadian society became a prescription for trouble. The Native people were consistently described as backward, incapable of concentrated study, lazy, and worse. These views, firmly planted in the culture, gave teachers and staff permission to treat students in dehumanizing ways. In this environment, physical, emotional and sexual abuse took place, as The Presbyterian Church in Canada's Confession stated.

Perhaps the most destructive element of Residential School life was the loneliness. Students were far from home, far from the surroundings they knew well, contact with parents was limited by distance and the lack of the

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communication technology which is part of our modern lives. Not every student in the Residential School system was abused physically or sexually, but every student felt the pain of loneliness and dislocation of being taken from their

familiar surroundings. This corrosive loneliness has had long term effects on the Native people of Canada.

Neither the government nor the church achieved the goals which led to the establishment of the schools. T.C. Ross, principal of Cecilia Jeffrey School, put his finger on the problem the residential schools faced,

Here is an institution in which the government professes to be attempting to educate, and the church professes to be attempting to evangelize. The government grant is too small for an adequate staff of teachers. As a result education suffers. None but a few of the present staff attach due importance to the task of presenting the Gospel of Jesus Christ to these children.

The government was unwilling to provide the schools with the financial resources necessary to do their job well. The Presbyterian Church accepted the opportunity to manage these schools on behalf of the government. In the process of managing the schools, the church and the school staffs lost the spiritual centre that had led to the creation of the schools in the first place. The loss of the spiritual vision meant that the schools became perpetuators of the dominant society, oppressing Native culture through proclaiming the message that Native people needed to be assimilated into Canadian social religion.