

# **The United Church of Canada's Response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action**

(August 2022)

The United Church of Canada continues to engage with and respond to the 94 Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (The Calls to Action can be found at the [The Truth and Reconciliation Commission webpage](http://www.united-church.ca/nctr.ca/reports.php) of united-church.ca or at [nctr.ca/reports.php](http://nctr.ca/reports.php)).

In June 2015, the churches that are parties to the Settlement Agreement (Anglican, Presbyterian, United, and a number of Roman Catholic entities) made a joint statement in response to the Calls to Action. The Response of the Churches can also be found at [www.united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/truth-and-reconciliation-commission](http://www.united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/truth-and-reconciliation-commission).

While The United Church of Canada recognizes the value in each of the Calls to Action, this document refers specifically to

- 1) calls directed to the churches that are parties to the Settlement Agreement or to faith groups generally
- 2) calls directed to the parties to the Settlement Agreement, which includes the churches

On [The Calls to the Church webpage](#) of the United Church website, you will find information regarding our response to Calls that relate to concerns for which the United Church has historically undertaken advocacy work, and continues to do so: the public inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls; child welfare and education; implementation by governments of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; and mandatory school curricula re: Indigenous history and culture, treaties, and residential school history.

## **Calls to Action directed to the churches and faith groups**

- 48.** We call upon the church parties to the Settlement Agreement, and all other faith groups and interfaith social justice groups in Canada who have not already done so, to formally adopt and comply with the principles, norms, and standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a framework for reconciliation. This would include, but not be limited to, the following commitments:
  - i. Ensuring that their institutions, policies, programs, and practices comply with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
  - ii. Respecting Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination in spiritual matters, including the right to practice, develop, and teach their own spiritual and religious traditions, customs, and ceremonies, consistent with Article 12:1 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
  - iii. Engaging in ongoing public dialogue and actions to support the United Nations

## Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

- iv. Issuing a statement no later than March 31, 2016, from all religious denominations and faith groups, as to how they will implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

### *Comments:*

A UN Declaration Task Group was formed in December 2015 to 1) develop a statement on implementing the declaration and 2) develop and implement a process to engage the whole church in complying with this Call to Action.

On March 30, 2016, the United Church joined the broader ecumenical community in announcing a collective intention to implement the principles, norms, and standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation (see [An Ecumenical Statement on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) on the [kairoscanada.org](http://kairoscanada.org) website).

On March 31, 2016, the United Church issued its own [statement on the UN Declaration](#).

The task group oversaw an educational process with management, staff, and committees, including new regional structures, as well as a video, workshop and other materials for use by all structures of the church, including communities of faith. These are available on the [UN Declaration webpage](#).

The United Church has also made a significant structural change to reflect the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In July 2018, the [Calls to the Church](#), an Indigenous-made plan to create a self-determining Indigenous Church, was presented to General Council 43. A year later, after an extensive consultation on implementation, the new structure was approved and is underway.

The United Church has been an advocate for the adoption and implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples for many years, and continues to advocate for the federal implementation of the Declaration. Most recently (March 2019) it participated in an ecumenical delegation to discuss Bill C-262 with Senators.

- 49.** We call upon all religious denominations and faith groups who have not already done so to repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples, such as the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius.

### *Comments:*

In 2012, the Executive of the General Council of The United Church of Canada passed a motion denouncing the Doctrine of Discovery, and initiated a process of discerning how its own values, actions, policies and structures continue to be informed by the Doctrine of Discovery. This resulted in a resource-development workshop in August 2015, and work is ongoing in drawing

attention to the instruments and impacts of colonization, particularly in worship and youth programs. A resource entitled “Acknowledging the Territory in Worship” invites congregations to acknowledge and learn the history of the territory where they gather (search “acknowledging the territory” at [united-church.ca](http://united-church.ca)).

The church encourages and promotes the development and use of ecumenical resources, as well as secular resources, that help to reveal how the Doctrine underlies systemic oppression of Indigenous Peoples.

A [Doctrine of Discovery section](#) of the United Church website has been developed to draw attention to this issue and related materials.

- 58.** We call upon the Pope to issue an apology to Survivors, their families, and communities for the Roman Catholic Church’s role in the spiritual, cultural, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children in Catholic-run residential schools. We call for that apology to be similar to the 2010 apology issued to Irish victims of abuse and to occur within one year of the issuing of this Report and to be delivered by the Pope in Canada.

