

**Conversations of Reconciliation:  
A Participatory Ethnographic Case Study in the  
United Church of Canada**

**by  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores how conversation and storytelling can contribute to the process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the Alberni Valley of British Columbia. Collaborating with Alberni Valley United Church, this participatory ethnography details the planning and hosting of a conversation on reconciliation between members of the congregation and others from the community, including members of the Huu-ay-aht First Nation. Through personal storytelling, participants described their experience of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in the valley and the impact of these experiences on their understanding of reconciliation. Using a Collective Story Harvest process, participants reflected together on what they learned from the stories.

By weaving together insights from the storytelling with theoretical reflections on truth, relationships, decolonization, and the moral imagination, this thesis considers how hearing another's story and allowing it to disrupt the dominant colonial narrative can lead to a transformed understanding and the possibility of transformed relations.

**Keywords:** Reconciliation; United Church of Canada; Residential School; Decolonization; Port Alberni

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## List of Acronyms

AFN	Assembly of First Nations
AVUC	Alberni Valley United Church
IRSSA	Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement
RCAP	Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada
UCC	The United Church of Canada



## Glossary

Aboriginal peoples	I use this term in relation to Canadian policy when referring to original peoples and their descendants in what is now known as North America where the discourse at the time used the terms
First Nations	People in the Nuu-chah-nulth territory used the self-descriptive term First Nations to describe themselves as original inhabitants. I use this term in that context.
Indigenous peoples	Throughout this thesis, I primarily use Indigenous peoples as the collective name for the original peoples of what is now known as North America and their descendants. It includes First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples.
Non-Indigenous	People who are not descendants of original inhabitants of what is now known as North America.
Settlers	People who have migrated to and colonized what is now known as North America and the descendants of these people.

# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

### 1.1. Calls to Action

On December 15, 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released both their final report and 94 *Calls to Action* (2015a; 2015d). For six years, the Commission traveled the country and heard the stories of Indigenous peoples and their experiences at residential schools. It documented the reality of over 150,000 children who were forcibly removed from their homes, who felt forsaken, unloved, abandoned, and who were abused physically and sexually. In the *Calls to Action*, the commission laid out a framework of recommendations it hoped would lead the country toward a new vision. It was based on understanding the truth, redressing the legacy of residential schools, and establishing mutual and respectful relationships through reconciliation between the Canadian State and First Nations peoples (TRC 2015d; United Church of Canada Archives n.d.).

The United Church of Canada (UCC) and its founding denominations<sup>1</sup> were involved in the operation of 16 residential schools in Ontario and Western Canada. These schools were designed explicitly to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Christian Canadian society by separating them from their families, forbidding their language, breaking their cultural connections, and indoctrinating them into a new social and religious culture (TRC 2015a; UCC Archives n.d.). In the running of the schools, the UCC supported these goals of assimilation and Christianisation (UCC Archives n.d.). By 1969, the federal government had taken over the management of or had closed the schools that had been run by the United Church, but the legacy of damage and abuse that had occurred in the schools remained.

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<sup>1</sup> The United Church of Canada was established in 1925 as amalgamation of the Methodist, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian Churches in Canada. The residential schools operated by the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches prior to 1925 continued to be operated by the UCC after amalgamation.

In 2015, I attended the UCC General Council meeting in Newfoundland. Over the seven days of meetings there were many stories of the UCC's commitment to the work of reconciliation. I was particularly touched by the address given by Dr. Marie Wilson, one of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissioners. She started by highlighting the 94 *Calls to Action* issued by the TRC Report:

Each time it says: "We call upon the parties to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement" that means us; each time it says: "We call upon the church parties to the Settlement Agreement" that means us; each time it calls upon all Canadians: that means us (Wilson 2015).

Dr. Wilson closed her reflection at General Council with a vision and hope:

That we feel outrage at injustice, learn the lessons of hardship, feel hope for what is still possible, respect the worth of each and every life with its potential to make a difference, and hold to the belief in the sacred teaching of love, with its built-in qualities of kindness and generosity - the power to transform everything – a life, a relationship, a church and a country (Wilson 2015).

Following Dr. Wilson's address, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Perry Bellegarde spoke. His message was very clear: reconciliation means closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Decades of broken promises and unfulfilled commitments, ignoring basic fundamental rights such as access to potable water, and an education system that disregards Indigenous languages, history, values, and knowledge systems have resulted in a gap in the quality of life. This gap has real and tangible consequences: overcrowded housing, higher rates of youth suicide, higher rates of Incarceration of Indigenous people and higher numbers of Indigenous children in provincial care, lower quality health care and education, and racism and discrimination still being faced daily by Indigenous people (Bellegarde 2015).

Chief Bellegarde was unambiguous—this is not acceptable: "It is not good for First Nations people and it is not good for Canada .... Reconciliation means restoring the relationship and sacred promises of our ancestors—to live and work together in peaceful co-existence and mutual respect" (Bellegarde 2015). A shared future means being committed to closing the gap.

On the last day of the General Council meeting there was a poll: When asked to indicate the top 3 priorities out of a list of 10, the proposal on reconciliation was named as the top priority by 96 percent of participants (UCC 2015a).

As I traveled home reflecting on the experience and the calls to action, I began to wonder, what does this mean on the ground? What does this mean in our local congregations, in the everyday work, life, and relationships in which we engage? How do we live this call to reconciliation? How do we even begin to have the conversation? I did not know very much of the story of the Alberni Residential School, but I knew of the residential school near Port Alberni that had been run by the United Church, and I knew that in that school there had been horrific abuse. I imagined that the work of reconciliation would be very close to the ground in Port Alberni. I wondered about their experience as a community—in real relationships, in their everyday lives, how do they enter this conversation?

I began discussions with the people at Alberni Valley United Church (AVUC) in November 2015. The congregation was engaged in the heart of the struggle. They had a history and a story that had continued to call them into the work of reconciliation, but it was neither an easy nor a simple story. I was struck by both the deep commitment to enter the questions and the deep fear of opening up to the pain. It was clear to me that the purpose of my research project needed to go beyond simply a recording of the stories and an observational analysis of the conversation. There was an opportunity to tap into the transformational work that the leaders in the congregation yearned for. How could this research project connect in even a small way to supporting the work at AVUC? How could I bring my own gifts of leading conversations in a way that might allow the congregation to learn more about its story and be given the opportunity to self-reflect on that story in service of a transformed conversation? Of course, these were lofty goals and I could make no such promise to the congregation, but I could open the invitation and see where it would take us.

Along with my own profound yearning to engage in the questions of reconciliation, I also brought a deep belief in the transformational power of conversation. From a theoretical stance this may be referred to as an interpretive approach (Rabinow and Sullivan 1987), and in the business literature it is referred to as dialogical organizational change theory (Bushe and Marshak 2015). It is an understanding that transformation comes from engaging in dialogue. This has been a guiding basis for the praxis in my work and in my connections with spiritual communities.

Transformation is a fundamental change in perceptions, assumptions, and worldviews that occurs at both an individual and systemic level. It is a shift in values, actions, and social consciousness resulting in a radical and foundational change to the social, political, and economic structures of society; a paradigm shift that dismantles the status quo and allows for the possibility of new outcomes (Saul 2009; Gass 2010; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2017; Generative Somatics n.d.).

Transformation is a process of individual and collective change. It is a theory, a methodology, and a practice based in a political commitment for a new vision of our collective future. It happens through conversation and connection, encountering another and hearing a new story. Through transformation, a new understanding emerges for how we imagine ourselves, our neighbours, and our world.

Connected to this theoretical model is the idea that storytelling is a practice that can lead to transformation and to deeper understanding, as people make meaning and then share this meaning in a generative way within communities and across generations. As academics and anthropologists, we might use the practice of ethnography to gather these stories and reflect them back in the service of generating new knowledge and understanding. However, long before anthropologists, human societies have understood the power and necessity of storytelling.

This thesis recounts the story of my connection with AVUC, from the first invitation, through the community conversation, and into the next steps that the congregation is taking on its journey to reconciliation. Through their story, I explore how the process of conversation, dialogue, and storytelling can contribute to transforming relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. By weaving together insights from the conversations held in the Port Alberni regional area with theoretical reflections on truth, relationships, decolonization, and the moral imagination, a new story emerges that challenges the current social structures and offers a path toward reconciliation.

The discourse in Canada is changing and lasting and sustainable social change will require a transformed paradigm to take hold.

Over the past 50 years, the Government of Canada has made a variety of attempts to manage relations with Indigenous peoples in Canada and to reconcile the damage done by the residential school system, including the White Paper, the

Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy (Government of Canada 1969), the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada 1996), the National Resolution Framework and Alternative Dispute Resolution process (2003), the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA 2006), and most recently the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) (Government of Canada 2015b). The UCC has similarly attempted to restore relations with Indigenous peoples by offering statements of apology, supporting healing and reconciliation programs, as well as making changes to its policy and practice in relation to Indigenous peoples and communities.

Indigenous nations and grassroots organizations have continued to assert their voice in the conversation by insisting on sovereignty and nation-to-nation dialogue, working toward treaty resolution, challenging legislation, and reclaiming power. Movements such as Idle No More are demanding justice by lifting up Indigenous ways of knowing and promoting a vision for healthy, just, equitable, and sustainable communities (Idle No More n.d.).

The creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was an essential piece of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA). In addition to settling class action claims and establishing programs for healing, the IRSSA called for a Commission to bear witness to the truth of Indigenous peoples' experience in residential schools and create a framework of reconciliation as a way forward (TRC 2015a). Many of the TRC's "Calls to Action" call on the UCC, as a party to the IRSSA, to take real and meaningful action toward a reconciled relationship with Indigenous peoples in Canada. The Commission was a starting place—it bore witness to the raw and painful truth of residential schools and to the hope of a renewed and reconciled future. The impact of this horrific legacy has been multigenerational and affects all Canadians, and, as Justice Murray Sinclair says, reconciliation will also take generations ("Reconciliation Will Take 'Generations'" 2015).

