

A Call to Action on Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women

Marion Lynn

Background

A teach-in on Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls was held on March 8, 2014 at our church to mark International Women's Day. Since that time, this tragedy has continued to garner a great deal of political, international and media support.

The speakers at the 2014 teach-in were: Dawn Harvard, President of the Ontario Native Women's Association and Vice-President of the Native Women's Association of Canada; Crystal Basi, Executive Director of The Native Women's Resource Centre of Toronto; Carolyn Bennett, MP and Liberal critic for Aboriginal Issues; and Mary Eberts, a lawyer with more than 20 years experience working on Aboriginal rights. All continue their work to bring justice to the women and their families.

Many of the 160 people who attended the 2014 teach-in, spurred on by the discussion groups, began working with local organizations, pressured politicians to establish a national inquiry, attended vigils and memorial ceremonies, and called for changes in education curriculum so that Canadians know more about Indigenous history and culture.

The Challenge

A few months ago, members of the Aboriginal Issues Working Group at the Church of the Redeemer were asked to organize a follow-up event to evaluate what has happened over the past year in terms of the missing and murdered Indigenous women, and to determine how we can contribute to the elimination of this national tragedy. In response, an event was organized for Saturday, March 21, 2015, following the National Round Table in Ottawa on February 27. We agreed to mirror the form of a round table discussion, with speakers, presentations, questions and answers, ending with an hour-long discussion and establishment of action plans and strategies. We were fortunate to have the return of three of the speakers from last year: Carolyn Bennett, Mary Eberts and Dawn Harvard, currently President of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC).


In addition, we were honoured to have Audrey Huntley, one of the leaders of "No More Silence," Victoria Pezzo, the current Executive Director of the Native Women's Resource Centre of Toronto, and Kim Stanton, Legal Director of the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF).

The March 21 Symposium

True to the concept of the roundtable, this event was held in the parish hall, where the space was conducive to forming two concentric circles of chairs. All participants could see each other as well as the speakers, who formed part of the circle. When the numbers unexpectedly swelled from 50 to 85, more chairs were placed at the back, still within the form of a circle, creating the physical form of inclusivity. People began to register shortly after 11AM and went into the boardroom to help themselves to a buffet lunch, provided by Bernice Hookimawillillener from Council Fire. As they found seats within the circle, people introduced themselves and talked with each other, a positive starting point for conversation. The event was opened with a prayer and smudging by Andrew Wesley, an elder and Anglican priest, and by drumming and singing by Mii Quan. The ensuing presentations were informative and riveting, leading to the consensus that there is a critical need for a public inquiry.

Keep the conversation growing.

The full report on the Symposium, together with the action plan to help you get involved, will be emailed to those who have attended the 2014 and 2015 events. It will also be available on the Church of the Redeemer web site. I have added context and details of some of the history and the writings in order to demonstrate the solid foundation for the call for a National Inquiry. This information is readily available on the internet and worth a deeper reading and analysis by those who want to become more knowledgeable and to become part of the political and social action on missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

Marion M. Lynn, is a member of the Aboriginal Issues Working Group. You can contact her at marionmlynn@gmail.com for a hard copy of the full report. 

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Actions Proposed as a result of the roundtable

- ☞ Acknowledge our shared history and work to eliminate the harmful and illegitimate distinction between “Aboriginal” and “Canadian” histories.
- ☞ Read. Read. Read. Everyone must learn about past and current colonial policies and practices. We must teach real history, undistorted by colonial attitudes.
- ☞ Listen To—and learn—the stories.
- ☞ Research authoritative resources. We need stories every day for as long as it takes. We need media contacts and supports. Blogging.
- ☞ Teach all teachers at all levels. They need “authentic information.”
- ☞ Make this a key election issue. Talk about it every day to someone who might vote. Draft election questions.
- ☞ Work as if an Inquiry will happen. Discuss Commissioners and draft terms. Then come to LEAF and others for detailed language.
- ☞ Educate ourselves: “Robust education and discussion will create a robust inquiry.”
- ☞ Support the grassroots groups and a National Inquiry every chance you get in petitions and online. Follow social media campaigns such as #AmINext #AreWeNext #MMIW #MMIWG #InquiryNow.
- ☞ Push for book clubs in Aboriginal History Month in schools, libraries, and approach retailers such as Indigo.
- ☞ Demand safe transport on isolated territories e.g. the Highway of Tears.
- ☞ Visit and Volunteer at Native Women’s Resource Centre Toronto www.nwrct.ca or Native Canadian Centre www.ncct.on.ca
- ☞ Send money to any MMIW organization or NWAC or ONWA.

