

MAKING IT RIGHT: Alberni Indian Residential School (AIRS) BRINGING LOST CHILDREN HOME

Proposal: What's the solution to the issue/challenge/gap identified?

Pacific Mountain Regional Council (PMRC) direct the Executive and Regional Executive Ministry to commit the appropriate fiscal and staffing resources over the next 4 budget cycles to:

- 1) Offer to conduct a forensic archeological search of AIRS in order to locate any bodies of children buried on the site in unmarked graves;
- 2) Offer to exhume, identify and repatriate, as requested, the bodies of any children buried on the AIRS site to their home, or for appropriate commemoration ceremonies, and markers;
- 3) Develop a strategy within PMRC to host and share the stories of Residential School survivors that incorporates deep listening and relationship building, to be implemented by 2023.
- 4) State reconciliation ministry as a priority for Pacific Mountain Region.
- 5) Proactively advocate for church bodies and government to implement the TRC Calls to Action.
- 6) Commit to raising \$1,000,000 to help ensure that a Healing Centre is built on the AIRS site.

Because:

The Pacific Mountain Regional Council of The United Church of Canada needs to respond directly to the requests being made by Tseshaht First Nation leadership along with survivors of the Alberni Indian Residential School (AIRS). The proposal is a series of initiatives and actions titled: Making it Right-Alberni Indian Residential School-Bringing the Lost Children Home. This proposal is an offer to Tseshaht First Nation following 10 years of listening.

Background:

The Nuuchah Nulth voice is present in this proposal. I will use the Nuuchah Nulth protocol of sharing who I am, who my family is, and where I am from.

My name is Rev. Minnie Hornidge. I am a settler raised in Ucluelet, Nuuchah Nulth territory. My father was Albert Larsen. He was a second generation Norwegian. He was raised in Uchucklesht territory and was a well-respected fisherman. My mother is Dorothy Larsen, nee McIntosh, her heritage is Scottish, English, and Irish She was raised on Carrier Territory.

I have listened to First Nations folk in Tseshaht and Hupacasath Territories for 10 years. Norah Martin, from Tla-o-qui-aht territory, and I have co-hosted Road to Reconciliation (RtR) gatherings called *? aps ciik cha chim hiy ap* (meaning – make it right) the name gifted to us by Nuuchah Nulth Elder Levi Martin. Over 2 ½ years we have sat in these *? aps ciik cha chim hiy ap* circles with 5-10 residential school survivors, who consistently say that the church and all

Canadians need to follow through on all the TRC Calls to Action. These residential school survivors wonder if more United Churches are interested in reconciliation and if they will be invited to share their story and this circle process the RtR has developed. I have sat with residential school survivors for the last 15 years from three nations Gitksan, Carrier-Dene and Nuuchahnulth. In all three of those nations, survivors have told me stories of children, and in some cases babies, dying while at Residential School. Those survivors thought the children's bodies had not been sent home. I am honoured to carry those stories. I am honoured that those residential survivors trusted me. This proposal is what I have heard requested as I listened, over the last 10 years, to the Nuuchahnulth leadership, community, residential school survivors, and intergenerational survivors. This proposal is a call to action not a reaction.

This proposal is honouring the agency of Tseshaht community and leadership as a sovereign nation. The asks in this proposal are an offering which may be accepted, rejected or called out: *"Rev. Minnie Hornidge you got it wrong - this is what the community is requesting."* Ta7taliya Michelle Nahanee reminds us that *"A Decolonizing practice is, stop asking us, Indigenous peoples, to tell you what to do. Listen, listen, listen, hear what we are asking for, educate yourself, and then respond. If you get it wrong, we will call you out. To ask us to tell you what to do is a colonial act."* (Decolonizing Practices Training and Decolonize First) As the Tseshaht have reminded us, we must proceed at the pace of trust.

Since the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc discovery at the Kamloops Residential School of 215 children unceremoniously buried in unmarked graves, people have experienced sorrow and renewed grief. Creation weeps. Residential school survivors weep. Second and third generation survivor's weep. God weeps. Settlers weep. Our spirits lament at the inhumanity of it all.

The issue this proposal addresses is that the United Church of Canada has known that children died at United Church of Canada run Indian Residential Schools. The United Church of Canada and Pacific Mountain Regional Council has the responsibility of naming and redressing the pain and hurt that has been caused with tangible, expedient action that is more than admiration for resilience and a promise to behave differently.

The seven-year Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings told us that they heard unsettling stories of children dying and cremated babies. In response to unrecorded deaths, the **TRC Calls to Action #71-76** outline what the survivors and the TRC Commission calls for. TRC Commissioner Murray Sinclair stated *"That the TRC asked the federal government to help fund a series of projects that would identify burial site locations of children at residential schools. The request for funding was denied."* **TRC Call to Action #74** states: *"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.”