In August 2015, at the United Church of Canada General Council Meeting, the Committee on Indigenous Justice and Residential Schools reported that the United Church had fulfilled all of its legal obligations under the Residential School Settlement—financial commitments, participation in the TRC, providing all the relevant documents to the TRC, and an ongoing commitment to support services and programs for former students and their families (UCC 2015a). They also recognized that the work of

reconciliation was just beginning (UCC 2015a). In part, this would mean reconciling with the truth of Canada's colonial history.

The colonialist ideology that created the residential school system continues to shape both settler and Indigenous identities and the nature of the relationship between them (Razack 2002; Regan 2010; Hunt and Holmes 2015). At the core of the colonial mission is the erasure of Indigenous peoples and the seizure of land (Hunt and Holmes 2015), manifest through dominant power relations that continue to reproduce and maintain the structures and the cultural institutions of colonialism (Chambers 2009). This has resulted in significant social, health, economic, material, and educational gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. Racism, violence, poverty, and inequality are not only embedded in our history but in the narrative and discourse of Canadian society today (Razack 2002).

The United Church remains an institution with its roots in the propagation and protection of colonial ideology, yet it has a desire to transform this history. As a national body, the UCC has committed to the rebuilding of right relations through policy, program initiatives, and financial obligations (UCC 2015b). UCC conversation at a national level is dedicated to the idea of reconciliation, and the church is making concerted efforts to understand what will be required. Yet, is reconciliation possible? What role will the United Church play in the Canadian discourse of reconciliation? What does the everyday conversation and practice of reconciliation look like in a local United Church community of faith? How will exploring these conversations contribute to the shaping of a new discourse in Canada, to authentic practices of reconciliation, and a move toward decolonization? How will changes in the conversation impact the social and economic structures of power so that there is just material equality and a transformed relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada? These are the questions I will explore through this participatory ethnographic study with the congregation of Alberni Valley United Church (AVUC).

## **1.2. Reconciliation**

Reconciliation has become the defining word for addressing the broken relationships that exist between cultural groups, yet the word means different things to different organizations, communities, and people in different situations. It has taken on

everyday usage in Canadian discourse, but there is a risk that the everyday usage that is developing does not acknowledge the depth of injustice that exists or the extent of what is required to restore relations between Indigenous and non- Indigenous peoples. Taiaiake Alfred (2011), a Kanien'kehaka scholar, describes the original pre-colonial treaties<sup>2</sup> at first contact as embodying relationship of peace and friendship based on sharing and cooperation. To restore relations would be to return to these basic principles. Though the word reconciliation can trigger apprehension and defensiveness in settlers and disillusion in Indigenous people who have experienced centuries of broken trust and broken promises, it has also inspired movements of justice and peace-making. It has become a shorthand way to describe a very complex and intangible process of what it means to be in relationship and how those relations can be transformed at a societal level, particularly where there have been systemic abuses, an imbalance of power, and a legacy of colonialism.

The TRC has defined reconciliation as “an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships” (TRC 2015a:16). It describes this as a process of repairing relationships through apology, reparation, and action with a commitment to real societal change. In its *Calls to Action*, the TRC calls for renewed relations based on principles of “mutual recognition, mutual respect, and shared responsibility for maintaining those relationships in the future” (TRC 2015d).

In the United Church, the concept of reconciliation includes a theological understanding of coming into right relations with God. In the context of relations with Indigenous peoples, it has been understood as building right relations of mutuality and respect that are based in humility, healing, and justice (UCC 2018). The question this research paper examines is how these understandings of reconciliation are manifest at local levels and in everyday conversation. What transformational shifts are necessary and what barriers must be challenged in order to develop a meaningful understanding and practice of reconciliation?

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<sup>2</sup> Peace and Friendship Treaties signed with Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, and Passamaquoddy First Nations prior to 1779 promised mutual obligations and benefits to both parties and did not involve First Nations surrendering rights to the lands and resources they had traditionally used and occupied (Government of Canada 2015a).



The concept of reconciliation is not without critique as a valid or useful way to address injustice and the ongoing mechanisms of colonialism (Verdoolaege 2008; Corntassel and Holder 2008; Saul 2009; Tuck and Yang 2013; Niezan 2013). Alfred (2011) challenges the reconciliation discourse that has framed Canada's TRC process. He sees the process as a continuation of colonial and imperial assimilation that does not incorporate Indigenous identity or sovereignty. In his opinion, reconciliation discourses instituted by a colonial institution serve only to absolve colonial injustice and pacify white guilt and do not invoke any meaningful changes in the lives of Indigenous peoples. He believes that reconciliation does not address the deeper problems of colonialism, but in fact reinforces these ideas as Canadians "congratulate themselves for their forbearance and understanding" (Alfred 2011:183) once Indigenous peoples are reconciled. Restitution, Alfred proposes, would mean the returning of land and compensation for past and continuing harms. It would require the recognition of injustice, respect for Indigenous rights and the honouring of Indigenous sovereignty (Alfred 2011).

Corntassel and Holder (2008) have argued that reconciliation is a western concept. The closest word in Nuu-Chah-Nulth might be "oo yoothloothl," which means "looking after" (or, looking beyond), and this is related to the commitment to move forward or beyond the problem. In Nuu-Chah-Nulth culture, this encompasses a process of gathering as a family to discuss and strategize on how best to deal with the problem, witness and rectify it (Corntassel, Chaw-win-is, and T'lakwadzi 2009).

In order for there to be genuine reconciliation that truly endeavors to create mutual and respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, power relations need to be examined and confronted and the efforts must result in real and tangible change in the lives of Indigenous people. If the discourses of reconciliation are not held accountable to questions of justice and Indigenous priorities, there is the risk that reconciliation will in fact continue to reproduce colonial ideologies (Porsanger 2004; Smith 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012; Hunt and Holmes 2015).

### **1.3. Canadian Political Context**

Throughout colonization, the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people has been marred by inequality and injustice. Even though the Indigenous peoples have never relinquished their sovereignty in Canada, the Canadian

state has imposed policy and unilaterally defined the political relationship since the time of Confederation. These policies and practices have been enacted to exert control over the land and resources and to maintain an imperialist relationship over Indigenous peoples. Even where treaties were negotiated, the Canadian state repeatedly broke the treaty agreements and continued to invade and occupy increasing territory without regard for Indigenous right or title. Evidence of ongoing colonial practices continue today, citing the need to protect industry and development for the national and economic good of Canada, thus maintaining control of the resources as well as the agenda.

With the rise of civil rights movements in the 1960s, Indigenous peoples became more politically active, and the Canadian public became increasingly aware of the disparity, the poverty, and the oppressive conditions faced by Indigenous peoples. In 1969, the Canadian Government issued the White Paper as an attempt to redefine the relationship with Indigenous peoples (Government of Canada 1969). This document recommended repealing the Indian Act and abolishing the treaties, while a commission would impose land claim settlements. The goal was to assimilate Indigenous people under the Canadian State and to absolve the federal government of any further financial or treaty responsibilities. The White Paper was withdrawn in 1970 after tremendous backlash asserting that it had ignored the input of Indigenous leaders and had failed to recognize Indigenous rights, sovereignty, or treaty claims.

Since that time, political activism and the call for a new relationship has continued to increase. Courts have upheld Indigenous land rights, the Constitution Act of 1982 guaranteed Aboriginal and treaty rights, while activists and Indigenous leaders continue to demand state-to-state relations and consultation in policy negotiations. There has been a slow shift from policies of assimilation to the recognition of self-determination and a movement toward decolonizing and reconciling relationships.

Though reconciliation was not a significant part of the public Canadian discourse at the time, political events in the early 1990s continued to challenge and urge the Canadian governments at all levels to recognize that change was needed in its relationship with Indigenous peoples. There were two significant events during this period that brought the situation again to the forefront of the Canadian political agenda. In 1990, Elijah Harper (an Indigenous member of the Manitoba legislature) rose in the Manitoba legislature, holding an eagle feather, and refused to consent to the Meech

Lake Accord.<sup>3</sup> His objection was that it had been negotiated without the input of Indigenous peoples and the Manitoba government was seeking ratification without public hearings. His action meant that the Manitoba legislature could not ratify the accord before the deadline issued by the federal government, effectively blocking the constitutional amendment deal (MacGregor 1990; TRC 2015a).

A second turning point was the Oka crisis in the summer of 1990. For 11 weeks the Kamesatake Mohawk nation blockaded access to a burial site on disputed land claim grounds after the mayor of Oka had approved that the land be turned into a golf course. An officer was shot as the police attempted to remove the protestors. The stand-off was extremely tense with violence breaking out on the barricade as the RCMP, and eventually the Royal 22<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of the Canadian military, were sent in to break up the protests. Racist rhetoric on Montreal media exacerbated the situation. Eventually an end to the stand off was negotiated and the golf course development was cancelled (TRC 2015a).

The discourse in Canada was also changing. Public pressure through local political movements and the significant work of individuals and communities challenged the government to act. In response to the conflicts, and with the growing public awareness and concern for poverty and inequity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, the Canadian Government established The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1991. The Commission brought the focus of public attention to the history and impact of the residential school system and broke open the conversation of reconciliation and justice in a new way (TRC 2015a).

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<sup>3</sup> The Meech Lake Accord was a set of constitutional amendments agreed upon by the federal and provincial governments on April 30, 1987. It would have granted the provinces greater control over immigration and Supreme Court appointments, a veto over constitutional changes, and increased control over federal spending in areas of provincial jurisdiction, such as education and health care. It would also have recognized Quebec as a distinct society within Canada. The Accord had to be approved by Parliament and all provincial legislatures within three years. Meech Lake failed when the ratification deadline passed without the necessary support from Newfoundland and Labrador and Manitoba (Higgins 2012).

