

Susannah SCHMIDT

**Review of
Justice and
Reconciliation:
The Legacy of Indian Residential Schools
and the Journey toward Reconciliation**

In 2002, when I was working as co-ordinator of the Canadian Student Christian Movement (SCM), I spent two precious days with Marie-Jeanne Coleman (née de Haller) who as a young woman worked as a travelling secretary in Europe for WSCF following World War II.

As we sat at the Colemans' cottage, looking out to Lake Ontario, which flows into the Atlantic Ocean via the St. Lawrence River, we talked about the visions of young women, which become the visions of old women, and vice versa, for reconciliation and peace.

I was struck that for Marie-Jeanne, and for many Christians of her generation identifying with Western Europe, reconciliation was first known in reference to transformation following the chaos and turmoil of World War II and the Holocaust.

For myself, while my perceptions have roots in the tragic horrors of World War II, I first encountered reconciliation as a living problem when I began the journey of awakening to the reality of genocide in the Americas. With other SCMs, and with other people in the Canadian ecumenical movement, I have been involved in a journey of facing this reality and coming to understand what it means today and for the future.

**Canadian Residential Schools, Colonialism,
Reconciliation**

I first came across the United Church of Canada's 2001 resource *Justice and Reconciliation: The Legacy of Indian Residential Schools and the Journey Toward Reconciliation* (JR) when as SCM staff I was considering how ecumenical youth could engage with the legacy of colonisation in Canada.

From the mid-nineties forward, multiple events catalysed a change in Canadian mainstream media and church discourse about Canada's ongoing fragmented relationship with indigenous peoples.

There were pan-continental indigenous campaigns around the theme of five hundred years of colonisation; nationally, there were high-profile constitutional and sovereignty debates in the media, as well as government–Aboriginal land struggles. There was a public disclosure about personal experiences of abuse in residential school by the then-Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations in Canada, Phil FONTAINE.

For Christians, the problem of Canadian colonialism has a particularly pernicious face: from the 1880s up to the 1970s, and in some cases as late as the 1980s, the churches ran “Indian residential schools” for Aboriginal children which furthered the national goal of assimilating First Nations as communities into the dominant white Anglophone and Francophone Canadian identity.

Currently, the issue of reconciliation is bound up not only with right relations from ethical, legal, theological and treaty perspectives, but also with the issue of litigation, as some former students (inmates and survivors) of the schools have taken legal action against the churches and government for physical and sexual abuse. Enforced cultural assimilation and the unwanted removal of children is not recognised by the courts as a basis for litigation.

Given such a contemporary context, when I picked up the resource *JR*, I knew that the United Church faces a formidable task in creating a denominational educational, pastoral and liturgical resource which can do justice to this problem, and which can speak to varied experiences and knowledge of colonialism and racism in Canada.

Aboriginal Solidarity, Anti-Racism and Faith

My own context is this: like others active in the Canadian ecumenical movement, I am struggling to be faithful to the death-dealing problem of Canadian colonisation and racism. This journey began for me in 1998 when I worked as a literacy instructor in a prairie prison in the province of Saskatchewan, where 95 per cent of the inmates were Aboriginal women.

While many women lived on reserves or nearby in urban centres, many others, like students of the historic residential schools, had been flown by plane from Northern communities. I saw that Canadian Indian policy creates a world where difference, instead of being mutually defined, respected and learned from, is con-

trolled by the economic, physical and psychic interests of the dominant colonial state.

Yet these women, who were so battered by life, taught me how to laugh in the face of demons. I cannot romanticise this learning, however, as I was also silenced and terrified by the racialized and sexualised violence I saw and experienced that summer, and also by Canadians' denial of the problem.

I felt that our society is poised at the door of a new potential in collective life, but so much obstructs the birth of something new. The narrative of the women at Jesus' tomb spoke to me: “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16,8).

I began to understand that developing a commitment to anti-racism as a white person, and learning about the land, creatures, and peoples of this continent was a necessary act of Hope in the face of Death.

Resources for Youth?

As an ecumenical (Roman Catholic) reader and as a person involved in theological study and the ecumenical movement, my review is in the spirit of what the resource raises in terms of its potential use with ecumenical and secular “Christian-curious” students and youth in need of a pastoral response.

I hope that these reflections may also contribute to broader dialogues about education for youth in the area of residential schools and anti-racism, or towards the development of youth education at the congregational or parish level.

