

What Have We Done?

Outline for a Service of Lament in response to the 215 children found at the Kamloops Indian Residential School

Offered on the Indigenous Day of Prayer, Sunday, June 20 2021
at [Living Skies Regional Council of the United Church of Canada](#)

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All use of this service in public worship or private reflection is welcome. The words below accompany a PowerPoint presentation, available here, at this [Google Drive download link](#). All text used with permission where needed. All stories and figures sourced from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission final report, or other Indigenous-led organizations as named.

Sources:

[National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation](#)

[Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)

[First Nations Child and Family Caring Society](#)

[Residential "schools" ran by The United Church of Canada](#) and its predecessors

Additional resources:

[Memorial resources for children who never returned home](#), including all known names

[United Church of Canada Apologies and commitments](#)

Words for each slide

Slide 1: Title slide

Slide 2: candle lighting

Slide 3: Land Acknowledgment: video

Slide 4: Words about Lament

The prayer of lament is that unsettling biblical tradition of prayer that includes expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair, and protest to God. Many of us have never been taught this way of praying and it is often missing in the worship of many congregations.

The prayer of lament is a place to begin as we seek to respond to the sin, the brokenness, and the complexity of our life together as human beings. It is tempting to rush to problem-solving and fixing when the situation is so dire, but it is important to stop, to grieve, to open our hearts that we might see clearly the path that leads to healing.

Let us take this time to stop and lament together. Let us stand in solidarity with our Indigenous relatives who continue to experience the tragic impacts of colonization and racism; let us mourn together and listen to the voices that call us to pay attention. Let us acknowledge complexity, that we don't have answers, and cry out to God together for the peace and justice that seems to elude us.

Slide 5: Let us begin with these words of lament from Cheryl Bear

Shared with her permission.

take your time
take days
sit with the grief
of these
daunting days
sit with her
and let her weep
let her crawl
into bed
way too early

and out of bed
way too late
let her cancel
all the
shopping trips
all the plans
and just sit
with her
stroke her hair
and tell her,
reassure her
that things
will get, no
are
getting better
even if they
are only won
in court battles
or through shaming
the government
into action
(shame, shame on them)
all of this work
was not in vain
every lecture
every slide
every chart
exposed the truth
and now
everyone can see
it took all of us
to get here,
to heal
to change
now it will take
all of us
again
to get there
to heal
to change

so our grandbabies
can truly be free
and can have
better days
and lives
and deaths"

Slide 6: Prayer (adapted from a prayer by Latasha Morrison)

Slide 7: Creator, come into our brokenness and our lives with your love that heals all. Consume our pride and replace it with humility and vulnerability. Allow us to make space for your correction and redemption. Allow us to bow down with humble hearts, hearts of repentance.

Slide 8: Bind us together in true unity and restoration. May we hear your voice within the stories and laments shared this evening. Give us collective eyes to see our role in repairing what has been broken. Allow these words to be a catalyst for personal transformation that would lead to collective healing and renewal.

Slide 9: *[Explain pattern for next section]*

Stories of Residential Schools and Lament

Slide 10:

1. The children who never made it home

Death cast a long shadow over Canada's residential schools. In her memoir of her years as a student at the Qu'Appelle school in the early twentieth century, Louise Moine wrote of one year when tuberculosis was rampaging through the school.

"There was a death every month on the girls' side and some of the boys went also. We were always taken to see the girls who had died. The Sisters invariably had them dressed in light blue and they always looked so peaceful and angelic. We were led to believe that their souls had gone to heaven, and this would somehow lessen the grief and sadness we felt in the loss of one of our little schoolmates." (*TRC – Volume 4 "Missing Children"*)

Residential school survivor Simon Baker saw his brother die a slow, painful death without any proper medical care at a residential school in Lytton, B.C. "I used to hear him crying at night, I asked the principal to take him to a hospital," "He didn't -- after about two weeks, my brother was in so much pain, he was going out of his mind."

Baker pleaded with the school for days to bring his brother Jim to a doctor. They never did. And his brother died of spinal meningitis.

The TRC estimates there were at least 6,000 deaths at residential schools, although there may have been many more. The record-keeping was abysmal and schools were allowed to destroy records after only a few years. There were no documented causes of death in about 50% of fatalities. The government often refused to pay the cost of sending children's bodies back home for burial, so children were buried right on school premises. In many cases, parents didn't even know what happened to their kids.

Slide 11:

Jeremiah 31:15

A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.

Moment of silence

Slide 12:

Sung Response: "Senzeni Na?" MV 66

[Words and music: traditional song, South Africa; public domain. Arrangement: More Voices, copyright © 2007 The United Church of Canada. OneLicense: A-727314] Sung by Keith Hall and Jordan Cantwell.