*Comments:*

We wish to acknowledge how important such an Apology would be to Indigenous members of the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian denominations, as well as Indigenous people who are not a part of the church. We particularly acknowledge residential school survivors, intergenerational survivors, and their communities. We also understand the importance of this to the many non-Indigenous people in the Roman Catholic church and beyond who are committed to reconciliation.

- 59.** We call upon church parties to the Settlement Agreement to develop ongoing education strategies to ensure that their respective congregations learn about their church’s role in colonization, the history and legacy of residential schools, and why apologies to former residential school students, their families, and communities were necessary.

*Comments:*

The United Church has developed and animated various educational resources and programs. These materials and an array of worship resources are available on the United Church website, including materials related to the 30th anniversary of the 1986 apology and the 20th anniversary of the 1998 Apology. A section of the website has been developed to host resources related to the [Apologies](#).

Histories of schools and photos are posted at [thechildrenremembered.ca](http://thechildrenremembered.ca). The book *Sorry: Why Our Church Apologized* is available from Wood Lake Books, and the church promotes and makes wide use of the KAIROS Blanket Exercise.

- 60.** We call upon leaders of the church parties to the Settlement Agreement and all other faiths, in collaboration with Indigenous spiritual leaders, Survivors, schools of theology, seminaries, and other religious training centres, to develop and teach curriculum for all student clergy, and all clergy and staff who work in Aboriginal communities, on the need to respect Indigenous spirituality in its own right, the history and legacy of residential schools and the roles of the church parties in that system, the history and legacy of religious conflict in Aboriginal families and communities, and the responsibility that churches have to mitigate such conflicts and prevent spiritual violence.

*Comments:*

In February 2015 the United Church released a statement that acknowledges its complicity in the denigration of Aboriginal wisdom and spirituality: “Affirming Other Spiritual Paths” (see Downloads on the [Apologies](#) webpage). The document contained a number of statements made by the United Church over the past several decades affirming the inherent validity of diverse spiritual traditions. The resource Circle and Cross: Dialogue Planning Tool was published in 2008 as “an invitation to a conversation about spirituality and justice in the relationships among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.” In 2015, the United Church, through the Ecumenical Working Group on Residential Schools, contributed to the creation of a theological reflection paper identifying questions and learnings arising from our role in the residential school system in order to foster discussion and discernment in theological colleges and learning centres.

The Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre and the Vancouver School of Theology’s Indigenous Ministries Consortium program prepare clergy for ministry in Aboriginal communities. Other theological institutions have incorporated Indigenous history and teachings within their curriculum. The Theological Education Circle (principals, deans, and keepers) has this Call to Action on their agenda.

The United Church and the Caretakers of Our Indigenous Circle have identified the need to educate student clergy, clergy already in paid accountable ministry, and clergy from other denominations and countries being admitted to ordered ministry, as well as all clergy and staff working in Aboriginal communities, particularly non-Aboriginal clergy. This work is now being overseen by the Indigenous Office of Vocation and the Indigenous Candidacy Board, which report to the National Indigenous Council. Education around Indigenous histories, cultures, and spiritualities was added to the list of Testamur requirements for ordination and commissioning.

The United Church is also coordinating an ecumenical working group which meets to discuss the ongoing colonial legacy of church mission and ministry among Indigenous peoples. This legacy extends beyond what happened in residential schools. The participating churches recognize that there are impacts of spiritual violence and Christian supremacism in Indigenous communities which remain to be addressed. They also are aware of deep divisions that may have been sown by mission strategies of denominations.

The group understands and is sensitive to the diversity of perspectives on the topic of spirituality among Indigenous nations across the country and the need to move thoughtfully and respectfully, and on a nation-to-nation basis. This includes being sensitive to relationships among denominations within Indigenous communities.

61. We call upon church parties to the Settlement Agreement, in collaboration with Survivors and representatives of Aboriginal organizations, to establish permanent funding to Aboriginal people for:
  - i. Community-controlled healing and reconciliation projects.
  - ii. Community-controlled culture- and language revitalization projects.
  - iii. Community-controlled education and relationship building projects.
  - iv. Regional dialogues for Indigenous spiritual leaders and youth to discuss Indigenous spirituality, self-determination, and reconciliation.