### **1.3.1. Indian Residential School System**

The Indian residential school system was a central part of a much larger intention by the Canadian Government to colonize and assimilate Indigenous people into a Eurocentric-based Canadian culture, while gaining control over their land and resources. As Canada established itself as a nation over the past century and a half, Indigenous policy focused on eliminating Indigenous government; controlling land through seizure, relocation, and restriction; disregarding treaties; outlawing Indigenous spiritual practices; disempowering Indigenous women; and denying the political, economic, and social rights of all Indigenous peoples (TRC 2015a).

Residential schools were designed to separate children from their communities and families, to disrupt the foundations of their cultural identity and further the goals of assimilation. Roman Catholic, Anglican, United, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches were complicit in this objective by establishing missions and boarding schools across Canada with the aid of federal funding. These churches managed most of the schools until the federal government assumed full responsibility in 1969. In total, there were 139 residential schools and residences, and it is estimated that over 150,000 First Nations, Metis and Inuit children attended residential school in Canada. Most schools were closed by the 1980's, though the last residential school remained open until 1996 (TRC 2015a).

### **1.3.2. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples**

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was established by the Canadian government in 1991 “to investigate and report back to the Government of Canada on one over-riding question: What are the foundations of a fair and honourable relationship between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Canada?” (Government of Canada 2016). The Commission initiated 350 research studies and held 178 days of public hearings, reviewed past inquiries and reports, consulted with experts, and visited 96 communities in the course of their work. In 1996 they released their findings in a five volume, 4,000-page report, which included 440 recommendations that centred on establishing a new relationship based on mutual recognition and respect, sharing and responsibility, and repairing the damage caused by 150 years of assimilation policies (Canada 1996).

The majority of the recommendations were never implemented and have been ignored by the federal government, but the process and the report prompted a new conversation in Canadian public discourse, challenging the foundational assumptions of Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples and inspiring a new path toward reconciliation (Wallace 2013; TRC 2015a). The report also recognized, without doubt, the damage caused by the residential school system and provided documented support to survivors making legal claims against the government and the churches for abuses suffered at the schools (Petoukhov 2013).

### **1.3.3. Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement**

Survivors began to come forward to demand justice and legal recourse, both as individuals and through class action claims. As a result of the mounting legal action being brought against the government and the public campaigns pushing for recognition of the abuses that occurred in the residential schools, the federal government launched the National Resolution Framework Alternative Dispute Resolution process in 2003 in an effort to negotiate out of court settlements with the residential school abuse claimants. This process received serious criticism from the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), including concerns that the process was intimidating, confusing, and unnecessarily complicated. The AFN argued that it limited compensation to a narrow range of acts and treated survivors unequally. A key finding in the report on the Dispute Resolution Plan by the AFN was that the Alternative Dispute Resolution process failed to address emotional abuse, loss of family life, language, and culture, and did not take into account the healing needs of survivors and their families. "Even though the primary focus of the report is the compensation plan, we stress that compensation is only part of a holistic process aimed at reconciliation, healing and compensation combined. We therefore include recommendations for a truth-sharing, healing and reconciliation process" (AFN 2004:2).

Given the looming certification of a multitude of class action suits and the possibility of thousands of cases being brought forth to the courts, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs eventually acknowledged the inability of the Alternative Dispute Resolution process to manage the cases before it. This led to a complex series of negotiations between representatives of former students, the AFN, other First Nations organizations, churches, and the federal government that

would result in the largest class action settlement in Canadian history: the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) (Wallace 2013).

In 2006 the courts approved the IRSSA, settling about 10,500 individual cases that were before the court at the time, as well as 3000 cases that were in the government alternative dispute resolution process (“Historic Settlement” 2006). The IRSSA included monetary compensation to all former residents of the schools, a process for assessing and adjudicating sexual and physical abuse claims, funding for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, the establishment of the Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program for survivors, a program for commemoration and memorial projects, as well as the creation of the TRC (IRSSA 2006; Regan 2010; Wallace 2013).

At long last, a national Statement of Apology was issued in the House of Commons in 2008, acknowledging the harm done and the role of the government in developing and administering the residential school system for the purpose of assimilation by removing and isolating children from their families, traditions, and cultures, as well as the lasting damage and impact on Indigenous peoples (Government of Canada 2015b).

#### **1.3.4. Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

As part of the IRSSA, the Government of Canada established the TRC in 2008, with a mandate to:

Reveal to Canadians the complex truth about the history and the ongoing legacy of the church-run residential schools, in a manner that fully documents the individual and collective harms perpetrated against Aboriginal peoples, and honours the resilience and courage of former students, their families, and communities;

and

Guide and inspire a process of truth and healing, leading toward reconciliation within Aboriginal families, and between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal communities, churches, governments, and Canadians generally. The process was to work to renew relationships on a basis of inclusion, mutual understanding, and respect (TRC 2015a:23).

The Commission was to accomplish this task, in part, by facilitating truth and reconciliation events across the country that would provide witness and support to former students and their families and communities as they came forward to tell their stories. These events were also intended to promote awareness and public education about the Indian residential school system and its impacts. The Commission was to create an historical record of the Indian residential school system and legacy and submit a report including its history, purpose, operation, and supervision, its effect and consequences (including systemic harms, intergenerational consequences and the impact on human dignity), the ongoing legacy of the residential schools and recommendations moving forward (IRSSA 2006).

The TRC's 94 "Calls to Action" sought to redress the legacy of residential schools and establish a framework for reconciliation. These "calls to action" are meant for all Canadians as well as the churches, governments, and Indigenous organizations that were parties to the IRSSA, urging a holistic and concentrated effort to repair the harm, change policies, and work together with the aim of building mutual and respectful relationships.

For the UCC, as a party to the IRSSA, there are particular calls to action that have been directed at the churches. On a national level, the UCC continues to engage and respond to these calls. Reading the TRC report and engaging with the calls to action through conversation and practice are one way local congregations can contribute to the ongoing work of reconciliation.<sup>4</sup> At the local level, many congregations have engaged the TRC report and the calls to action through study and conversation. This increased awareness is changing the discourse and the practices at the local congregational level.

## **1.4. Alberni Residential School**

### **1.4.1. History**

This research project took place in conjunction with Alberni Valley United Church. In exploring the questions of reconciliation, I approached AVUC to ask if they were interested in collaborating with me as a way of exploring their own story of reconciliation.

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A, "The United Church of Canada's Response to the Truth and Reconciliations Commission Calls to Action (December 2016)."

Reconciliation and the impacts of the residential school system are close to the heart of this community. The UCC was responsible for the oversight and running of the Alberni Indian Residential School from 1925 until the federal government took over management of the school and residence in 1969. High school students had been attending public schools in Port Alberni since 1934 while living in the residences, and by 1966 all the children living at what was then officially called “Alberni Indian Student Residence” were attending local public schools. There were 300 children from across Vancouver Island and throughout the province of BC in residence in 1969 (UCC Archives n.d.). The level of integration into the public schools has had a significant impact on the stories and experiences of people in the community of Port Alberni.<sup>5</sup>

The Alberni residence closed in 1973, primarily at the call of the West Coast District Council of Indian Chiefs, who were disturbed and upset by the poor operation of the residence and were fundamentally opposed to sending children far away from their homes to attend schools (UCC Archives n.d.). The trend within federal government policy during this time was to withdraw from providing direct education to Indigenous children and to integrate students into provincial or territorial schools while working toward closing the schools and residences (TRC 2015a).

When the residence closed, the Tseshaht First Nations Band took over the former residential school buildings to use as administrative offices and in 2009 decided to finally take down the buildings. They held a ceremony inviting former students and boarders to take part in demolishing the former dormitory (UCC Archives n.d.). An article in the *Ha-Shilth-Sa* newspaper expresses the deep emotion and legacy connected to the residential school:

Tears flow as the people that are tearing at the building carry pieces of it down a set of stairs to a roaring fire where the debris is piled and burned. What could this building represent to have it so mistreated?

Hurt, pain, violence, hunger, broken dreams and broken families, battered cultures and battered bodies: It is Peake Hall, the dormitory of the Alberni

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<sup>5</sup> In the stories that were shared at the AVUC reconciliation conversation, Cathy, Mary and Dennis all talked about attending Gil Elementary school with children who were living at the Alberni Indian Student Residence, and others shared about the integration in high school. Deborah shared her story of being both at the residence as well as being boarded with local families while attending public school under the residential school system.



Indian Residential School, the site of unspeakable abuse of young children over the generations.

They share stories of the children that were sent to the school who would become forever estranged from their families and their culture. They whisper the stories that parents and grandparents have told about rape and torturous treatment, of being beaten for speaking their Native languages, of being hungry, scrounging through garbage bins for an old bit of potato or other such morsel.

Tseshah arranged to have the survivors traditionally brushed with smudge and cedar boughs in the longhouse. They wrapped the survivors in blankets, made sure there were councillors on hand to work through the trauma of returning to the site. They sang to them to lift their spirits, and prayed for them to heal their pain. They fed them as well, good medicine for the hungry soul (Steel 2012).

#### **1.4.2. Arthur Plinth Abuse Trial**

The Alberni Indian Residential School and residence had an infamous reputation for the abuse and mistreatment of the children who had been sent there. There were documented reports of abuse made to the Department of Indian Affairs dating back to the early twentieth century with details of severe physical abuse, including reports that staff “unmercifully” whipped the boys, kicked the children, hit them with fists, and choked them (UCC Archives n.d.).

Through the 1970s in Canada, Indigenous people began publishing memoirs of their experiences at the residential schools. This was augmented with oral histories and testimony being documented and collected by Indigenous organizations as a way to increase public awareness, advocate for justice, as well as support the healing process for survivors.