Slide 13:

2. Loss of Identity and Language

The Truth and Reconciliation's final report calls for Canadian schools to develop and implement curricula aimed at teaching Indigenous languages and cultures, particularly "the history and legacy of residential schools."

But some still refuse to acknowledge the residential school program's role in a larger strategy of suppressing and assimilating Indigenous languages and cultures – what the commission explicitly calls an attempt at "cultural genocide."

Lydia Ross remembers how numbers were "used on a daily basis instead of names": "My name was Lydia, but in the school I didn't have a name, I had numbers. I had number 51,

number 44, number 32, number 16, number 11, and then finally number one when I was just about coming to high school. So, I didn't have a name, I had numbers."

Many children arrived at school speaking only indigenous languages, but students were punished if they spoke their own languages. Marcel Guiboche remembers: "A sister, a nun started talking to me in English and French, and yelling at me. I did not speak English, and didn't understand what she, what she was asking. She got very upset, and started hitting me all over my body, hands, legs and back. I began to cry, yell, and became very scared, and this infuriated her more. She got a black strap and hit me some more."

...from Pilgrim Press/Progress article 2015: First hand accounts

Hazel Ewanchuk remembers, violence was used daily to enforce "the orders":
We had to take the orders no matter what. You couldn't say, I can't do that. You did it, or else you got a strapping, and we had Bible study every night. I didn't mind that. I thought, what are they preaching here about love? Where is that love? You know. There was no love for us. They made a liar out of Bibles and liars of themselves too."

Slide 14:

Lamentations 3: 34 – 36

³⁴ When all the prisoners of the land
are crushed under foot,
³⁵ when human rights are perverted
in the presence of the Most High,
³⁶ when one's case is subverted
—does our God not see it?

silence

Slide 15 :

Sung Response: "Senzeni Na?" MV 66

Slide 16:

3. Malnourished children

The memoirs of former students have stressed the poor quality and limited quantity of residential school food. Students at the Mohawk Institute in southern Ontario came to refer to their school as the "Mush Hole" because of the porridge that was a breakfast staple. The theft of food and the disciplining of students for stealing food were commonplace. In at least one case, hungry students got in trouble with the law for

stealing from local stores. Runaways often said they had been motivated to leave by the poor quality of the food they received at the schools.

Parents often took up their children's complaints, at times refusing to send their children to schools if they believed the food was insufficient. Despite the many negative reports, the government was never prepared to provide the detailed direction needed to improve the diet—in large measure because officials knew that few improvements could be made without a corresponding improvement in funding.

When faced with reports of poor diet at a Saskatchewan school, Deputy Minister Duncan Campbell Scott simply instructed the Anglican Missionary Society that "the children be provided with good, substantial and well-cooked food." (*TRC – Volume 4 "Missing Children"*)

Slide 17:

Lamentations 4: 3 - 4

³ Even the jackals offer the breast
and nurse their young,
but my people has become cruel,
like the ostriches in the wilderness.

⁴ The tongue of the infant sticks
to the roof of its mouth for thirst;
the children beg for food,
but no one gives them anything.

silence

Slide 18:

Sung Response: "Senzeni Na?" MV 66

Slide 19:

4. A Call for Reform

In the early 20th century, Medical Inspector Peter Henderson Bryce began to push for better sanitation in [residential schools](#). In his 1907 report on residential schools, he highlighted the staggering [death](#) rates at the schools. At one institution, the File Hills Colony residential school in southern Saskatchewan, Bryce found that 69 per cent of all alumni had died, almost all of them from tuberculosis. Bryce concluded that these deaths resulted from the poor conditions and lack of sanitation within the schools. His

report made it clear that the [federal government](#) was directly responsible for these conditions.

In 1922, Bryce reported that 24 percent of all children who had attended residential schools in Canada had died. The Department of Indian Affairs did not publish Bryce's report. It was leaked to [journalists](#), however, prompting calls for reform from across the country. Despite this public outcry, the residential schools were not closed. Bryce's recommendations were largely ignored. Indigenous children continued to die of tuberculosis and other diseases at alarming rates.

Slide 20:

Isaiah 58:1-12

"Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God.

Silence

Slide 21:

Senzeni Na

Slide 22:

5. Where is the Accountability?

For all its successes, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission faced controversy over the restriction that prohibited survivors and staff from naming or otherwise identifying individuals accused of wrongdoing. In principle such restrictions are offensive in the mandate of a truth commission, but the logic in this case was intended to protect the rights of victims who may wish to pursue criminal charges against their abusers. Perpetrators of crimes at residential school are not protected from future prosecutions and the TRC didn't want to allow testimony that might prejudice a future criminal case.

For those willing or able to step forward with charges and relive the traumas of the abuse, the almost universal result was years of court action resulting in a sentence amounting to only a few weeks of jail time per victim.

