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Christian Perspectives

Perhaps you heard church bells tolling at the beginning of the month or have seen the many articles in the newspapers and on television telling us that we have come to the end of the long process of gathering the truth and moving towards reconciliation in the matter of the residential schools attended by so many of our indigenous Canadian citizens. As Canadians we have had a sense of pride about how we have treated other peoples. After all, we embraced the concept of multiculturalism during the 1970's and 80's as new immigrants came to Canada from all over the world. It turns out this was false pride. As Canadians we had not embraced the culture of our first peoples at all. We have had to face the fact that our official policy as a nation was to eradicate the culture of our indigenous peoples through the system of education in residential schools. It is to our great shame that as a nation and as mainline churches we did not make ourselves knowledgeable about what was going on at these residential schools and act to protect the rights of children much sooner than we did.

In the last twenty years we have reaped the whirlwind of our ignorance and lack of concern. The reputation of our Christian churches has suffered because of this exposed scandal. The long history of the church in general includes many accounts of the misuse of power and of abuse. Yet the institution of the church, peopled by honest, faithful souls has overcome corruption within itself to carry on with Christ's primary message to love one another and to love our enemies, who more accurately might be described as those different from ourselves. This most recent example makes it very hard for us to say that we follow the teachings of Jesus, who in one gospel story, welcomed children giving them concern ahead of adults. The Gospel of Matthew says in very strong language, ?If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the ocean.? Children are meant to be protected and to grow in loving environments.

Since 2007 the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) led by Justice Murray Sinclair has been travelling about the country hosting gatherings and conducting private interviews to allow former students of residential schools to tell their stories. We have now heard stories of personal and systemic abuse that has appalled, angered and finally aroused strong sentiments of remorse among the listeners. Those not directly related can't help but feel culpable for what our society as a whole has done.

First we think of those who suffered sexual abuse. How could they hope to establish healthy adult relationships when many had to hide their past experiences and psychological help was not readily available? Then we think of those who were punished with physical abuse on the excuse that they were difficult children. These children were living through trauma, the trauma of being taken from their families, of the lack of support of advocating adults, of having to function in a foreign language in many instances. Children's behaviour is often a reflection of the peace or trauma in which they live. These children were exposed to communal living in which childhood diseases would be encouraged to spread. Many died. Even those who escaped the worst trauma spent precious years away from families so that they did not learn how to parent, how to provide for themselves, how to interact with the world in a way suited to their communities. Is it any wonder that many drowned their sorrow in alcohol and drug abuse?

Now we know and cannot hide from what has happened. It is our collective responsibility. The marches and speeches in Ottawa during the early days of this month have come to an end but the survivors of the residential school system live on. Their children raised by parents often impaired by their experiences live on. The special prayers have been prayed and services of reconciliation have been completed. As some of the marchers in Ottawa assembled in Rideau Hall, Governor General David Johnson raised the question addressed to all of us, ?Where do we go from here?? I hope that question resonates with all of us, inspiring us to work together to create a better legacy for our first nations peoples, lest we forget.

Rev. Stephanie Pellow