

## Mount Zion's Journey with our Indigenous Neighbours

Mary Thompson, June 20, 2011

I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak to you this morning, on the day before National Indigenous People's Day. I would like to talk about our own congregation's journey, just the bare bones of it, mind you, and about some of the recent events in our area and across the country. I would like to thank all who have kept me in touch with things by email, and to the Vespers group, for good discussions on these matters all year.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or TRC for short, was formed in 2008 "to document the history and lasting impacts of the residential school system on Indigenous students and their families".

If we look back to 2012, nine years ago, things were stirring. The TRC were more than halfway through their work and were holding hearings with survivors. In March, as some will remember, our congregation participated in the Shannen's Dream campaign of Kairos, adding our voices to calls for a school building on the Attawapiskat First Nation. In October, Mohawk lawyer Beverly Jacobs gave a talk at Laurier about the Sisters in Spirit study, in which she and her colleague Andrea Williams had painstakingly gathered data on missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls across the country, laying the groundwork for the eventual National Inquiry. The Idle no More movement started toward the end of 2012, as a protest against the dismantling of environmental protection laws. So 2012 was a pivotal year. It was also the year that a new relationship began between the Six Nations Anglican Parish of the Indigenous Anglican Church and our Eastern Synod, and in this connection Luther Hostel participants went to visit the Six Nations community and the site of the Mohawk Institute, that had been a residential school. That was when Scott Knarr, then our Director of Music, visited the former residential school for the first time, and found it life-changing. He started to visit the Six Nations Anglican Parish, where the priest was Rev. Canon Norman Casey. Later, part of Scott's internship on the way to becoming a Deacon was carried out under the supervision of Father Norm.

In April of 2013 Scott arranged a bus to take the choir to St. Peter's Ohsweken, to sing in the Sunday service. In my recollection, attendance was sparse, but the closing hymn, "When you walk from here", was truly a hit. After the service, we were invited to a wonderful lunch in the church hall, and many parishioners attended. We were presented with the beautiful paddle that hangs in the narthex. After lunch they invited us to a tour of the Mohawk Chapel, guided by a parishioner, elder Leona Moses.

Over the next few years, because of this relationship that Scott had begun, we had church visits back and forth, and we became involved in two initiatives of the women of the Parish. One thing to know about the reserve is that grief is an ever-present part of their lives, for various reasons, but in part because the rate of suicide or attempted suicide in young people is higher there. In a way, both of the initiatives were grounded in this circumstance. Our Joan Brunger participated in one of the projects, called Brightening the Spirit, Breaking the Silence, which worked to bring awareness of suicide and to

help people to talk about it, help them heal from the loss of loved ones. The other project, which several of us became involved in, was to focus on children and youth, and it was a dream of Leona Moses to offer an after school program of music and the arts. Another community resident was the Indigenous Ministries Coordinator of the Anglican Church, the Rev. Canon Ginny Doctor. In ministry in Alaska she had been associated with music camps and had seen very positive effects on children and youth. She brought in a couple of leaders from Alaska for the first Music for the Spirit camp on Six Nations, held in the summer of 2014. Music for the Spirit, which we have followed through the years, had summer camps every year until the pandemic struck, and after-school programs starting in 2017. The after-school program has moved online during the pandemic. I'd like to mention that the Kuhnert family have been strong supporters all along. Pr. Karen and her daughters have participated in most or all of the camps, and currently Kristina and Hanne are the After-School Zoom facilitators. Under the devoted leadership of the Coordinator, Richelle Miller, this program has expanded to include Indigenous visual arts, and this past year, some participants have exhibited in the Grand Expressions project. Sadly, three of the main personages of the story are gone: Leona Moses died in May 2014, Father Norm Casey in January 2020, and Ginny Doctor, unexpectedly, just 3 weeks ago. On June 10 the youth and instructors of Music for the Spirit put on a very beautiful and moving tribute to Ginny Doctor. In the course of her work for the Anglican Church she had produced an hour-long film on the Doctrine of Discovery, released in 2019 and easy to find on YouTube. In part of the film she explains the link between the Doctrine of Discovery and the establishment of residential schools.

After the TRC 94 Calls to Action were released in 2015, there were a two ecumenical retreats, a couple of years apart, that are now referred to collectively as Stronger Together. Through these, led in large part by historian Rick Hill, then of the Six Nations Polytechnic, we came to know some Six Nations residents of other Christian denominations and some of the longhouse tradition. All were exploring their history, and becoming acquainted or reacquainted with the reality of the residential schools.

Last year, if you remember, Dorinda Kruger-Allen of Martin Luther University College spoke to us on Sunday June 21. She pointed out that for Indigenous peoples, the national day is celebrated as the Summer Solstice – a day of feasting, music and dancing. This year the mood may be different, and grief will not be far away. The announcement of the terrible discovery of the remains of 215 children at the former Kamloops residential school has led to anguish and soul searching, further suffering, and of course anger. We are sad to learn that last weekend on Six Nations someone set fire to the 204-year-old building of St. John's Tuscarora. In these times we are reminded that of the 94 TRC Calls to Action, there has been "significant" progress on only 30, and completion of between 6 and 10, depending on who is counting.

There have been many other happenings since a year ago, including of course the ongoing struggle against COVID, which has led to some improvements in public health for First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples, but has affected some communities disproportionately. Here are just a few others.

- (i) In Waterloo Region, we have the Land Back Camp, whose demands last summer led to some good work toward TRC goals on the part of the municipal governments, but who

encountered so much in the way of the wrong kind of attention that they have moved to a secluded part of the Laurel Creek Conservation Area.

- (ii) We see protests in Caledonia that have drawn attention to government inaction in addressing Haudenosaunee land claims, and the April 20 declaration by the Haudenosaunee Chiefs of a moratorium on development across the Haldimand tract.
- (iii) On June 3, following a delay due to COVID, the federal government released a response to the 231 Calls for Justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (issued in 2019). The response is being criticized for being short on specifics, but the story will obviously not end here.
- (iv) Finally, there is Bill C-15, which requires Canada to develop within 2 years an action plan for implementing the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, or UNDRIP, in accordance with TRC Call to Action #43. This bill was supported by a coalition of Churches, including our own, called Faith in the Declaration, and when the bill was about to pass through the House of Commons and come to the Senate, Faith in the Declaration coordinated a campaign of writing letters to the Senate. Some of us would have participated. They also hosted a Zoom webinar with the three TRC commissioners: Murray Sinclair, Chief Wilton Littlechild and Marie Wilson. Commissioner Sinclair was asked whether he thought the letter campaign would have any effect. He said he thought it could be very important. As a Senator when the previous version, private member's Bill C-262, had been introduced, he had seen the positive influence of concerted action by the churches even as the opposition had successfully stalled the debate. As he predicted, C-15 was passed by the Senate last Wednesday, June 16, and the next, undoubtedly arduous, phase of the work begins.

To conclude: the pain of our shared history is deep, and reconciliation work is slow. We need to be patient, and to be prepared for disappointments, and to move with the times, but in this we are also called to watch for what God will have prepared for us to do.