In for the Long Haul: From Truth to Reconciliation

Pamela Thomson

On May 1, 130 folks came to Church of the Redeemer to hear Justice Murray Sinclair (Peguis First Nation), chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) speak on the topic of “From Truth to Reconciliation.” Justice Sinclair is a powerful thinker



and speaker who tells stories to answer queries.

Our title for the evening came from his observation in a recent TRC Youtube video that all Canadians must be involved in the journey of reconciliation over the next many years.

He emphasised that the residential schools were not “schools,” but places of deprogramming culture, language, learning, myths and stories, family alliances, and spirituality. The aim of the “schools” was to demean all that the children knew. Justice Sinclair reminded us that those who were not abused lived in fear of abuse, in a culture of disempowerment. Self-esteem was destroyed for generation upon generation.

The settlement agreement under which the TRC was formed created a myriad of injustices: those who spoke their story felt intimidated and violated having to remember and to disclose what often had been kept in; Aboriginals in day schools, in Newfoundland and Labrador, and in other federally-run schools are excluded from the process; those who died and those generations raised by survivors or children of survivors are excluded. These exclusions create a large hurdle to true reconciliation.

Justice Sinclair reminded us that education broadly tries to answer four questions to prepare one for life.

Where do I come from? Here is where myth, legend, holy stories of creation and people, and real heroes arise. This is the history of oneself, the family, the community, society.

Where am I going? Here one is taught to recognize one’s responsibility to the future. We can deal with the issue of death, too.



Why am I here? What will I be/do when I grow up?
 What is my role in life on a minute and a larger scale?
 Who must I care for?

Who am I? Who are we?

Particularly in the context of these questions, Aboriginal youth were not given answers or led in a way they could understand. Because they were separated from home, there was no reinforcement from family or community as they had the right to expect.

When it comes to forgiveness, that is not for churches or governments to give. They owe a new mind-set and understanding of their role. Forgiveness is for the Aboriginal. Most importantly, forgiveness is what a survivor parent needs from an abused child; a child of a survivor needs from an abused or rejected child.

Reconciliation is about the right relationship with Aboriginal peoples. This reconciliation is coming out of a violent relationship. If you want to be in relationship, it must be developed along the lines of self-respect and respect for Aboriginals. For self-respect, that which has been taken away needs to be replaced. How can we compensate for that which has been taken? Justice Sinclair referred to the concept of ‘atonement.’ This word comes from the Medieval English “at-onement,” or “harmony.” A brief search of the concept indicates the role of atonement in religious beliefs and practices. In Judaism, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the

times of atonement, the holiest day of the year. In Christianity, the moral influence view of atonement is based on the belief that the purpose of Jesus was to bring positive moral change to humanity.

Justice Sinclair gave us a hint to what “the long haul” might be. He recalled part of the Exodus story where the people of Israel did not enter the promised land until all survivors of slavery were gone. It took generations. This story also suggests that it is the young who will be willing to work on forgiveness of the colonists, the settlers.

Reconciliation will be complete when all Canadians live in right relations with others based on mutual respect arising from knowledge and understanding. The Aboriginal young will have self respect, dignity



and pride, and then the process will be engaged. “If you think it was hard to hear the truth, it is little compared to the difficulty of reconciliation.”

Please watch, listen, respect and support differences, implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and restore what has been taken.

Pamela is a member of the Aboriginal Issues Working Group and was instrumental in bringing Justice Sinclair to Church of the Redeemer for this engaging evening of listening and learning.