Slide 23:

From Amos 5:

There are those who hate the one who upholds justice in court and detest the one who tells the truth. You levy a straw tax on the poor and impose a tax on their grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. Therefore the prudent keep quiet in such times, for the times are evil. Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you claim. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps God will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph.

silence

Slide 24:

Senzeni na

Slide 25:

6. Child Welfare – Residential Schools Revisited

Cindy Blackstock of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada reports that "Indigenous Child Services findings suggest that First Nations children are not being removed because their families are putting them at greater risk, but rather because their families are at greater risk due to social exclusion, poverty and poor housing."

In 1997, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples set out a comprehensive plan to redress the pervasive inequalities experienced by Aboriginal peoples and recognize their rights. The findings and recommendations of this commission were never acted upon.

On February 23, 2007, a human rights complaint was filed against Canada by the Assembly of First Nations and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada to seek redress of the federal government's inequitable child welfare funding policy. The funding for Indigenous Child Welfare is approximately 30 percent lower than Provincial child welfare rates. This has devastating, and preventable, impacts for First Nations children and families.

The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal found in favour of the complainants and ordered the Canadian Government to compensate First Nation kids who suffered harms as a result of the state's discriminatory conduct. Despite its pledge to rectify systemic

injustices against Indigenous peoples, the federal government has appealed the decision of the Human Rights Tribunal.

Slide 26:

Jeremiah 8: 21 – 9: 1

For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then has the health of my poor people
not been restored?
O that my head were a spring of water,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
so that I might weep day and night
for the slain of my poor people!

Silence

Slide 27:

Sung Response: "Senzeni Na?" MV 66

Slide 28:

7. Jordan's Principle

Jordan River Anderson was a young boy from Norway House Cree Nation in Manitoba who was born with multiple disabilities. He lived for two extra years in a hospital because federal and provincial governments could not agree on who would pay for his at-home care. Unfortunately, Jordan died at the age of 5 before he could ever experience living in a loving home.

Jordan's death ignited a movement to uphold human rights for all First Nations children through the creation of the child-first principle called "Jordan's Principle" – to ensure First Nations children could access the services they need without denial, delay, or disruption.

In 2005 the Caring Society found 393 other First Nations children facing similar situations to Jordan's. It took 4 non-compliance orders from the Canadian Human Rights Commission to prod the federal government to implement "Jordan's Principle" in 2007. Unfortunately, the definitions used were so limited that very few children could qualify. In 2016 the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal declared the definitions in the legislation were discriminatory and ordered changes.

Just this past week there were hearings for judicial appeals from the federal government to overturn those changes to the definitions and in the meantime, the changes have not been implemented.

Slide 29:

Isaiah 58:6-9

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness] will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

silence

Slide 30 :

Sung Response: “Senzeni Na?” MV 66

Slide 31:

United Church Psalm of Lament

By the altars of our churches—
 there we sit down and there we weep
 as we think of the children.
On the communion tables there
 we hang up our righteousness and our certainty, our good intentions and
knowing best.
For there we thought we did good things
 and there we thought we built the Kingdom.
How could we be so wrong?
How could we be complicit in such evil?
How did we fail to notice? How did we choose not to hear? How were we complacent?
How did we succumb to bureaucracy and systems?
How did we claim to preach your word
 when in truth we were the ones who kept the little ones from You?
Let us not avoid the millstone around our necks,

the rightful weight of Your sorrow, anguish, and anger at the works of Your church.

Out of the depths we cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear our voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the cries of the generations of Rachels,
weeping for the children they will no longer hold,
refusing to be consoled.

What shall we do, Holy Mother, with the truth of our legacy?

If we sit in the seat of power, it is there;

if we believe ourselves the soul of the nation, it is there.

If we say, "Surely we meant well,
and were only trying to help,"

even then we cannot hide from the shadow of our complicity,
for your truth is with us,
your justice calls us to account.

If you, O Lord, should mark our iniquity,
Lord, we could not stand.

We wait for you, Blessed Father, our souls wait,
and in your word we hope;

our souls wait for your justice
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

We hope in the Lord!

For with the Lord there is truest justice,
and with Her is great power to redeem.

It is You, O Lord, who will redeem The United Church of Canada
from all its iniquities.

Turn, O Lord, save our lives;

deliver us from our ugliness and evil for the sake of your steadfast love.

Let us not deem this truth of our identity an unfortunate chapter,
a mistake no longer with us,
a grievous error that is now redeemed.

But let us know the truth, and in the truth be made free:

the truth that this harm is in our DNA,
the truth that this evil is still with us,
the truth that we too need liberation and healing,
the truth that oppression and domination are woven in our fabric.

