

Proposal for utilization of Forest Grove Community Church 'green space' funds to support reconciliation in Saskatoon

Context

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, launched in 2008, was a commission like no other in the history of Canada. As described in the summary document of the aptly titled report, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*, the Commission heard from more than 6,000 witnesses, most of whom survived the experience of living in residential schools as students. "For many Canadians, the stories of their experience can be hard to accept. Children were abused, physically and sexually, and they died in the schools in numbers that would not be tolerated in any other school system in the country. This truth can be difficult to reconcile with the idea of Canada as a bastion of democracy, peace and kindness throughout the world."

The harmful legacy of Canada's residential school system continues to profoundly impact Indigenous people. Genuine reconciliation between Indigenous people and other Canadians will require that the paternalistic and racist foundations of the residential school system be rejected. Reconciliation requires that a new vision, based on a commitment to mutual respect, be developed. It also requires an understanding that some of the most harmful impacts of residential schools have been the loss of pride and self-respect of Indigenous people, and the lack of respect that non-Indigenous people have been raised to have for their Indigenous neighbours.

Getting to the truth wasn't easy, especially for those who participated in the hearings with the Commission. Likewise, the road towards reconciliation is also deeply challenging and requires a commitment from all of us. Reconciliation is not an Indigenous issue, it is a Canadian one. And as followers of Jesus Christ, who have benefited enormously from this land, it is also our issue. As the authors of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report ask, "Now that we know about residential schools and their legacy, what do we do about it?"

In the Executive Summary of the *Truth and Reconciliation Report*, the TRC Commissioners stated that the actual process of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples will only be possible through meaningful action on the part of non-Indigenous people in Canada. "A critical part of this process," they suggested, "involves repairing damaged trust by making apologies, providing individual and **collective reparations**, and following through with **concrete actions** that demonstrate real societal change" [emphasis added]. *Calls to Action #58-61 - "Church Apologies and Reconciliation"*, provide the Church with a practical roadmap to reconciliation. Justice Sinclair, one of the TRC Commissioners, has encouraged an acknowledgement that all Canadians, in one way or another have been affected by the residential school experience. Faith communities, including ours are not exempt from responding to the calls to action, both generally and specifically, working collaboratively with Indigenous people to change hearts and minds.

How are we to respond?

Forest Grove Community Church has roots in a long history that understands that proclaiming the Good News, cannot be separated from working for justice and reconciliation. As the Anabaptist theologian Palmer Becker writes in his book *Anabaptist Essentials*, “Jesus is the center of our faith. Community is the center of our lives. And reconciliation is the center of our work.” We believe that at the heart of the gospel is the good news that Jesus is reconciling the world to Himself (Ephesians 1:10, 2 Corinthians 5:18-19), and that working for peace, justice and reconciliation between people is a vital element of what it means to seek God's kingdom on earth. This begs the question, how can we model the reconciling life and work of Jesus in our relationships with our Indigenous neighbours when we haven't adequately addressed the injustices that have been done in the name of God and the Church?

In March 2014, a *Statement of Anabaptist Church Leaders*, was presented at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in Edmonton. Willy Reimer, the Director of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Canada, was one of five Canadian Anabaptist leaders who wrote that statement which included the following:

“We recognize that being part of a dominant culture, our attitudes and perspectives made the Residential School experience possible and that these attitudes and perspectives became entrenched in our relationships and our cultures. We regret our part in the assimilation practice that took away language use and cultural practice, separating child from parent, parent from child, and Indigenous peoples from their culture. We regret that, at times, the Christian faith was used, wrongly, as an instrument of power, not as an invitation to see how God was already at work before we came. We regret that some leaders within the Church abused their power and those under their authority. We acknowledge the paternalism and racism of the past. As leaders of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ church communities, we acknowledge that we have work to do in addressing paternalism and racism both within our communities and in the broader public”.

This statement from Anabaptist leaders, including the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, provides a moral rationale for why Forest Grove Community Church should proceed with a proposal of this nature.

