

The work of the Aboriginal Issues Working Group

RECENTLY WE asked Pamela Thomson and Marion Lynn about their involvement with the Aboriginal Issues Working Group. We wanted to know more about why they are engaged in this area of ministry and the ways some of us might become connected with this work.

Pamela, how long have you been interested in the issues faced by the Aboriginal community and was there a particular moment when you felt this was something we, at Redeemer, could and should learn more?

My passion has been slow growing. I began to think about residential schools when Andrew Wesley first joined us at Redeemer. Then, came the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement in 2007 and a donation. I ruminated on the news and our apologies over the years. When I had settled into partial retirement and a new home, I felt a call to learn and to act within my community.

What about you, Marion? Was there an event or situation that prompted you to deepen your involvement in the Aboriginal community?

Those of us working on women's rights and in feminist studies since the 1970's, recognized the struggle on the part of Native women for their rights as an integral part of Canadian women's studies and social action. And, research on violence against women always uncovered the disproportional violence against poor and marginalized women. The heightened demonstrations and publicity about missing and murdered indigenous women, beginning with the uncovering of the horrendous crimes committed by Robert Pickton against the women in downtown Eastside, Vancouver, focussed my attention once again on Native women.

Of the events that we've offered at Redeemer, Pamela, is there one that has been inspiring for you?

Meeting and getting to know our three Aboriginal counsellors, Mike, Kim and Murray, was an inspiration and a push to become involved more deeply. Hearing the stories of people I actually knew, about their experiences at residential school, and their journey of recovery, had a huge impact on my sense of fairness and justice. Their friendship continues to support my journey.

Marion, what Redeemer event encouraged you the most?

Organizing and participating in the teach-in entitled *Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls in Canada: A National Tragedy*, was the most important event in 2014 for me. Listening to the following women was an enlightening experience for all of us: Dawn Harvard, President of the Ontario Native Women's Association; Crystal Basi, Executive Director of the Native Women's Resource Centre of Toronto; Mary Eberts, Human Rights and Aboriginal Issues lawyer; and the Honourable Dr Carolyn Bennett, Liberal critic for Aboriginal Affairs. We expected the usual thirty to forty participants to come to the Redeemer on Saturday, March 8, International Women's Day. Instead we had about 160. A number of us have continued working on this and associated issues during the past year.

A follow-up question for you, Marion.

Has there been an event or a moment where what you heard and learned was difficult and yet important to wrestle with?

I volunteered for and attended the October 4 Vigil, organized by the Native Women's Resource Centre of Toronto, and held in Allan Gardens on a cold night.

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The setting was filled with candles to remember the missing and murdered women. A few hundred people attended. The speakers, one more brilliant and moving than the next, told their stories of violence and survival. I walked home alone thinking that if these brave and determined women could work in community to support one another and create change, then I could walk along their path with them.

I was invited to attend a December 6 memorial event at the YWCA Elm Street Centre, to hear of a donation of \$1 million by the sisters of the Ruby family to the YWCA in honour of their mother who had been a life-long supporter of the work of the YWCA. The Elm Centre that opened in the summer of 2011 provides 350 apartments for women and children escaping poverty, violence, marginalization, and those living with mental health or addiction issues for a safe, warm and welcoming community. Fifty of these apartments are in the section called Winona's Place and are specifically for Aboriginal women and their children. It is a safe haven for them in what can be a cold and careless city. I am currently working on a fund-raising project for Winona's Place, to make it safer and more inclusive for those who call it home.

As Liska Stefko says, "Show up." If you want social change and social justice, put yourself forward, march, join, write letters, organize workshops and teach-ins, donate money, attend events, talk to those in power, talk to those who are victimized by the system.

Pamela, what new learning do you have that arose out of one of those times where there were difficult things to hear?

My reading has had the greatest impact, in addition to spending time with our counsellors in informal situations. The toughest things I learned concerned colonialism and the ignoring of the stories, culture & rights of our original Indigenous residents in reading *A Fair Country* by John Ralston Saul. This book showed me that my whole approach to my personal and professional life was wrong. It was very unsettling to be told that most of what I had thought was misguided in terms of law and social justice. Although I was not dismissive of Aboriginal folks, the culture and society I lived within and represented was racist and ignorant.

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I now know in my heart that I am a Treaty person, and that my governments have broken laws without shame, have made laws to demean and destroy, have taken actions which betray principle and favour the "dominant culture" for no good or valid reason. I want to change hearts, to radically alter life views to reflect the Gospel People we are.

If we wanted to read more about the issues the working group is raising for us as a community, what books would you recommend?