In the early 1990s, The Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council completed a study, *Indian Residential Schools: The Nuu-chah-nulth Experience*, based on interviews with 110 former students from Alberni residential school, which was published in 1996 (Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council 1996; TRC 2015a). The stories detail the physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual abuse, the loss of culture and separation from family, as well as the ongoing impacts experienced by survivors. At the time, the tribal council was in treaty negotiations with the government and the question of the residential school legacy was of key importance to the First Nations. The federal government was refusing to include

the issue of residential schools as part of the treaty talks, prompting the First Nations negotiators to threaten further court action. The tribal council began to call for a public inquiry into the schools and for apologies from provincial and federal governments as well as from the churches. This report also prompted a large scale RCMP investigation into specific incidents of abuses at the Alberni school (Howard and Porteous 1996).

As a result of the investigations and testimony of the abuse victims, Arthur Plint, a dorm supervisor at the school, was charged and convicted in 1995 on 36 counts of sexual assault committed between 1948 and 1968. Donald Haddock, another dorm supervisor, plead guilty to four counts of indecent assault occurring between 1948 and 1954 (UCC Archives n.d.). As both men plead guilty, the trials ended before former students had the opportunity to tell their stories in court. Thirty of the former students decided that more needed to be done. Lead by Willie Blackwater, they decided to launch a class action civil suit against the federal government and the UCC, who had been responsible for the operation of the school (Wright 2016).

The *Blackwater v. Plint* (2001 BCSC 997) civil action trial lasted three years and resulted in a precedent-setting decision by Supreme Court Justice Donald Brenner. Brenner ruled that both the federal government and the UCC were vicariously liable for the abuse caused by Plint. This opened up possibility and hope for survivors across the country, and the number of cases being brought against the government and the churches that had been involved in running the schools exploded. “By early 2001, some 8,500 former students were engaged in litigation.... By 2005, when the Supreme Court of Canada upheld Brenner’s ruling, there were 14,000 cases” (Wright 2016).

The UCC appealed the Brenner decision and instigated their own lawsuit against the federal government over vicarious liability. In *Blackwater v. Plint* (2003 BCCA 671), the church appealed on the grounds that no case had been established for holding it vicariously liable. The federal government contended that the church should be held jointly liable. In the original court decision, Brenner had held the church vicariously liable for 25 percent of the claim. In *Blackwater v. Plint* (2003 BCCA 671), the BC Court of Appeal then ruled that Ottawa was 100 percent responsible. However, in October 2005 the Supreme Court of Canada restored the original ruling that the church be held 25 percent liable for damage claims by former students (*Blackwater v. Plint* 2005 SCC 58).

## **1.5. St. Andrew's United Church, Port Alberni**

Alberni Valley United Church is the amalgamation of two Port Alberni United Church congregations: St. Andrews United Church and First United Church. St. Andrew's United Church's first worship service was held November 13, 1886 in a small hut on the south side of the Somas River. It has its roots in the Presbyterian tradition and was founded by a Presbyterian missionary, Rev. Alexander Dunn. First United Church began as a Methodist church in the early 1900s before becoming part of the United Church of Canada in 1925 (AVUC 2013). The congregations amalgamated in 2001 as a means of sharing resources and strengthening their capacity in the Alberni Valley. During the 1990s, St. Andrew's United Church had played a significant part in the United Church's history of reconciliation by taking an intentional stand to urge the United Church to make an apology in light of the criminal charges that had been brought against former Alberni Residential School dorm supervisor, Arthur Plint (Bob Stewart Archives n.d.).

The time of the trial and appeal were challenging for the community of Port Alberni and for those in the local congregation at St. Andrew's United Church. Relationships between the congregation and local First Nations communities had already been damaged through the Plint trial and appeal as lawyers questioned plaintiffs aggressively in court. The manner in which the national church was conducting itself through the liability trials continued to put local relationships at risk.

In 1986, the UCC offered an apology to Indigenous peoples for its part in colonization, but had not apologized specifically for its role in the operations of Indian residential schools. The UCC was concerned that if it took responsibility for what had happened at the residential school, it would absolve the federal government of needing to participate in the settlements and providing resources to attend the ongoing healing needs. This was key to the UCC's vicarious liability argument, insisting that the federal government had far more resources to support the compensation and that "letting them off the hook" would do more harm to First Nations peoples in the end (UCC Archives n.d.). The First Nations people who were engaged in this conflict saw this argument as condescending and paternalistic, as the Nuu-chah-nulth were working on their own behalf to put pressure on the federal government to take responsibility. They did not

need the “help” of the church in order to advocate for justice. What the Nuu-chah-nulth people asked for was an apology.

Influenced by the federal and provincial political climate toward First Nations relations, and with the growing tension in the UCC as the appeal continued, the congregation at St. Andrew’s decided to begin its own study of residential school issues. As a result, St. Andrew’s United Church became very engaged in questions of what it means to be in reconciliation with First Nations peoples.

In January 1996, St. Andrew’s United Church congregation began a discussion group on residential school issues. Over the course of the next 17 months, a group of approximately 25 congregational members would meet monthly, engaging resources from the UCC, such as the UCC brief to the RCAP, the Report from the Moderator’s Task Group on Residential Schools, information on the Healing Fund and the background rationale to the 1986 UCC Apology to Native Congregations (Bob Stewart Archives n.d.).<sup>6</sup> They invited guest speakers from the General Council of the United Church and the BC Conference of the United Church, leaders from the local First Nations Community, as well as former residential school students. They held conversations and meetings with First Nations people and with people in the United Church. They prayed and discerned, and looked for ways to move forward.

In May 1996, United Church of Canada Moderator<sup>7</sup> Marion Best and two staff from General Council visited Port Alberni to attend a meeting between St. Andrew’s United Church representatives and members of the Nuu-Chah-Nulth Tribal Council:

We visited the site of the residential school and had conversations with survivors of the school including some who were involved in the suit against the United Church. The meeting was hosted by the leaders of the Nuu-Chah-Nulth Tribal Council.

I will never forget that meeting. Again and again the stories were told and the leaders sought an apology from me for our role in residential schools. They expected I would give an apology as the designated leader of the United Church. It was something I was not entitled to give. I could only

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix B, “United Church of Canada Apologies to First Nations Peoples.”

<sup>7</sup> The Moderator of the United Church the elected spiritual leader and presiding officer of the General Council of the United Church of Canada. They are elected by the General Council for a 3 year term of office. The General Council is the highest legislative court in the governance structure of the United Church.

convey an apology that had been approved by the General Council or its Executive. I left that meeting with a very heavy heart (Kamloops Okanagan Presbytery 2013).

After six months of study, the congregation came to the decision that they needed to express a formal apology for the role of the church in the residential school and began to craft their own apology to be presented to the local First Nations peoples. UCC General Council legal representatives cautioned them about the apology because of the ongoing court action regarding vicarious liability and the potential financial and legal implications for the church. This stance was deeply divisive within the UCC. The fear was that the settlement payments, if the church was found liable, could potentially bankrupt the church and force it to sell off all its assets. Some officials in the church believed that the apology, if issued against the advice of legal council, could leave the church without insurance coverage, meaning it would have limited resources to actually compensate and support claimants. Many, however, felt that the church should apologize regardless of the costs (Bob Stewart Archives n.d.).

St. Andrew's completed the first draft of its apology in June 1996 and refined it over the next six months, meeting with members of the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples to review the apology and to plan a ceremony and feast for the presentation. In February 1997, the congregation held a congregational meeting to present the draft of the apology. The motion to present the apology was carried unanimously (Bob Stewart Archives n.d.). On May 6, 1997, St. Andrew's hosted a feast for 700 guests and presented the apology<sup>8</sup> as well as gifts of blankets, woven shawls, and a gift of money to the Nuu-Chah-Nulth language fund in a ceremony of repentance (Bob Stewart Archives n.d.).

In 2007, Julianne Kasmer collected and recorded the stories of the apology in a paper titled "The Quest for Hope and Healing: A History of the Residential School Apology from St Andrew's United Church in Port Alberni, BC." Kasmer interviewed many of the participants, congregational members, and officials who had been involved in the process. For members of St. Andrew's it was a question of integrity, and ethical and moral responsibility; they understood the risks, but felt a strong conviction that the apology should proceed and that the church must publicly confess to the Nuu-chah-nulth

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix C, "An Apology From St. Andrew's United Church to First Nations People for Harm caused by 'Indian' Residential Schools."

peoples and work for justice. The care and preparation that the congregation took in planning, consulting, and delivering the apology is a testament to this conviction. In reflecting on the apology feast, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who had been involved felt the experience had changed them (Kasmer 2007).

But the apology and the feast were not without tension. Not all Nuu-chah-nulth people accepted the apology; there were a group of people gathered in protest, and they would not accept the apology. Protesters were drumming and holding signs that read: “There is Nothing in the World – that could EVER repay what you Took away from our People – Nothing”; “Apology is Not Enough”, “Many Many NIGHTS I went to Sleep Hungry. I Lay there crying for my Mom + Dad. All I wanted was to Go Home” and “United Church BROUGHT ME To The Residential School – BUT They Did NOT Look After Me” (Bob Stewart Archives n.d.). Throughout this time, the UCC continued to caution the congregation, as the liability trials and appeal continued in Nanaimo.

In 1997, the congregation led a petition, with concurrence by the Presbytery and BC Conference levels of the United Church, for an apology from the national church for its role in the residential schools. The proposal was defeated when brought before the 36th General Council in Camrose, Alberta. Instead the General Council issued a “statement of repentance.” This caused deep disappointment and anger in the congregation and with Indigenous communities across the country. “The word that was needed was Apology.” (Bob Stewart Archives n.d.).