For you see and note trouble and grief,
that you may take it into your hands;

the helpless commit themselves to you;
 you have been the helper of the orphan.
O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek;
 you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear
to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed,
 so that we from earth may strike terror no more.

silence

Slide 32:

2 Chronicles 7:14

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

Slide 33:

1998 Apology to former students of the United Church Indian Residential Schools, and to their families and communities – spoken by The Right Rev. Bill Phipps on behalf of The United Church of Canada:

From the deepest reaches of your memories, you have shared with us your stories of suffering from our church's involvement in the operation of Indian Residential Schools. You have shared the personal and historic pain that you still bear, and you have been vulnerable yet again. You have also shared with us your strength and wisdom born of the life-giving dignity of your communities and traditions and your stories of survival. In response to our church's commitment to repentance, I spoke these words of apology on behalf of the General Council Executive on Tuesday, October 27, 1998:

"As Moderator of The United Church of Canada, I wish to speak the words that many people have wanted to hear for a very long time. On behalf of The United Church of Canada, I apologize for the pain and suffering that our church's involvement in the Indian Residential School system has caused. We are aware of some of the damage that this cruel and ill-conceived system of assimilation has perpetrated on Canada's First Nations peoples. For this we are truly and most humbly sorry.

"To those individuals who were physically, sexually, and mentally abused as students of the Indian Residential Schools in which The United Church of Canada was involved, I offer you our most sincere apology. You did nothing wrong. You were and are the victims of evil acts that cannot under any circumstances be justified or excused.

"We know that many within our church will still not understand why each of us must bear the scar, the blame for this horrendous period in Canadian history. But the truth is, we are the bearers of many blessings from our ancestors, and therefore, we must also bear their burdens.

All read together:

Slide 34:

"Our burdens include dishonouring the depths of the struggles of First Nations peoples and the richness of your gifts. We seek God's forgiveness and healing grace as we take steps toward building respectful, compassionate, and loving relationships with First Nations peoples.

Slide 35:

We are in the midst of a long and painful journey as we reflect on the cries that we did not or would not hear, and how we have behaved as a church. As we travel this difficult road of repentance, reconciliation, and healing, we commit ourselves to work toward ensuring that we will never again use our power as a church to hurt others with attitudes of racial and spiritual superiority.

Slide 36:

"We pray that you will hear the sincerity of our words today and that you will witness the living out of our apology in our actions in the future."

Slide 37:

Prayer:

God, we lament the damage that our silence in the face of colonial violence has done, for the sins of racism that run through our lives like so many threads in a cloth. Forgive us for the times we have given in to our discomfort, for the times we have forgotten our own privilege and failed to stand with our Indigenous relatives.

Slide 38:

Help those of us who experience white privilege every day remember that, with our privilege, we are imbued with the responsibility to challenge and hold one another accountable. Give us the courage to educate ourselves, to listen well, and to use our voices when it is most needed. Amen.

Slide 39:

Hymn of Lament: "A Voice Is Heard in Ramah" MV 111

(recording from More Voices CD, embedded in PowerPoint)

Slide 40:

A voice was heard in Ramah that could not be consoled,
as Rachel wept for children she could no longer hold.
For Herod ruled the nation, yet feared the Infant King.
How great the devastation that fear and anger bring!

Slide 41

O God, we hear the crying for little ones of yours,
For many still are dying in conflicts and in wars
in every troubled nation, on every violent street,
how great the lamentation when fear and anger meet!

Slide 42

Whenever one is weeping, the whole world suffers, too.
Yet, Jesus, as we serve them, we're also serving you.
So may we not ignore them, nor turn our eyes away,
but help us labour for them to bring a better day.

Slide 43

O Prince of Peace, you lead us in ways of truth and grace.
May we be brave to practice your peace in every place
to love each fear-filled nation, to serve each troubled street,
how great the celebration when peace and justice meet!

[Words: copyright © 2004 by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. Music: Welsh folk melody; Evan's Hymnau a Thonau, 1865; arr. English Hymnal, 1906. OneLicense: A-727314]

Slide 44

Benediction

May we move on from this time of lament,
acknowledging the pain of our siblings deeply wounded by the Residential Schools.
May we be open to continue to learn,
even in the grief of losing our image of who we are as a church and as a country,
an image that has been faulty and incomplete.
May we embrace the holy work to which we are called
to form a new vision of how we might be on this land we are blessed to share,

to form a new vision of how we might listen and learn from the people of this land,
to form a new vision of how we might be in our treaty relationships.

We will step forward on this path of transformation, not knowing where it will lead us,
but trusting always in the promise of the Holy One's love and forgiveness.

And let us always remember
we are never alone,
the peace of Christ holds all creation,
the love of God enfolds all creation.
and the wings of the Holy Spirit, they carry all creation, now and forever.
Amen and amen. *(Rt. Rev. Richard Bott)*