JR Saul's new book *The Comeback* is an easier read than *A Fair Country*, but is just as instructive and unsettling. It is essential to read, as is *The Inconvenient Indian* by Thomas King. King makes one chuckle on every page for the first half; then the humour becomes darker as he hammers home the history of American and Canadian Indigenous peoples in relation to the white, colonialist powers. This book goes a long way to push past guilt and sorrow to understanding and acceptance of the truth of what each of us and our ancestors have done. {Example: why are white people "massacred," but Aboriginals are "conquered"?)

I loved the language and story of *Indian Horse* by Richard Wagamese. It, like Joseph Boyden's two first books, is set in the north (Kenora and Moosonee) where I grew up and where as a young AYP member my family billeted girls from the residential school at Moose Factory in the 1950's.

Marion?

Begin with Joseph Boyden's trilogy: *Three Day Road*, *Through Black Spruce*, and *The Orenda*

I echo Pamela with John Ralston Saul's *A Fair Country* and *The Last Comeback*

Stevie Cameron's *On the Farm: Robert William Pickton and the Tragic Story of Vancouver's Missing Women*, and the final one I would suggest for the moment: Candace Savage's *A Geography of Blood, Unearthing Memory from a Prairie Landscape*.

Marion, you wrote about your experiences of attending Pow Wows last summer. In these cold days of winter, what memory of those events lingers and makes you yearn for summer when you can get back out there to attend more Pow Wows?

There is a deep and abiding spirituality as the foundation of these

performances and gatherings. The speakers always thank the Creator. You do not take photos during the Grand Entrance, or of the dancers and musicians without their permission. It is a beautiful natural setting; it is a holy place and a holy time.

There is a deep sense of community, with generations of family coming together and those who have moved off reserve, returning home. The artistry of the musicians and dancers is ancient and stunning. The designs of the regalia, the costumes worn by the dancers, and the performances themselves go back generations, representing history and culture, tragedy and survival.

Pamela, has there been an event beyond the ones held at Redeemer that has encouraged you to bring that learning back to our community?

Yes. Attending a discussion among Wab Kinew, Bishop Mark MacDonald and Jennifer Henry about *Buffalo Shout Salmon Cry*. This became Redeemer's summer read this past year. They have so much experience and knowledge to impart. The perspectives of each, because of circumstances of birth and faith, were invaluable in helping me start learning to articulate the issues and to envision how Redeemer could grow in knowledge and action. This is a spiritual journey for me as well as a matter of justice and living the Gospel.

We've had a number of events at Redeemer in the past two years. For both of you, what hopes, dreams, and plans does the Aboriginal Issues Working Group have in the works in 2015? What would you hope that each of us would undertake to become more involved with the questions that the working group is striving to work toward?

Pamela: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission will issue its report at the beginning of June. We want to help people prepare for this Report and then to gather as we begin the process of learning and understanding its contents so that actions of reconciliation may begin.

Our guiding principles, as Jim Boyles has articulated, are to educate, encounter and engage with every aspect of the aboriginal story: racism, poverty, education, clean water, housing, treaty rights, land claims. I want all members of my community to commit to reconciliation and reparation.

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Marion: Indeed. Read, organize and attend lectures and events, watch films and plays, and The Agenda on TVO. Go into Native communities and organizations and ask if you can join, volunteer, donate time and money, listen to stories. Watch local, provincial and federal politics with Native issues in mind. Write to your local councillor, MPP and MP to be both critical and supportive as required.

To sum up and reiterate—and we are on the same page on this one!—here is what you can do:

READ. Read and Learn. The AIWG has a reading list, which hopefully will be up on our website soon. AIWG publishes a weekly news digest of

links to news and events. History, treaties, the TRC, First Nations culture, native spirituality

VOLUNTEER. There are several Aboriginal organizations which would welcome us: Toronto Urban Native Ministry; Council Fire; Native Women's Resource Centre. Regular Vigils for MMIW and other causes can always use help.

GO. Go to a Pow Wow this June or in the summer. There are drum socials, dances regularly. Every week you can find a lecture or a panel in the city. "Just show up." Create an opportunity to meet an urban native. Find an event during Aboriginal History Month.

WRITE. Letters to politicians keep issues top of mind on poverty, education on & off the Reserve, missing & murdered Indigenous women & girls, healthcare, support for intergenerational and direct survivors of Residential Schools, water pollution, air pollution and climate change. Do a book review for *The Gathering*.

PARTICIPATE in AIWG events and offer help to its members. We encourage suggestions or queries.

TALK. Discuss your discoveries as you learn. Ask questions. Share your journey.

DONATE MONEY. Indigenous organizations and events need financial support.

EDUCATE. ENCOUNTER. ENGAGE.

Thank you to both of you for your time in answering our questions and more importantly for the energy you bring to helping us to learn more so that we may experience more your efforts to educate, encounter, and engage.