St. Andrews members continued to engage the national church in conversation. The following statement is from the St. Andrew’s church bulletin, September 6, 1998, in preparation for a visit by the UCC Moderator Rev. Bill Phipps and members of the Executive of General Council:

Much has happened in the last 15 months since the Apology Supper at Maht Mahs. I think that I can safely say that that was a significant congregational event and that, regardless of our different opinions and backgrounds, we pulled together and something special happened; something that no other UC congregation had done. We had control of what happened and, it happened.

Since that time, there has been disappointment, confusion, even anger, due to events beyond our control – Trial in Nanaimo, Appeal, the national church’s position.

After much discussion, it was decided that the most useful thing would be to try to share our experience of the Apology Supper at Maht Mahs in May of last year.

- - the preparation and the actual event. A broad cross-section of the congregation participated in many different ways in that event and members are invited to share their memories of the experience, big or small, and the significance to them, to the visitors. It is not a question of having to stand up before a large group. We will also hear their view as our leaders. Hopefully, prayerfully, we may get back to our more “united” feelings of 15 months ago (Bob Stewart Archives n.d.).

There were many people who had been involved in the apology who were frustrated by their experience with and the perceived hypocrisy of the UCC (Kasmer 2007). They continued to implore the members of the General Council Executive through letters and in-person meetings, requesting that an apology be made. The General Council Executive of the United Church was engaged in its own conversation about how to respond to the mounting pressure and the call for more significant action by the church. As a result of these deliberations and discussions, United Church Moderator Rev. Bill Phipps delivered an apology on behalf of the General Council Executive for the United Church’s involvement in the Indian residential school system on October 27, 1998.<sup>9</sup>

The amalgamated AVUC congregation in Port Alberni continues to hold reconciliation and right relations at the core of their work, but they struggle to know what it means to live fully into this vision. On their website they state:

“We are committed to living into right relationship with all people and creation. We acknowledge and accept that as The United Church of Canada we have participated in wounding people and creation in the past. We ask for forgiveness and help as we make amends. We believe that by connecting with all people we will grow and change and emerge a more compassionate, caring and healing community of faith” (AVUC 2013).

The congregation has faced internal tension about how to continue fostering practices and conversations of reconciliation. Every week at the beginning of their Sunday worship service, the congregation at AVUC acknowledge the traditional and unceded territories of the Tseshaht and the Hupacasath peoples and “give thanks and join them in stewarding this land” as signs of their ongoing commitment. They also recite

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix B, “United Church of Canada Apologies to First Nations Peoples.”

a prayer in Nuu-Chah-Nulth that was gifted to the congregation as a sign of trust and relationship, yet not all those in the congregation agree that these should be recited each week. The leaders and congregants continue to look for ways to practice reconciliation. Many of the congregants have close ties to the First Nations communities through their work and through school. During the course of this research project, members of the congregation participated in the Port Alberni Walk for Reconciliation and have partnered with two other local churches to consider how they might better understand and respond to the TRC's *Calls to Action*. They organized and jointly hosted "The Blanket Exercise,"<sup>10</sup> and have plans for three other learning events: "Building Bridges through Understanding the Village"; "Truth and Reconciliation Commission 94 Calls to Action"; and "The United Nations Rights of Indigenous People" (AVUC 2013).

## **1.6. Port Alberni and the Alberni Valley**

### **1.6.1. Demographic**

The AVUC is situated in the city of Port Alberni, British Columbia, within the traditional territories of the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations. Nuu-chah-nulth territory encompasses 14 First Nations territories on the West Coast of Vancouver Island. Under the governance of the province of British Columbia, Port Alberni lies within the Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District. Within the structures of the United Church of Canada, the congregation is part of the Comox-Nanaimo Presbytery in the Conference of British Columbia.

The Nuu-chah-nulth nations of the Hupacasath and the Tseshah peoples have lived, owned, and stewarded the land in the Alberni valley for generations (Tseshah First Nation 2018; Hupacasath First Nation 2018; Alberni-Cloayoquot Regional District n.d.). The Nuu-chah-nulth worldview, "everything is one," is expressed through their origin stories, in which understandings of the nature of the universe and the human

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<sup>10</sup> The Blanket Exercise is an interactive learning experience that teaches 500 years of Indigenous rights history in a 90 minute participatory workshop. It was developed by KAIROS (an ecumenical social justice organization in Canada) in response to the 1996 *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*—which recommended education on Canadian-Indigenous history as one of the key steps to reconciliation. Standing on blankets that represent the land, participants take on the roles of Indigenous peoples in Canada as they walk through pre-contact, treaty-making, colonization, and resistance (Kairos 2017).



condition are communicated. These stories teach important values shared by the community: a work ethic, perseverance, endurance, patience, kindness, and helpfulness and generosity. The interdependence of people and between the spirit and physical world is a key strength of traditional Nuu-chah-nulth communities. Creation calls forth a oneness, wholeness, interconnectedness between all life forms and the unity in creation. At the core of the Nuu-chah-nulth way are the values of love and respect. Together these form the essential elements in Nuu-chah-nulth worldview (Atleo 2004).

Prior to first contact with settlers, the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples had a vibrant culture and sophisticated system of laws and teachings that governed their land and communities. Resources were plentiful in the area, and the communities relied on fishing, whaling and hunting for sustenance. Ceremony has always played a central role in the lives of the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples (Morrow 2015; Desjarlais 2018).

The earliest recorded contact with Europeans was in the mid 1700s, when the Spanish established a fort in the inlet, and there has been permanent European settlement in the valley since the late 1880s (Alberni-Cloayoquot Regional District n.d.). These early settlers worked primarily in the logging industry as well as on government road and rail construction.

The establishment of settler industry in the valley began in 1860 with the violent takeover of a Tseshah village on the shore of the Inlet as two merchant ships, armed with guns, forced the Tseshah people out of the village so that they could build a sawmill (Stone 1984). According to research participant Kelly Foxcroft-Poirier, the land that became the sawmill site had been the traditional site of governance and training for young Tseshah leaders. The original sawmill was abandoned and burned down only a few years later, but the land was never returned to the Tseshah people. In 1896, the harbour was reoccupied by settlers and a new pulp mill was built in 1905. The waterfront site has remained an area of industry and settler occupation ever since.

Lumber, pulp and paper, as well as other resource-based industries such as fishing have been the mainstay of the community, though this has changed significantly over the past 20 years. In 2016, agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting made up 7.7 percent of the labour force down, from 17.7 percent in 1996, though manufacturing also accounts for 9.5 percent of the labour force, an indication that the forest industry

continues to be a significant economic driver (Statistics Canada 2017; Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District n.d.). The resource sectors have struggled over the decade and this has had a significant impact on the community of Port Alberni (Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District n.d.).

The shift in employment patterns and the economy have meant increased employment in construction, transportation, and health and social services, though overall the community has been in economic decline with minimal population growth compared to the rest of the province. This has resulted in further indications of economic downturn as the community shifts away from resource industries. The unemployment rate in 2016 was 10.2 percent compared to 6.7 percent in BC, and the average household income was \$67,196 compared to \$90,354 for the whole of BC. The statistics for education show 48.4 percent of those over the age of 25 do not have any postsecondary education compared with 36.1 percent in BC. This is consistent with areas characterized as resource driven economies (Statistics Canada 2017).

According to Statistics Canada, the population of Port Alberni was 17,678 in 2016, with 25,112 people living in the “census agglomeration,” which includes the city of Port Alberni, the First Nations reserves at Ahahswinis, Abberni, Klehkoot, and Tshaheh, as well as the regional electoral areas of the Alberni-Clayoquot regional district. Of note is that 13.3 percent of the population identify as Aboriginal. This is significantly higher than the average for the Province of BC where 5 percent of the total population are of Aboriginal identity. Also interesting is that 1,660 or 6.6 percent of people in the region indicated an affiliation with the United Church of Canada, including 130 people of Aboriginal identity who identified as connected or affiliated with the United Church. The average affiliation in BC is 5.1 percent (Statistics Canada 2017).

The population in the area is aging. In 1996, people aged 65 years or older made up 11.7 percent of the population. In 2011, this age group made up 20 percent and 24.1 percent of the population in 2016. The median age in Port Alberni is 49.6 as compared to 43.0 in BC overall (Statistics Canada 2017).

## 1.6.2. Reconciliation in the City of Port Alberni

In January 2017, two initiatives in Port Alberni uncovered division and a pervasive undercurrent of racism in the city. After being prompted by a Facebook message, School District Trustee Rosemarie Buchanan started to investigate the history of A. W. Neill, former Vancouver Island Indian agent (1903–1913) and House of Commons MP (1921-1945) after whom A. W. Neill Elementary School is named. What she discovered was a legacy of white supremacist rhetoric and action toward First Nations peoples and Japanese immigration. Buchanan began to have conversations at the school board about changing the name of the school as a symbol of reconciliation (Morrow 2017). City Councillor Chris Alemany also worked in consultation with the Tseshaht and Hupacasath First Nations to bring a motion to the city council to rename Neill Street (Morrow 2017). Word of the proposed changes was broadcast on a local radio station and onto on-line forums, where they met significant backlash as people made comments on social media such as “these people need to get a life, and talk about real issues,” and “waste of time [and] taxpayers money! Move on to something more constructive!” (Hamilton 2018). The comments on Facebook were particularly negative, exposing racism and distrust in the community.

In the end, a petition was started, and 848 people signed in opposition to the motion. A quote from the organizer of the petition, Cameron Stefiuk, highlights the tension:

Nothing can be done to change our past. No amount of retribution will ever compare to the horror and brutality of people like A. W. Neill .... In fact, it is my very belief that reconciliation ... in certain cases creates more division and harm than it does good,” he said. “I don’t feel that I was personally responsible and have to reconcile for things I have nothing to do with (Rardon 2017a).