*Comments:*

In 1994, the United Church created [The Healing Fund](#), which provides \$300,000 in annual funding support to Aboriginal community-based healing projects. The [Justice and Reconciliation Fund](#), established in 1998, provides support of \$100,000 each year to community projects that foster awareness, dialogue, and relationship-building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The [Gifts with Vision](#) giving catalogue offers several gift opportunities that support community-led language and cultural revitalization, and reconciliation programs. [Mission & Service](#) supports many aspects of Indigenous ministries and justice. Programs like Wampum and Neechi have brought together Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth to sow seeds of friendship and right relations.

### **Calls to Action directed to the parties, including the churches**

29. We call upon the parties and, in particular, the federal government, to work collaboratively with plaintiffs not included in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement to have disputed legal issues determined expeditiously on an agreed set of facts.

*Comments:*

Over 1,000 claimants in the Independent Assessment Process (IAP) had not been compensated because of the use of the “administrative split” argument by Canada’s lawyers and the acceptance of that argument by IAP Adjudicators. An IAP claimant who was denied compensation made a Request for Direction that was heard in an Alberta court. The United Church intervened in support of the claimant in this case, but Judge Nation ruled in 2015 that the adjudicators had decided rightly in accepting the “administrative split” argument of Canada’s lawyers. Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett initiated a federal review

of these cases in February 2016, and most have now been settled.

The Day Schools Class Action (McLean) involves plaintiffs who attended Indian Day Schools on reserves or in Indigenous communities. The federal government as the sole defendant, and there is now a settlement agreement. The United Church is currently conducting a research project to identify all its records related to Day Schools.

The Day Scholars Class Action (Gottfriedson) deals with students who attended residential schools on reserve or in Indigenous communities but lived at home, and did not receive the Common Experience Payment. A settlement agreement in this action was reached in June 2021.

- 46.** We call upon the parties to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement to develop and sign a Covenant of Reconciliation that would identify principles for working collaboratively to advance reconciliation in Canadian society, and that would include, but not be limited to:
- i. Reaffirmation of the parties' commitment to reconciliation.
  - ii. Repudiation of concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples, such as the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius, and the reformation of laws, governance structures, and policies within their respective institutions that continue to rely on such concepts.
  - iii. Full adoption and implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation.
  - iv. Support for the renewal or establishment of Treaty relationships based on principles of mutual recognition, mutual respect, and shared responsibility for maintaining those relationships into the future.
  - v. Enabling those excluded from the Settlement Agreement to sign onto the Covenant of Reconciliation.
  - vi. Enabling additional parties to sign onto the Covenant of Reconciliation.

*Comments:*

The United Church, with the other parties to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), has been working on the Covenant since 2020. The process was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Broad consultation is expected in 2022.

- 73.** We call upon the federal government to work with churches, Aboriginal communities, and former residential school students to establish and maintain an online registry of residential school cemeteries, including, where possible, plot maps showing the location of deceased residential school children.

*Comments:*

National and regional archives staff have sought and identified all information the church holds on deaths, burials, and cemeteries related to United Church residential schools. The Remembering the Children Society in Alberta, with United Church staff support, has been working with the provincial Aboriginal Heritage Resources section to identify all residential school cemeteries and related unmarked graveyards in Alberta. This is critical work in the service of accountability and reconciliation, and our church and archives are open to every initiative to collaborate with others.

On a related Call to Action, on 30 September 2019 the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation launched the National Student Memorial Register online at [memorial.nctr.ca](http://memorial.nctr.ca). The United Church issued a [Memorial Prayer for Children of This Land](#) to accompany reading of the register.

- 74.** We call upon the federal government to work with the churches and Aboriginal community leaders to inform the families of children who died at residential schools of the child's burial location, and to respond to families' wishes for appropriate commemoration ceremonies and markers, and reburial in home communities where requested.

*Comments:*

The United Church has begun this work with respect to four of the residential schools for which it takes responsibility: Red Deer, File Hills, Regina, and Brandon. The church has also responded to inquiries about burials of patients from the Charles Camsell Hospital at a cemetery on the property of the Edmonton IRS—where the students dug the graves.