Background to Proposal

On January, 23rd, 2020, following the long-awaited sale of what has commonly been referred to as the ‘greenspace land’, Forest Grove Community Church Council (FGCC) called together current and former leaders from all three sites of FGCC to pray and begin to discuss options for how the revenues from the sale could best be invested. One of the ideas brought forth at that meeting was to use some of the funds to support implementation of the *Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action* for churches.

In November of 2020, as directed by the FGCC lead team, site pastors Brian Wiens and Nathan McCorkindale invited a small group of interested individuals to form a TRC advisory team**, which included strong First Nations and Métis voices. The intention was for this group to consider how Forest Grove Community Church (as one of the ‘other faiths’ referenced in the *Calls to Action*) might participate in acts of collective reparation that also demonstrate a commitment and contribution to real societal change. Now that we know more about the moral, ethical and spiritual obligations to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and to the *Calls to Action*, we too, need to ask ourselves, what do we do about it?

Guided by that question, the TRC advisory team met on four occasions in January and February 2021. The team realized that the task before them wasn’t only to consider the possible distribution of funds to Indigenous organizations or initiatives. Instead, it was to consider how to develop collaborative, respectful relationships with Indigenous peoples and organizations, in order to do the long-term and lasting work of reconciliation.

Guiding Principles

Arising from their discussions, the advisory team articulated the following principles as central to FGCC’s work towards reconciliation:

- Leading with/through relationship,
- Rooting collective actions and responses to the TRC *Calls to Action* in justice, as opposed to charity;
- Developing inclusive, community-based processes with Indigenous communities and the FGCC leadership;
- Engaging respectfully and authentically with Indigenous peoples and leadership.

These principles are recommended to the Forest Grove Community Church lead team and Council, as a guide to the short term and long term actions that will demonstrate the commitment of Forest Grove Community Church to reconciliation with Indigenous people and the *Calls to Action*, generally. The proposal below reflects the advisory group’s collective wisdom and commitment to these principles.

Proposal

The TRC advisory team recommends a two-fold course of action:

- (1) Set up a longer term TRC advisory team which would include Indigenous and non-Indigenous leadership to guide the ongoing process of engaging in and developing collaborative, respectful relationships. One of their shorter term tasks would be to facilitate, manage and oversee the distribution of funds designated through (2) below;

(2) Submit a proposal to FGCC proposing that a portion of the greenspace revenue be set aside in a fund to be used to accomplish some of the TRC *Calls to Action* for churches, as well as for other potential reconciliation efforts by Forest Grove Community Church

Further framework and terms of reference, including decision making processes, for the longer term advisory team (referenced above) would be developed with input from Indigenous participants and approved by the FGCC Council. There are many possibilities that could become reality through this initiative. For example, meaningful actions to respond to *Call to Action #61* (see Appendix A for specific wording) that the advisory team might consider could include, but not be limited to: support for language acquisition programs, cultural restoration initiatives, Elders visiting small groups or congregations, long-term relationships with community organizations or programs, funding for blanket exercises in the FGCC congregations or the broader community, and cultural training and education for FGCC staff, leaders, and volunteers.

This is a fresh expression of our mission as a church. This initiative is rooted in the call of God to be a people of justice, who having been reconciled with God, seek to live out reconciled lives with our Indigenous neighbours. As has often been said, there can be no true reconciliation without justice. The Scriptures teach us that justice is not about winners and losers but about the restoration of shalom (all-rightness of every aspect of life). Shalom is the result of true justice that leads to peace and wellbeing for all people: Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. This initiative would also be rooted in one of the core values of FGCC: we are committed to *“relationships of integrity, reconciliation and love.”*

Based on these recommendations, **the TRC advisory team is requesting that the Council of FGCC set aside \$200,000 in a separate fund to be used to implement this proposal.** In addition, the TRC advisory team recommends that a framework and terms of reference, including decision making processes, be established for a longer term advisory team. The structure and role description for the advisory team would be developed with input from Indigenous participants and approved by FGCC Council. The team could then be assembled to begin its work.