This settler argument undermines the work of reconciliation. Reconciliation does not call for retribution, but it does require restitution for the harm done. Land was stolen, Indigenous peoples have been displaced, and treaties have been broken. The residential school system has caused intergenerational harm to Indigenous communities, the impact of which is still prevalent today. Government policies and structures continue to disrupt relations between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people. Settlers and their descendants continue to benefit from these systems of

colonization and thus are responsible to be part of the change, politically as well as personally.

The reaction to the name change proposals are yet another example of how settler history takes precedence over Indigenous history, and how Indigenous voice is discounted or erased from the discourse. Establishing relationships of mutual recognition and mutual respect requires a shared responsibility to address issues of justice.

In response to the protest, Jolleen Dick, a Hupacasath First Nation council member, organized a walk for reconciliation from the Harbour Quay to the City Council Meeting. At the meeting she brought forward three recommendations to the city in support of continued reconciliation efforts: first, to acknowledge that the city of Port Alberni is on the unceded territories of the Tsehaht and Hupacasath First Nations when opening council meetings and events; second, to adopt the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation; and third, to implement the TRC's specific calls to action (Rardon 2017b).

The City Council defeated the motion to change the street name, and instead moved to form a committee “for the purpose of investigating practical actions for the City and the community to help foster reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.” After the vote, several First Nations people expressed their disappointment to council—including Jolleen Dick. “I feel so sick,” said Dick. “You are sending the message that it is OK to maintain racist values in the community” (Petrescu 2017).

These examples from the wider community of Port Alberni provide some of the context in which the Alberni Valley United Church is working. Members of the AVUC participated in a counter protest walk for reconciliation in response to the petition that was circulated. In reflecting on the work of reconciliation at AVUC, Kelly Foxcroft-Poirier, stated: “Some of the things you were seeing in the community of Port Alberni and your church and we are seeing in the world is some kind of deep disconnection, and the only antidote to showing up for that work is connection.”

## Chapter 2.

### Unsettling the Story

People communicate through story; it is how we think and make sense of the world. Our world is shaped through the telling of stories and these stories have the capacity to either confirm our beliefs or challenge our understanding of truth. There is a strong pull, particularly when power and identity are called into question, to hold onto stories that maintain the illusion of righteousness and stories that support the hegemonic common sense from which power is held. It is difficult to let go of privileged positions. Transformative social and political change will require that this story be challenged. For there to be authentic reconciliation and a redefining of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, the settler story must be unsettled.

Reconciliation is based in repairing relationships through respect, acknowledgement, rebalancing power, and the just redistribution of resources. Reconciliation is not an Indigenous problem—it is a relational problem. Settlers must take responsibility to engage their own truth telling and to dismantle the narratives, behaviours, and social structures that have shaped their colonial identity and that continue to reproduce dominance in their relationships with Indigenous peoples (Wallace 2013). This truth telling begins by understanding how the myth of Canada as the benevolent peacemaker, the myth of a non-violent settlement and the myth of “not knowing” have distorted the settlers’ sense of reality and have been barriers to real change.

For settlers, the praxis of reconciliation will require an unsettling of the values, beliefs, and actions that continue to underpin and maintain colonial systems of power. The oppressive structures, systems of injustice, and power imbalance are not only something of the past—they impact all parts of our society today. This ongoing colonialism is in part supported by the overriding narrative of Canada as home of the benevolent peacemaker acting in the best interest of all (Regan 2010; Wallace 2013; Niezen 2013). The settler story is of a nation that celebrates diversity, adventure, exploration, and good intentions leading to a just and prosperous country. It is very difficult for settlers to accept an alternative story that the conquest and colonization of

Canada has been a violent process intent on eliminating or assimilating Indigenous peoples. How the story is told can support the dominant narrative and maintain the relations of power of the status quo. It can be unsettling when one comes to see that the story of Canada was not one of peace and good intention.

Retelling the story can be a path to decolonization. Settler denial—claiming innocence because “we didn’t know”—and the resistance to hearing a new story is a colonial strategy set on maintaining the dominant narrative. In the case of residential schools, there were many documents, reports, letters, and stories sent over the years to government officials showing that officials were informed about the abuse and neglect and were aware of the serious problems in the system but failed to act. Similarly, it is problematic to excuse responsibility by situating the story in the past. The stories that have upheld colonial power continue to impact the policy and practices of reconciliation today. Settlers continue to benefit from the system of injustice and in order for there to be reconciliation, settlers need to take action for change.

Transformation happens through conversation and relationship when individuals accept personal and political responsibility for shifting colonial attitudes and actions that do not serve our relationships well. This will require a critical self-awareness on the part of settlers, a sense of accountability, as well as the willingness to allowing an alternative story to change us. This begins to shift the social discourse. It is essential to bear witness to the struggles and impact that these colonial stories have had on Indigenous peoples, but also to the impact on settlers. Settlers need to educate each other and dismantle the myths that continue to support colonizing attitudes and behaviours.

Though the TRC focused on the legacy of the IRS, there is danger in isolating the IRS experience from the larger agenda of colonization. To simply apologize for the past mistreatment at the school by placing blame on individuals or on the actions of previous generations allows colonialism to continue unchecked. Instead, what is required is an unsettling look at what led to the creation of the IRS as well as the TRC and how those factors continue to influence policy and relations today (Cornthassel et al. 2009; Petoukhov 2013,). Reparations for the abuse at IRS will not transform relations unless accompanied by a process of decolonization that includes centering the Indigenous political agenda for self-determination, honouring sovereignty, resolving land

rights and treaty issues, and a sincere effort to transform the power relationship from colonial power to that of equality and respect (Smith 2012).

This will involve decolonizing the dominant narrative, challenging the assumptions of the past, transforming the structures of oppression and exploitation, and working together with Indigenous peoples in understanding a new truth, one that makes space for Indigenous voices and practice, shares power, and builds relationships of mutual respect and responsibility. Colonization is about taking space, colonizing space, owning space and controlling bodies (Wallace 2013). We now need to create space for the counter narratives, space to encounter each other, space for critical dialogue, testimony, storytelling, and witnessing. It will be uncomfortable and require risks of vulnerability, humility, unknowing, and a commitment to stay with the discomfort in our own struggle in order to be open to transformation. Unless this happens, the remembering and the storytelling will continue to perpetuate the power relations of colonialism.

## **2.1. Moral Imagination**

Shifting and challenging colonial worldviews, unsettling assumptions, and transforming understanding is daunting work. Drawing on the idea of the moral imagination can offer a framework through which this can be accomplished. Many authors have reflected on the moral imagination, from poets and visionaries such as T. S. Eliot and Martin Luther King Jr., to scholars and philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, and Hannah Arendt (Lederach 2005).

The moral imagination is the ability to engage the imagination so that one is able to think beyond one's self, to see the moral and human dimensions of the world, to expand one's thinking so that issues can be explored from a perspective other than one's own (Pittenger 2011). It is the capacity to reach out toward the world and toward others, seeking to understand what is beyond one's own experience and then incorporating that alternate understanding so that one's action considers others and are accountable in creating a just social world.

British historian and modern literature professor Lyndsey Stonebridge describes Hannah Arendt's conception of the moral imagination as imagining what it might be like

to be in the place of another. It means to look through another's frame or worldview to understand the experience that is not ours, instead of trying to understand the experience of another by filtering it through our own worldview (Stonebridge2017). For Arendt, the moral imagination meant engaging with others in their place, on their terms, and exploring issues or problems from perspectives other than one's own. This is best done in relationship and dialogue, engaging in the world, not apart from it (Lederach 2005).

The moral imagination begins with hearing another's story. But it goes beyond that; it is the ability to integrate that story so that one's worldview is expanded and one's understanding of the world is changed. Engaging the moral imagination is substantially different and more difficult than simply feeling empathy (Stonebridge 2017). One of the mandates for the TRC was to promote awareness and public education about the Indian residential school system and its impacts. But for these stories to shift the discourse, settlers must learn to listen differently. Hearing the stories of systemic abuse in residential schools and the violence perpetrated against Indigenous peoples through the story of benevolent peacemaker can trigger an empathetic response from settlers who want to help fix the problem. But empathy alone encourages distance and detachment; it enables one to observe and offer care while removing accountability. With empathy, the power relationship remains unchanged as the one who empathizes keeps the power (Regan 2010; Stonebridge 2017). It is not enough to engage empathy without the commitment to personal and political change.

Paulette Regan (2010) calls for a listening that provokes an empathetic unsettlement. This involves the practice of understanding what is happening in the world beyond oneself (Pittenger 2011). Transforming colonialism requires the capacity to mobilize the moral imagination, being attentive to the need to seek better understanding, acknowledging the interdependency and mutuality of relationships, and taking personal responsibility for self-reflection that shapes our understanding.

In *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, John Paul Lederach sums up his understanding of Hannah Arendt's idea for engaging a moral imagination:

We have the capacity to remember the past, but we have no capacity to change it. Not even God can change the past. We have the capacity to



imagine a different future, but we have no capacity to fully predict much less control it. Try as we might, nobody controls the future. The web of life is juxtaposed between these realities of time, between memory and potentiality. This is the place of narrative, the art of restorying (Lederach 2005:148).

## 2.2. Truth and Storytelling

Reflecting on the concept of truth in her essay “Lying in Politics,” Arendt says, “Factual truths are never compellingly true.... Facts need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnesses to be established in order to find a secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs” (Arendt 1972:6). For truth to be meaningful, it needs testimony and it is more powerful when embedded in a shared human experience. Myth and storytelling are essential to the creation and transformation of society as mechanisms that give truth meaning.

