# A Time of Reflection on Port Alberni: A Pastoral Gathering

On Tuesday, February 21, 2023, the Tseshaht First Nation of British Columbia shared preliminary research findings concerning 67 children who had died while attending the Alberni Residential Institution, and evidence of 17 unmarked graves at the site.

This script is part of The United Church of Canada’s response to this news from Port Alberni for the non-Indigenous church. The aim of these sessions is to remember the children and their families, to hold space for the variety of emotions and reactions to the findings reported by the Tseshaht First Nation, and to equip us to have conversations and hold space for others in your congregations and communities through this difficult time. This is done through sharing what we know and offering a reflective space to engage in the ongoing work of healing and reparation.

This resource has been created by the Rev. Dr. Pamela McCarroll, Vice Principal and Associate Professor at Emmanuel College; Liz Garrison, a social worker psychotherapist who specializes in working holistically with people living with complex trauma, grief, and pain; the Rev. Robin McGauley, a spiritual director and artist; and General Council staff Lori Ransom and Alydia Smith.

Please adapt this resource to fit your context.

In preparation we suggest that you watch the [press conference from Tseshaht First Nation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sh_sYN17Ko8) and visit the [United Church website](https://united-church.ca) for current information on the church’s response.

You may consider having visuals or symbols to represent the different emotions named. In smaller groups consider ways for participants to share their feelings. Please also remind people to use the resources available to them:

* 24-Hour Crisis Line for Indigenous Residential School Survivors: 1-866-925-4419
* Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Crisis Line: 1-844-413-6649
* Hope for Wellness: 1-855-242-3310
* [Employment and Family Assistance Program (EFAP)](https://uccbenefits.ca/group-benefits/employee-and-family-assistance-program/), 1-800-387-4765
* Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868, Text: 686868

## Welcome and Acknowledgement of Traditional Territory

Insert words appropriate to your location.

Light a candle.

## Context: What We Know

Please add updated information or [read the statement issued by The United Church of Canada](https://united-church.ca/news/response-phase-one-findings-alberni-residential-institution).

Share information on the [Bringing the Children Home initiative](https://united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/climate-change), which has three main components:

1. Provide funding to Indigenous communities, should they wish it, to support the work of identifying unmarked graves, knowledge gathering, commemoration, and ceremony to honour the children who did not return home from these residential institutions.
2. Make direct provision to communities, should they wish it, of all United Church archival records related to residential institutions.
3. Continue to conduct archival and oral history work to create a document index and narrative of all the information we have related to student deaths and burial sites.

## Moment of Silence

## Prayer for the Work of the Church

(With thanks to the Right Rev. Dr. Carmen Lansdowne for writing some of the words of this [*prayer*](https://united-church.ca/prayers/prayer-non-indigenous-church-after-results-tseshaht-first-nation).)

Creator,  
you, in whom we live and move and have our being,  
you created the universe and everything in it, in the fullness of your time,  
which is so vast it is difficult for us to comprehend.

We, your children, caught up in the busy-ness of life,  
often forget there is always space and time.  
Always.

We continue to be held to account for the ongoing legacy of  
the United Church’s role in colonization and the operation of residential institutions  
—the so-called “schools.”

Today we are held accountable specifically for our operation of the Alberni institution  
in the traditional territory of the Tseshaht (c̓išaaʔatḥ) First Nation.

This is difficult work—the messiness of repentance can be hard to do,  
and we may feel tempted to rush.  
There is no rush—only your time,  
your healing.

We bring to mind the hard work that healing takes—  
the commitment and discipline to practise ways of peace and compassion in every aspect of life, and the emotional labour that this work demands.

We are grateful for those who take up the task of Indigenous justice as the core of their work   
in the world.

We remember the Tseshaht community’s ongoing work  
to commemorate the lives lost at Alberni, to care for the grave sites,  
and to support healing within their community.  
May your healing presence be with them.

We remember all survivors of the residential school system and their family members.   
May your healing presence be with them.