Contextual History

Justice and Reconciliation frames reconciliation as a problem of “broken relationship,” which will involve listening to stories, conversion, and a commitment to work for justice in responsive solidarity.

In the first section, contextual historical information is provided on such legislation and policy as the Indian Act, with its legislative control and suppression of Aboriginal collective and individual identities and rights.

A critical history is drawn of the United Church's participation in residential schools, which neither downplays the impact of the policy of assimilation which the schools promoted, nor makes scapegoats of individuals who worked in the schools.

Of the eighty-plus schools run by the Roman Catholic, Anglican,



Methodist and Presbyterian churches, the United Church, as a church descended from the union of certain Methodist and Presbyterian churches, was historically involved at running a peak of 13 schools, or about 10 per cent.

In the schools, while it is known that there were some poorly skilled and disturbed employees who would not have been tolerated in other systems, the majority of school workers were young idealists, often young women, who decided to forego a good salary elsewhere in order to help out with mission work among Aboriginal communities.

Truth-Telling, Lamentation, Repentance

A second theological section of *JR* posits a model of “truth-telling, lamentation and repentance, and seeking the spirit” based on Biblical and Aboriginal wisdom. One dimension of “truth-telling” is a sketch of statistics of certain material realities of Aboriginal life in Canada.

Of Aboriginal households, 84 per cent live below the poverty line; 23 per cent in reserve houses have neither piped nor running water; 80–90 per cent of peoples on Aboriginal reserves are unemployed; only 33 per cent of lands guaranteed in treaties are controlled by Aboriginal peoples; the rate of suicides in Aboriginal communities is six times higher than elsewhere in Canada, and the youth suicide rate is the highest in the industrialised world.

A personalised face of truth-telling in the form of people’s stories does not soften these harsh realities, but it nuances them and gives them a face that readers can reach towards.

Aboriginal narrators who are residential school survivors generously share their varied experiences and insights of the meaning of residential schools. Liturgical resources in the forms of Biblical passages and community and individual exercises, rituals and actions are included to assist non-Aboriginal people in moving out of guilt to truth-telling, lamentation and repentance.

Further Resources

The last major section details ecumenical, secular and international approaches to Aboriginal advocacy, solidarity and reconciliation. Readers can find the United Church’s apologies to Aboriginal peoples, information about the Native Conference Circle, the Healing Fund, as well as a glossary of terms, and a FAQ section.

Detail is offered about recommendations made by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples’ call for a public inquiry into residential schools, and about the Assembly of First Nations’ demand for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) inspired by South Africa. Information is also included on South African and Australian social processes for dealing with apartheid and colonialism.

Developing Ecumenical Youth Education

In terms of its potential use with youth, I would consider two issues: 1. Whether or not young people who are open to ecumenism may have less attachment to denominational identity due both to age and to the cultural experience of growing up in a multicultural and multi-faith Canadian society.

2. Youth of colour and white youth already involved in justice networks, influenced by feminism, anarchism, anti-racism, anti-imperialist and anti-globalization movements, may not share an

older generational assumption that Canadian society and the Church have always historically defended human rights.

In consideration of both of these points, and while acknowledging the serious challenges inherent in this proposal, an ecumenical and secular “coalition” of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth from the outset could be a next step in the process of developing education, since this would not only speak to a range of youth who are in the Church and against the Church, but would also provide the benefit of providing a broader snapshot of the problem.

As one first reader of this review noted, any national resource (youth or adult) designed for local empowerment also raises the question of *how* or *if* the vision will be appropriated and taken up at the local level: further power issues of rural/urban, central Canada/Western and Eastern Canada, national church/local congregation are raised.

These dynamics also contribute to the types of resources or projects often developed by national bodies seeking to reach the broadest audience possible. How can mainstream churches or youth networks such as WSCF make theological and practical sense of this dilemma?

Addressing Canadian Racism

In the question of addressing racism, one question I had of the resource was in regards to the resource’s tensions in presenting a liberal and inclusive approach versus a liberation theology model of privileging the perspective of victims or the oppressed.

I appreciated the authors’ drawing on Aboriginal epistemological models, whereby truth is built through a process of story-telling and consensus-building. On the other hand, I am wary of how this approach may be swallowed by a white liberal approach, which historically builds truth by subsuming “peripheral” perspectives into a centralized core narrative.

While the resource acknowledges at length the harm of residential schools, and acknowledges racism, I found that it does not by-and-large challenge the system of Christian white privilege and racism, particularly as implemented in the Americas, and as developed by pseudo-science to legitimate the slave trade and capitalist exploitation of the land and resources.