In May of 2021, Moderator Richard Bott of The United Church of Canada shared these words in a prayer for the students of the Kamloops Residential School: *“But, God, if we truly listened, we can’t be surprised. The Elders and the Communities had already told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, told the governments and the world, the stories of the children, dead and buried, unnoted by the settler systems, but never ever forgotten by their siblings, their parents, their communities.”* It is time for the settler church to finally listen. It is time to respond with tangible action. The Church, our church, must respond. It must take action.

At a memorial held at the new Tseshaht Administration Building, on Tseshaht reserve land on May 31, 2021 Brenda West of Courageous Community Center (a PMRC – UCC church plant in Port Alberni) connected with a survivor of the Kamloops Residential School. Together they placed empty shoes on the orange bridge that forms the entrance to reserve land, where children crossed on their way to AIRS. They prayed together, listened together, talked together. The United Church communities in Port Alberni have been engaging in this kind of effort for many years: deep listening, admitting wrong-doing, relationship building and walking the road to reconciliation. Tseshaht have already engaged in work and ceremony around bringing the lost children home (for example: AIRS: Healing the Lost Souls Event, in September of 2019.)

Tseshaht community has been clear about what they need from the church, and it is more than one congregation and one church plant can do alone. It is clearly a call to action.

On June 8, 2021 the Courageous Community Centre (CCC), which has Indigenous representation, arrived at consensus that these recommendations be made to PMRC and UCC.

On June 9, 2021 AVUC Council unanimously passed a motion that these recommendations be made to PMRC and UCC.

On June 10, 2021 Norah Martin, AIRS survivor and co-lead of ? *aps ciik cha chim hiy ap* circles of the Road to Reconciliation project (RtR) received a copy of this proposal

On June 10, 2021 Wahmeesh (Ken Watts), Tseshaht First Nation, Elected Chief Councillor received a copy of this proposal.

As members of The United Church of Canada, we have benefitted from the practices of colonialism. We must also take responsibility for our actions, historically and presently.

While we should partner, collaborate, and advocate, we should not wait for governments to do what is right. It is up to us. Together we have the capacity to make it right by walking the talk of reconciliation, advocating in the halls of political power, leading by example, keeping before the church, the federal government, and the country the urgent need to step up and address the harm we have perpetrated. We are at a watershed moment of awareness with so many finally asking "What can I do? How can I help? What is my responsibility?" Let's answer those questions. It is going to take every one of us accepting responsibility and contributing actions to make this right and to transform systemic anti-indigenous racism in Canada.

Canada will not thrive until what has been unearthed is made right. Our weeping must lead to action. We cannot stop in the sadness. May we listen to Mother Earth who is calling for healing. She calls because she has held these children in the safety of her arms. She has held them and now the time to make it right is here, to care well for these ones, the ones yet to be unearthed, and their relations.

The United Church of Canada has issued formal apologies, adopted UNDRIP, implemented an Indigenous made plan to create a self-determining Indigenous Church, denounced the Doctrine of Discovery, established the Healing Fund, established the Justice and Reconciliation Fund, and compensated Indian Residential School survivors individually. Now it is time to offer more reconcile-action on the long journey of living into right relationships. The Indigenous community tells us that if we do what is ours to do in our own generation, then seven generations from now we will know what it is to live in right relationship. Delaying action now, will prolong the torment, deepen the divide and, sadly, take more than seven generations to heal.

Cost Analysis for this Proposal

Recommendation #1:

- Ground Penetrating Radar @ \$200.00 an hour for a minimum of two-weeks: \$ 24,000

Recommendation #2:

(Based on the possibility of 250 children's bodies being found at AIRS)

- Exhume/unearth bodies---using necessary equipment and people \$25,000
- Genetic Testing @ approx. 150.00 per DNA test \$37,500
- Bringing the deceased children's families to AIRS to accompany their children home for burial or conduct appropriate ceremonies on a local sacred site. Travel cost, hotels, gas, flights as needed for Elders who cannot make the journey by vehicle, food, etc.@ 700.00 per family \$175,000
- Transport the children's bodies home at \$500.00 per child \$125,000

- Financial contribution for traditional burial ceremonies based on consultation with Elders @ \$1000. per child *\$250,000*

Recommendations # 3, 4, 5 (within existing programming budgets)

- Develop a strategy within PMRC to host and share the stories of residential school survivors that incorporates deep listening and relationship building to be implemented by 2023.
- State reconciliation ministry as a priority for Pacific Mountain Region.
- Proactively advocate for church bodies and government to implement the TRC Calls to Action.

Recommendation #6

- 3) Commit to raising \$1,000,000 to help ensure that a Healing Centre is built on the AIRS site. *\$1,000,000.*

Making It Right total (Over 4 Budget Cycles) *\$1,636,500.*

Respectfully Submitted by

Rev. Minnie Hornidge (retired)
Brenda West (lay leader of CCC)