The federal government contributed funds to several ceremonies held in connection with the Red Deer school planned by the Remembering the Children Society. Ceremonies have also been held in regard to the File Hills IRS, the Regina Indian Industrial School, and Brandon Indian Residential School cemeteries. A sign and fence have been erected at the File Hills IRS cemetery. Markers for some of the United Church schools were obtained through the Assembly of First Nations–Aboriginal Healing Foundation “National Commemorative Marker Project.” Further work is needed to determine more of the names of those who are buried in residential school cemeteries.

The United Church will, where appropriate, work in cooperation with Indigenous communities and the federal government in any further initiatives. In July 2021, the church established [Bringing the Children Home](#), an initiative to support communities, should they wish it, in the work of identifying unmarked graves, knowledge gathering, commemoration, and ceremony to honour the children who did not return home from United Church residential institutions. There is also commitment to directly provide communities with all United Church archival records related to residential institutions.

- 75.** We call upon the federal government to work with provincial, territorial, and

municipal governments, churches, Aboriginal communities, former residential school students, and current landowners to develop and implement strategies and procedures for the ongoing identification, documentation, maintenance, commemoration, and protection of residential school cemeteries or other sites at which residential school children were buried. This is to include the provision of appropriate memorial ceremonies and commemorative markers to honour the deceased children.

*Comments:*

The United Church has been involved in recent years in supporting work to identify, reclaim, preserve, and document cemeteries and honour student burials related to our schools at Red Deer, Edmonton, File Hills, Regina, and Brandon.

The City of Regina designated the Regina Indian Industrial School (RIIS) school and cemetery site as a heritage resource in September 2016. In-kind funds allocated from the Settlement Agreement supported the RIIS Media Project and the production of the documentary *RIIS from Amnesia*, which documented the research process in developing the list of students who attended RIIS and then visiting the descendants in 34 First Nations communities. The Red Deer Industrial School cemetery has been designated a provincial heritage resource. In 2017, a monument was erected at the graves of four students buried in the Red Deer City cemetery. The former Assiniboine Presbytery coordinated the development of the Brandon IRS Mobile Learning Centre to share information about that school and its cemeteries in relevant communities in Manitoba.

As information emerges regarding other sites, the United Church will work collaboratively on research, information-sharing, and commemoration. The Bringing the Children Home initiative is a response to this Call to Action.

- 76.** We call upon the parties engaged in the work of documenting, maintaining, commemorating, and protecting residential school cemeteries to adopt strategies in accordance with the following principles:
- i. The Aboriginal community most affected shall lead the development of such strategies.
  - ii. Information shall be sought from residential school Survivors and other Knowledge Keepers in the development of such strategies.
  - iii. Aboriginal protocols shall be respected before any potentially invasive technical inspection and investigation of a cemetery site.

*Comments:*

The United Church supports these principles. In particular, our experience at the site of the Red Deer school reflected these principles and resulted in the establishment of the Remembering

the Children Society, with membership from several First Nations, the Metis Nation of Alberta, and congregations in Treaty 6 and 7 regions. The Society published a handbook, *Guidelines for Initiating Projects involving Indian Residential School Cemeteries and Unmarked Burials*. One thousand copies have been distributed. The Regina Indian Industrial School Commemorative Association has followed a similar path. Regarding File Hills IRS unmarked burials on Okanese First Nation, Okanese has led all the efforts in respect of recovering, commemorating, and protecting the graveyard with support from the United Church in Saskatchewan.

The Bringing the Children Home initiative is a response to this Call to Action.

- 81.** We call upon the federal government, in collaboration with Survivors and their organizations, and other parties to the Settlement Agreement, to commission and install a publicly accessible, highly visible, Residential Schools National Monument in the city of Ottawa to honour Survivors and all the children who were lost to their families and communities.

*Comments:*

Initial visioning for this monument is underway, and The United Church has indicated to the Department of Heritage its support for and willingness to participate in this initiative.

- 82.** We call upon provincial and territorial governments, in collaboration with Survivors and their organizations, and other parties to the Settlement Agreement, to commission and install a publicly accessible, highly visible, Residential Schools Monument in each capital city to honour Survivors and all the children who were lost to their families and communities.

*Comments:*

The United Church would collaborate in any such initiative by a province or territory.

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