Racism and white privilege are not defined in the resource, even in the glossary. The question of cultural genocide is not addressed, and this to me is problematic, since it is an overwhelming one.

White privilege continues to shield particularly white people from an openness and a practical capacity to encounter the ongoing impact of cultural genocide in Aboriginal communities.

Similarly, I reflected that it is difficult to determine to what extent non-Aboriginal voices might have a voice in such a resource. The privileging of Aboriginal stories perhaps reflects a need to put the voices of those who have been oppressed by residential schools at the centre.

Yet, there is a way in which the absence of the voices of those who have benefited from social structures of oppression suggests a power dynamic where the privileged maintain the power not to be exposed or vulnerable.

Similarly, the absence of voices of multicultural people of colour results in a lack of a nuanced analysis of how the settler system is bound with Canadian racism. What, for example, are the responses of Japanese, Chinese, Korean or Taiwanese congregations in Canada, or of caucuses of people of colour in white-dominant congregations who are taking on these issues?

Those Who Doubted the Policy

In some sections of the resource, such as in *Those Who Doubted the Policy*, responses of white Canadians who tried to publicise the problems they saw are shared. This inclusion contributes to breaking down a concept of whites as a mass without varied interests and responses.

I found, however, that in the lament section, there is little acknowledgement of the varying ways that readers may be vulnerable in lamenting systems of white racism, and the multiple ways that conversion is necessary for authentic human dialogue.

I find this significant because racism functions by marginalising not only people of colour and Aboriginal peoples, but also by creating a “pecking order” among whites, where shared identity is based on shared privilege.

Reconstructing a New Memory

This critique is only possible because individuals and communities have made the initiative of responding to a problem and taking risks in doing this work. I am inspired by the resource and by its creators. I am certain that this work is a starting place for further conversation and a catalyst for other denominations to follow suit.

Since reading the resource, the image presented in the book of a

“handful of retired archivists” moving into the archives to “dismantle a faulty corporate memory” is a story which has stayed with me. The process of reconstructing a new memory is a daunting one, which will take many generations, and every contribution will be significant.

Susannah SCHMIDT is a Roman Catholic from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. She is learning that she and her Canadian ancestors grew up in the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, the Wendat, and the Anishnaabeg peoples. From 2000 to 2003 she worked as national co-ordinator of the SCM in Canada (www.scmcanada.org). She is an M.A. student at the Toronto School of Theology, and holds an undergraduate degree from McGill University in Montréal, Québec. She is grateful to Professor Michael BOURGEOIS at Emmanuel College, Joëlle MORGAN from SCM/WSCF, and Brian THORPE from the United Church who offered conversation and comments in the development of this review. She welcomes any comments at schmidts@utoronto.ca.



Szőnyi László Gyula

Resolution of Post-War Social Conflicts: The Case of Törökbálint

The passenger who comes to Budapest from the West would not think that this most-developed, “occidental” region of Hungary went through the fires of adversity in the decades following World War II.

The population in the Swabian-majority settlements was forcibly relocated and substituted, only a part of them remained, and most of their houses were taken by migrated Magyars – evicted people from Romania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, wartime (or post-wartime) refugees, cottars from Eastern Hungary (due to the “democratic agrarian reform”) and people who had to leave their motherland as a result of the Czechoslovak–Magyar Population Exchange Agreement.

Our theme treads on extremely sensitive ground in Central Europe, as well as in Hungary. Across the border it gets under the skin of the Germans, Magyars, Czechs, Slovaks, Romanians and nationals of former Yugoslavia. And on this side of the border we might encounter their descendants’ fear and anger – wounds together with offences by Magyars from Eastern Hungary and from across the border, as well as the Swabians. It is apparent that the conflicts were and are not only between nations and ethnic groups, but also among Magyar circles.

Swabians in Hungary

The settlements of Budapest’s Western sector were almost completely destroyed during the time of the Turkish Conquest (XVI–XVIIIth centuries), and the great majority of them were resettled by Germans (referred to as Swabians), who inhabited several villages: Budaörs, Budakeszi (where the current German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Joschka FISCHER comes from), Zsámbék, Etyek, Nagykovácsi and Törökbálint. A small proportion was resettled by Slovaks, eg. Sóskút, Tárnok; also Magyars; and Serbs in Érd.

While the majority retained their national (primarily German)