We remember those whose employment with the United Church includes this important work on the church’s behalf, knowing that their individual emotional lives are significantly impacted, especially the staff who themselves are survivors.  
We remember Indigenous Ministries and Justice staff, regional council staff, General Council and United Church Archives staff, the Moderator, and the General Secretary.  
May your healing presence be with them.

We remember elected members on various committees and councils of the United Church who work for justice for Indigenous peoples, especially at this time as they and we listen and discern an appropriate response to the Tseshaht community’s calls for action.  
May your healing presence be with them and all of us.

In the silence of our hearts we name to you now those we know who are engaged in this important work. (silence)  
May your healing presence be with them.

And in the silence of our hearts we pray for ourselves,  
revisiting our own commitment to Indigenous justice and reconciliation.

May your healing presence be with us.  
May we be open and ready to journey on this path toward healing.  
May each step on the journey be taken in humility and grounded in your love.

We pray in the name of the One who loves us and has shown this love to us.  
Amen.

## Spiritual Reflection

We come together today to pause and pray, to mourn and lament, to remember and honour the children whose graves have been found at the Port Alberni residential institution. This is a time to recognize the many emotions, currents, and energies running through us—through our individual bodies and communities. We acknowledge the anguish of hearing about these unmarked graves and the stories of horrific abuse and violence at a United Church–run institution.

It can be a temptation in times like these to want to skip over or shove aside the pain and instead run to try to fix and solve all that has happened. However, Indigenous leaders, communities, scripture, and trauma theory advise that this approach can make things worse.

Since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action were announced in 2015, Indigenous leaders and communities have been urging Canadians to not jump to “reconciliation” but to be present to hear and absorb this time of truth-telling. The uncovering of unmarked graves at the Port Alberni residential institution is an important truth-telling moment.

The invitation to each of us is to allow ourselves to feel and acknowledge the full weight of the atrocities that happened.

In Christian sacred stories, over and over we notice the people of God journeying through their emotions—their rage, their sadness, their shame and sense of confusion. They journey with God and with each other. We see Jesus, our mentor and friend, weeping and crying and openly expressing the pain, anger, and confusion he feels.

The Christian story speaks of incarnation—of the Divine embodied in human form. This means that the experience of being human, of feelings and emotions, are understood by God and are embraced by God. Incarnation is about love. Not a love that is sentimental, but a love that is lived out through action.

I’m going to invite us to pause now, close your eyes if that’s helpful, or come to a soft gaze, to turn inward and connect with the part of yourself that knows love. Notice, if you can, where love exists within yourself, within your body. Dwell here for a minute.

Do you understand this love to be the source of God within you?

Hear these words from the United Church’s Song of Faith:

[We] speak faithfully of  
the One on whom our hearts rely,  
the fully shared life at the heart of the universe.

We witness to Holy Mystery that is Wholly Love….

In grateful response to God’s abundant love,  
 we bear in mind our integral connection  
 to the earth and one another;  
we participate in God’s work of healing and mending creation.

I am reminded too of theologian Paul Tillich, who wrote: “The first duty of love is to listen.”

As we listen to our difficult emotions, we can do so in a container, a space, of love. As we acknowledge and confess the complicity of the church in the process of colonization and the death and the pain that this continues to cause, may we listen as an act of love. May we trust in Love to guide us.

### Silence

Instead of speaking words to God in prayer, I invite you instead to be silent, for you to listen to God’s call to you in a time of prayer.

### Silence

And turn your attention now in silence to remembering the children who died and the families and communities who lost them. Hold them in love….

Source of Love and justice, we are sorry and deeply troubled by the enormity of our acts of betrayal. Amen.

## Holding Space

As many of you know, grief comes in many forms. We encounter it in various ways in losses throughout our lives, but even so the full force of it can often surprise us. When a new loss emerges, like the painful loss of these children’s lives, it can catch us off-guard, feeling an intensity or numbness we forgot we knew.