Conclusion:

Churches and faith communities have a unique role to play in fostering reconciliation. The Commission highlighted this by articulating specific actions for churches. In response to the Commission our denominational leaders acknowledged the great harm that has been done by the church to Indigenous people and called us to the work of reconciliation. It is time for action.

Risk-taking faith has been part of the history of Forest Grove Community Church. From the first members who founded Nutana Mennonite Brethren Church in 1964, to the congregation of 300 who in faith constructed a building on Webster Street that seats 850, to the patient relationship-building initiative with the Wounaan people of Panama that was started in 2005

and that has born much fruit in the years since, risk-taking faith has been part of the DNA of FGCC.

This proposal also calls us to fresh faith and new actions. It invites us to humbly allow Jesus to lead us into the work of reconciliation that we believe is near to His heart so that His kingdom might be experienced in new ways in this city.

**** Advisory team (January - February, 2021):**

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Related resources/links:

- *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.* [Recognition of the role of churches and faith communities, pg. 219 – 234. Note: Page numbers refer to the numbers within the document itself not the PDF reader.]
[Honouring_the_Truth_Reconciling_for_the_Future_July_23_2015.pdf \(trc.ca\)](#)
- MCC's response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action #48 and #49
<https://mcccanada.ca/media/resources/7848>
- Statement of Anabaptist Church Leaders: March 2014
https://mcccanada.ca/sites/mcccanada.ca/files/media/ontario/documents/statement_of_anabaptist_church_leaders_to_the_trc_march_30_2014.pdf
- Truth and Reconciliation documents can be found at:
[Reports - NCTR](#)

Appendix A

Settlement Agreements and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

48. We call upon the church parties to the Settlement Agreement, and all other faith groups and interfaith social justice groups in Canada who have not already done so, to formally adopt and comply with the principles, norms, and standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a framework for reconciliation. This would include, but not be limited to, the following commitments:

- i. Ensuring that their institutions, policies, programs, and practices comply with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- ii. Respecting Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination in spiritual matters, including the right to practise, develop, and teach their own spiritual and religious traditions, customs, and ceremonies, consistent with Article 12:1 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- iii. Engaging in ongoing public dialogue and actions to support the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- iv. Issuing a statement no later than March 31, 2016, from all religious denominations and faith groups, as to how they will implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

49. We call upon all religious denominations and faith groups who have not already done so to repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples, such as the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius.

Church Apologies and Reconciliation

58. We call upon the Pope to issue an apology to survivors, their families, and communities for the Roman Catholic Church's role in the spiritual, cultural, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children in Catholic-run residential schools. We call for that apology to be similar to the 2010 apology issued to Irish victims of abuse and to occur within one year of the issuing of this Report and to be delivered by the Pope in Canada.

59. We call upon church parties to the Settlement Agreement to develop ongoing education strategies to ensure that their respective congregations learn about their church's role in colonization, the history and legacy of residential schools, and why apologies to former residential school students, their families, and communities were necessary.

60. We call upon leaders of the church parties to the Settlement Agreement and all other faiths, in collaboration with Indigenous spiritual leaders, Survivors, schools of theology, seminaries, and other religious training centres, to develop and teach curriculum for all student clergy, and all clergy and staff who work in Aboriginal communities, on the need to respect Indigenous spirituality in its own right, the history and legacy of residential schools and the roles of the church parties in that system, the history and legacy of religious conflict in Aboriginal families and communities, and the responsibility that churches have to mitigate such conflicts and prevent spiritual violence.

61. We call upon church parties to the Settlement Agreement, in collaboration with Survivors and representatives of Aboriginal organizations, to establish permanent funding to Aboriginal people for:

- i. Community-controlled healing and reconciliation projects.
- ii. Community-controlled culture- and language-revitalization projects.
- iii. Community-controlled education and relationship-building projects.
- iv. Regional dialogues for Indigenous spiritual leaders and youth to discuss Indigenous spirituality, self-determination, and reconciliation.