In *The Politics of Storytelling* (2002), Michael Jackson uses Arendt’s “The Human Condition” to explore how storytelling is used to make sense and meaning of experience and how this meaning making is a social process. Experience is first made comprehensible when it has been thought through; it is then that it can be communicated with others. We do this by telling stories. We share a common capacity with every other human being—our interactions and conversations give meaning to our experiences and allow us to relate to one another. They are a means of exchange. Stories give shape to our social world, and are thus set with competing interests, power relations, and politics. We participate in this communal sense making by translating what we experience in our private realm into a story that can be expressed in public. We take in stories from the public and these can transform our private being. By sharing our stories, we are not only expressing our being, but we are becoming (Jackson 2002).

It is the process of storytelling and the effects that storytelling has on both the teller and the group that “brings the social into being” (Jackson 2002:16). It is not about whether the story is “true” in some absolute way; rather what matters is the effect of the telling, how the conversation is shaping the social world and the individuals. Because of the nature in which stories shape the public and the private, they are foundational in the construction and operation of power.

At the individual level, stories have the power to restore our sense of self and our relationship to the world around us. By sharing one's experience with others and finding common ground, we restore our place in the community. We tell stories to recount and process events that have happened to us. When we share stories with others in a way that they can relate to and as they respond, it affirms our sense of belonging. We can gain a sense of agency in the face of our experiences, even if this agency is an illusion (Jackson 2002). Stories are also mechanisms of social power. Who gets to tell the story, and how the story is told, what stories are considered valid and true, and whose stories are discounted all have significant impact on the way power is held and exercised in society. The work of social transformation and the rebalancing of power will involve telling and hearing a multitude of stories.

Storytelling is an emergent practice; knowledge is created through the telling and listening. Storytelling stirs emotion and can call assumptions and beliefs into question. The stories we tell and create together are formed through the narratives in which we live, but just as the social narratives around us shape our stories and our lives, these narratives can also be challenged by our stories. Change happens when we push the boundaries of these dominant narratives and challenge the status quo, question power and structures, and make space for stories of resistance that offer hope for new possibilities to emerge.

At its most basic, storytelling is about returning to the fire at the end of the day to share with our circle of people; it is recounting and reworking our experiences from the day, making sense and belonging. In times of transformation, this can be even more important, as people tend to their broken lives and mend them together through story.

Thus, in every human society people fare forth at the beginning of each day from some hearth or homeplace and, at the close of day, return to some such place to rest, recover, and, most importantly, recount their experiences, both commonplace and curious, solitary and shared, of what has befallen them (Jackson 2002:50).

In the work with the congregation at AVUC, we spent much time talking about stories and how the stories were impacting the work of reconciliation. We talked about how to learn from the stories and how to transform the stories. The stories they shared during this research project are connected to and embedded in the ongoing story of the congregation through its quest to apologize, as well as the deeper stories of settler

relations in the Alberni Valley, of the residential school, and of the stories from time immemorial in that place that are told by the Nuuchahnulth peoples.

### **2.3. Why Local Matters**

Reconciliation will ultimately be the work of everyday people in relationship with each other as neighbours and co-workers, community builders and allies, living and working together in local towns and cities across the country. The impact of the IRS and the legacy of broken relationships, the violence, the tension, and resulting anger are not just theoretical issues but are inherently embedded in local context and in the day to day lives of people in community (Wallace 2013). And just as the brokenness exists in the local, the local can be a space of decolonizing and transformation. The local is where people engage.

Communities have the power to “produce their own knowledge and means of social change” (Wallace 2013:16). The community level is where relationships are built, where stories are shared, and thus where this transformative change is possible. People and communities can enact social change through relationships, conversation, community building practices, and building allies as they work to find new solutions together. Communities have the capacity to transform and shape the world, not just resist it. Being engaged in community life and transforming the ways we understand ourselves and the ways we act can have ripple effects in transforming relations in the broader context (Wallace 2013).

The story of the 1997 St. Andrew’s United Church apology was an example of a congregation acting outside of the prescribed actions of the national church. It engaged its agency as a local community to resist the national narrative and in turn influenced change within the national body.

The school and street name change proposals in Port Alberni and the vicious comments and protest that erupted as a result highlight the conflictual relationships that can erupt at the local level. They raise questions about who has the power to name and who gets to tell the story. Wallace asserts that “on the ground practices of collaboration with Indigenous communities posit new possibilities of reconciliation” (2013:28-29). These questions are relevant as the City of Port Alberni establishes the new

reconciliation committee: will it support a collaborative effort to transform relationships and further the work of reconciliation, or will the status quo of the white settler nation be maintained?

Unsettling the stories that have perpetuated the imbalance of power between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is a first step toward a new story of genuine reconciliation. This will require making space for critical dialogue, not just on a national level, but in local communities, in church halls and in family living rooms. We need to hear stories other than our own as a way to engage our moral imagination and transform our understanding so that we continue efforts to decolonize our practices in everyday life. We then need to take responsibility for telling the new story.

## **Chapter 3.**

### **Process and Methods**

#### **3.1. Interpretive Social Science**

From a theoretical perspective, interpretive social science holds that the social world is a product of how we interpret it. Meaning is created through social interactions and agreements and thus is open to many possible understandings (Rabinow and Sullivan 1987). Where a positivist world view sees all relationships as linear, an interpretive understanding conceives relationships as an interactive web of meaning, knowledge, and action. Rather than looking for universal truths, social interpretive researchers examine meaning-making processes and narratives: how they influence social practice, how they are reinforced, and how they change over time (Bushe and Marshak 2015).

At the centre of this socially constructed meaning making is discourse. Discourses are the means by which humans create the social realities that frame their sense of who they are. This is done through the texts, stories, myths, narratives, metaphors, conversations, actions, and practices that give shape to a culture and bring thinking into being (Marshak and Grant 2008). How individuals and groups think and act is shaped by communal discourses, and the discourses are in turn shaped through the ongoing conversations and interactions within the group. Narratives are the storylines that are produced to make sense of interactions and events and are foundational to discourse. Narratives do not simply exist to describe reality; the language of the narrative gives meaning to action, articulates how to make sense of our experiences, and is the framework through which humans interact (Marshak and Grant 2008). Change occurs in society as the narratives change. When stories are challenged and when new stories emerge and are shared, cultures change and adapt to the new realities supported by these new narratives. Social change requires changing the conversation.

A critical perspective must also be brought to a discussion of discourse. Power and politics can be used to create and privilege certain discourses in ways that maintain the advantages of those in power. Critical discourse examines whose interests are being served by the prevailing narratives and how power is being used to reproduce this

inequality through language and text. Discourse and power are mutually constitutive; discourse shapes power relations, and relations of power shape those who have influence in the discourse as well as the ways they have influence. Resisting and changing the dominant discourses requires challenging the narratives and the discursive process to make room for new interpretations that allow for new practices and can shape new realities (Marshak and Grant 2008).

Humans are reflective and interpret day-to-day interactions, relationships, and conversations to make sense of their experiences and what is going on around them (Bushe and Marshak 2015). This continual reflexivity and meaning making, in turn, shapes the cultural narratives. In this way all cultural and social life is a reflection of practical activity rooted in a historical context of meaning (Rabinow and Sullivan 1998). Social practices are the modes of socially construed actions that arise from the socially constructed norms and discourses of a society. How we act is shaped by communal discourses as the discourses either enable or constrain the way relating is practiced and interpreted. Changes in the discourse will change the practices and the meanings that are assigned to them.

Participatory design methods build on the notion that transformational change is emergent, not planned, and that social construction of reality occurs in the relationships and communications between people. By inviting conversation, the discourse is changed. Understanding is created as participants express their experience and integrate it with others' experiences in an ongoing process of interpretation. Researchers have the ability to notice spaces of emergence and to act as interpretive translators by encouraging engagement and inquiry within the whole system and involving participants in the uncovering of intention, meaning, and motivation. By noticing the emergent dynamics, they can encourage understanding through process design (Bushe and Marshak 2015). Researchers are not looking for solutions; change will emerge within the system. The role of the researcher is to facilitate a collaborative process that encourages reciprocal learning.

This research project centers on the process of conversation. The purpose of the research was to facilitate a conversation among AVUC congregants about their experience of reconciliation. Through conversation, congregants would generate a sense of their shared story of reconciliation, would be able to reflect on their individual

stories in light of the shared story, and would learn more about reconciliation from sharing experiences. As part of the design, we planned a structured conversation and storytelling event for congregants to attend. This conversation included methods for analyzing and pulling out learning from the storytelling and engaging conversation among congregants to create new knowledge and understanding. The method of design also involved conversation. Working with a small group of leaders from the AVUC congregation, we used conversation to co-create the structured event and the framework for analysis. It is through these design conversations that insights into the work of reconciliation by the congregation began to emerge. The content of both the design conversations and the structured storytelling conversation serve as the data collected for the research. The process of conversation serves as the means of data generation, analysis and the creation of new understanding and knowledge.

I began my role of the researcher as the observer, with a promise to reflect back to the congregation their stories. There was risk in showing up with the invitation, but there was also safety in keeping the research arm's length. However, it was not too long into the process when I realized that the research and the conversations also needed to include me. As I engaged with the congregation around their stories, I needed to come to understand my own story of reconciliation and connection to the questions. How was this conversation transforming me, and, even more poignantly, how was it unsettling me? As I began to unpack the stories and struggled to know how to tell them, I often found myself straddling the need to make meaning and understanding for myself with my goal of honouring the stories as told by the people who came to share. I struggled with a belief that my role was to detach myself from the stories and offer a reflective presence to the congregation's process, but to be engaged in the research I also needed to own, declare, and embed my own process of learning and reflexivity.