It is one thing to know that grief exists cognitively, or in our minds, and another to feel it—feel it alive in our chests, our guts, our hearts, and our communities. We are taking some time today to name some of the emotions that can be common grief responses present in our collective experience of grief. In naming these emotions we are acknowledging the impact of the Tseshaht announcement on us collectively. It is our hope that mindfully and prayerfully naming these emotions is an invitation to be reflective on how the truth of this news touches us.

I invite you to reflect silently on your own experience and in your communities as we name our emotions. I invite you to allow yourself to experience the emotions named in ways that feel okay for you. We name some common reactions and emotions as a way of opening ourselves to acknowledge them as part of our collective human experience. After each emotion is named we will pause for a moment of silence that will end marked with the sound of a bell. The bell will open up the chat for a minute or two for you to enter a word or two- to three-word phrase as part of our meditative reflection today. This could be noting any affirmations or repetition of any of the words spoken, body sensations, emotions, or images you feel. We acknowledge that silent presence is also participation. (pause)

It has been a hard couple of years, and there are and have been many crises, both personal and collective. It is a normal human response to shut down, want to tune out, when it all feels too much. Sometimes this is short-lived, like shock after an accident; sometimes we want to just avoid and deny pain altogether. We may have little capacity for our own emotions or that of others.

We pause to honour the numb and frozen parts present in ourselves and in our communities today as we reflect on this most recent announcement.

### Silence

Some may feel outrage—at the church, at God, at the Canadian government, at the challenge this presents, at yourself, or something else. It may feel more like an anxious drive to move, an increase in heart rate and an urgency.

Like fire, anger struggles to be contained. It can be destructive but can be a source of strength for action, pushing us forward, pulling us onward, too.

We pause to honour the anger and pain present in ourselves and in our communities today….

### Silence

Death is sad. Death, violence, and abuse related to injustice, borne out on children and families, is devastating. Our sadness, tears, and sense of hopelessness may sit like a lump in our throats or a constriction in our chests, holding us in place, causing us to pause.

We pause to honour the sad parts present in ourselves and in our communities today.

### Silence

For both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people living on this land, some can feel inadequate, not up to the task of responding to racist structures and systems.

In the face of injustice, some of us can feel heavy, stuck, and broken, afraid to risk or take a step. Weighed down by shame or blame. Trying to be perfect.

We pause to honour these fearful or ashamed parts present in ourselves and in our communities today….

### Silence

We pause for a moment of silence to honour the other feelings and experiences present in ourselves and our communities today that have not been named. (3-second pause)

These may include those of commitment, courage, connectedness, compassion, or hope. For the named and unnamed experiences we hold imperfectly together, we honour them.

### Silence

### Prayer: Remembering the Children

This prayer was commissioned in 2008 by the four denominations that were party to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement because they ran residential institutions—the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, and United churches—for use during the Indigenous and Church Leaders’ Remembering the Children tour, which helped prepare communities across Canada for the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

God of our Ancestors,   
who holds the spirits of our grandmothers and grandfathers and the spirits of our grandchildren,  
Remembering the Children,  
we now pledge ourselves to speak the Truth,  
and with our hearts and our souls  
to act upon the Truth we have heard  
 of the injustices lived,  
 of the sufferings inflicted,  
 of the tears cried,  
 of the misguided intentions imposed,  
 and of the power of prejudice and racism  
which were allowed to smother the sounds and laughter of the forgotten children.  
Hear our cries of lament  
for what was allowed to happen, and for what will never be.  
In speaking and hearing and acting upon the Truth,  
may we as individuals and as a nation  
meet the hope of a new beginning.  
Great Creator God,  
who desires that all creation live in harmony and peace,  
Remembering the Children  
we dare to dream of a Path of Reconciliation  
where apology from the heart leads to healing of the heart  
and the chance of restoring the circle,  
 where justice walks with all,  
 where respect leads to true partnership,  
 where the power to change comes from each heart.  
Hear our prayer of hope,  
and guide this country of Canada  
on a new and different path. Amen

## Benediction

Let us go,  
with the assurance of God’s mercy,  
the passion of Christ’s love, and  
the support of the Spirit’s peace,  
to continue to honour the children as we journey towards justice and healing.  
May it be so.  
Amen.