## **3.2. Research Design**

The research began with a conversation. I attended a worship service with the congregation and met with the AVUC Chair of Council,<sup>11</sup> offering the initial invitation to participate in a participatory research project on reconciliation. She resonated strongly with the topic of reconciliation, and we agreed to continue talking. I had a second

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<sup>11</sup> The Council is the governing body of the congregation.

conversation with the minister and the Council chairperson, this time more concrete—what would this project look like? How could it tie into the work already being done at AVUC? Did it make sense to do this work at this time in the congregation? They had experience with the type of facilitated Art of Hosting<sup>12</sup> conversations that I was offering, and they were committed to the work of reconciliation, but they were also facing serious questions of their own sustainability. The question of reconciliation carried significant history and weight in the congregation; did they want to risk what it might mean to have these conversations in a more intentional way?

In October 2016, I presented a proposal to the AVUC Council. I offered to work with a small group of AVUC members to design and lead a conversation about reconciliation with First Nations peoples in light of the TRC's *Calls to Action*. The conversation would form the basis of my research and thesis on how local UCC congregations were engaging the conversation of reconciliation at a local level. There was caution around the Council table. One man asked, "Why would we want to open up these old wounds?" This was countered by the statement "This is our work" and a sense that they needed to face these questions as a congregation. This could be an opportunity for healing and reconciliation not just with their First Nations neighbours, but within the congregation as well.

The Council said yes, they believed this was the work that the congregation needed to engage in at this time, and they wanted to move ahead with the project. There was a social justice team in place called "Affirm" that met monthly and had led the congregation through a process of becoming an Affirming Community.<sup>13</sup> The Affirm team agreed to act as the planning and design team for the research project. It would be a risk for the congregation to undertake this project, opening up to conversation that could be emotionally painful and require self-examination and change. The motivation was a desire for justice and healing with First Nations peoples in their community as well as within the congregation.

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<sup>12</sup> Art of Hosting is a grass-roots network of practitioners using a collection of conversational processes and group facilitation methods to host "conversations that matter" to elicit the collective wisdom of groups. (cite)

<sup>13</sup> Affirming Community is a designation recognized by the United Church for congregations who publicly affirm their support for the inclusion of LGBT people in the congregation and work toward justice for inclusion in their community.



### 3.2.1. The Chaordic Steps

The goal of the planning team was to design and facilitate a conversation on reconciliation at AVUC. To design the conversation, I used a participatory Art of Hosting tool called the “chaordic stepping stones.” The chaordic stepping stones is a planning framework intended to bring form and order to a process without stifling creativity or the emergence of new ideas. These steps can be used both as a planning tool and as a tool to help better understand an organization, community, or initiative. The tool is designed to be used collectively, and offers a series of steps to guide the planning as well as a set of lens, through which to reflect on the process. The steps of the chaordic path are need, purpose, principles, people, concept, limiting beliefs, structure, practice, and harvest. Each of these stepping stones contain key questions related to the overall goal of the project or conversation to lead the group through the design process (Corrigan n.d.).

### 3.2.2. Need and Purpose

I started by asking the team what they saw as the need—why did AVUC need to have this conversation? There was a strong sense of ‘call’ to the work of reconciliation, and a hope that the conversation would be life generating and that it would make a difference. They felt the need to see and hear each other as a congregation and to hear their story of reconciliation collectively. The congregation had experienced conflict over many years centered around the questions of reconciliation. Some of this was from the experience surrounding the 1997 apology by St. Andrew’s United Church as well as the experience with a former minister, Kevin Annett.<sup>14</sup> There was fear at opening up these questions again, but there was a stronger need to create an experience of coming together with the hopes of finding reconciliation within the congregation of AVUC.

It was also critically important that the focus of the conversation be on the need for reconciliation with the First Nations peoples. With a congregation made up of

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<sup>14</sup> Mr. Annett was ordained in 1990. He had two brief postings before coming to St. Andrew’s United Church in Port Alberni in 1992. In January 1995, following a presbytery review, he tendered in writing his resignation to Comox-Nanaimo presbytery. Following two Formal Hearings conducted by the United Church of Canada, Mr. Annett was removed from the ordained ministry of United Church of Canada due to a finding of ineffectiveness (or lack of fitness) as a minister; failure to maintain the peace and welfare of the church; failure to recognize the authority of the Church courts.(BC Conference)

primarily settlers and non-Indigenous people, they knew they had their own work to do in relating to the harm caused by the residential school system and the ongoing impact of colonization. Lastly, they wanted to make the connection between their work as a congregation and the work of reconciliation needed in Port Alberni. As one member of the team stated: “We are bigger than just our own story, we are also part of the community of Port Alberni and we want to be able to build on this work so that we serve the community. We have a role in the community, we are connected, we have work to do.”

As part of the process, the team then worked to name a clear purpose for the conversation, one that would guide the design and planning and help keep the work focused. They identified the primary purpose as ‘an opportunity to write our collective story of reconciliation together and witness to who we are.’

### **3.2.3. Principles**

In the chaordic step process, identifying the principles that will guide the design and the conversation is a co-creative process that helps sustain the work over the long term. By identifying the principles that the team can come back to when the plan or the situation encounters challenges, there is solid ground for on-the-fly adaptations that keep the design focused on the purpose without being constricted by the structure.

The principles that the AVUC team named for the conversation tied closely with the principles that they wanted to hold throughout their work of reconciliation. They wanted the design of the conversation grounded in their intention for a reconciled relationship with First Nations peoples. They were very clear that the focus of the design and the conversation needed to acknowledge that the legacy of the residential school system and the continued presence of colonialism have had a direct impact on the current state of relations, an impact that affects all people, both Indigenous and settler. They wanted to be able to connect their story with the bigger story, to bring in perspective, and to widen the circle of understanding: that the stories shared in AVUC could have an impact on a wider conversation within the Valley and within the United Church, and that they would in turn be influenced and connected to what was going on beyond their walls.

The leaders wanted to model the vulnerability and authenticity that they hoped would lead to a deeper conversation. In this, they named the principles of witnessing each other, listening to and supporting each other in the sharing, and honouring each story. These principles were to be made visible in practical and concrete ways by paying attention to the physical space as well as the emotional space. To be able to honour, support and listen to the stories, it was important that people could hear and see each other. It was important that the space be safe and accessible, and that the space be held sacred through ritual and ceremony as the conversation began and unfolded.

To help create this space, the team wanted to introduce RESPECT<sup>15</sup> guidelines for the conversation (Kaleidoscope Institute 2015). These would set a tone for the conversation based on practices of each person owning and taking responsibility for what they shared, being empathetic and sensitive to others, pondering what they heard and felt before they spoke, examining their own assumptions, keeping the conversation confidential, and trusting the ambiguity. They were not there to debate who was right or wrong, whose story was true and whose was not, but instead to build a collective and multifaceted picture of the story. Just as there are many ways to tell the story, it was recognized that there would be many ways to enter the experience. All of these would be honoured as much as possible by making space for the intellectual, the emotional, the physical, and the spiritual in the design and in the facilitation.

Working through the step of naming principles helped me understand the social context and values held by the congregation. In writing this thesis, I returned to them as a way to respect the stories that were shared and align with intentions held by the planning team. If the purpose of reconciliation is to live into mutual and respectful relationships between First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous people, it was hoped that the principles established by the AVUC team would serve the conversation in a similar manner.

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<sup>15</sup> The RESPECT guidelines were developed by Eric Law of the Kaleidoscope Institute as guidelines for respectful communication in groups of people with different backgrounds. They are written in an acronym that helps group members remember the guidelines. These guidelines are commonly used within United Churches in British Columbia. See Appendix D, “RESPECT Guidelines.”

### 3.2.4. People

The design team then spent time with the question of who the conversation was for. They recognized that for the most part AVUC was made up of non-Indigenous people from settler backgrounds, but not exclusively. How would the design of the conversation recognize the need to be both in conversation together with First Nations peoples who were part of the wider community as well as providing the space for the congregation to do its work of grappling with the questions and “unsettling” themselves enough to be able to enter into a larger conversation? Throughout the planning the design team wrestled with these questions: Whose voices need to be in the circle? Do we need to have a conversation first among “ourselves” and then reach out? Will congregants share honestly if there are others there who aren’t “family”? In the first planning meeting, we discussed ways to communicate with the local First Nations community that we were going to be holding the conversation. The intent was to offer respect. As a student researcher, would it be appropriate for me to request permission to do the research in this territory? Though the research was not to be research of First Nations peoples, but of the story of the United Church, the question of reconciliation needed to be in the context of these relationships. How could we explore this question in isolation? Would that even be useful? We also bumped up against this tension in planning the ritual and physical set-up. We shared this land and this space; we also relied on the cedars to cleanse the air and the land to hold us. Were there aspects of healing and ceremony from First Nations local culture that we could incorporate without appropriating that which wasn’t “ours”?

Initially we wondered if it would be appropriate to contact the chief of the Tsechat people to inform them of the research project being conducted in their territory. Though the research was focused on the conversations within the United Church, we understood that reconciliation requires relationship. In the end we did not contact the local First Nation communities directly. Making contact would have required a risk of discomfort, stepping into unfamiliar space. It felt vulnerable to be in the unknowing and I chose to remain in the confines of a known United Church conversation. This tension highlighted a key barrier in the work of reconciliation. While there is a need for settlers to take responsibility for their own work and not make it an “Indigenous issue,” reconciliation will only be possible through relationship. It will require being uncomfortable, stepping out of privileged space and into the mutual space of relationship. Going back to the original

principles, we experienced the tension between holding this conversation with a clear focus on the impact of residential schools and a focus on reconciliation, with the need to keep it “safe” for congregants. There is a difference between being safe and being uncomfortable. How could we disrupt the story if we weren’t willing to be uncomfortable? This is the space of privilege.

At the November 20, 2016 planning meeting, this tension hit a critical point for Minnie, the minister of the congregation. As we were talking about how to make the conversation “safe,” something became disturbed in her and she asked, “Why do we avoid the hard?” Minnie reflected on her experience in traditional First Nations circles, where the circle was kept open and people were not afraid to hear the hard stories because as they kept going around the circle healing would come. She was naming a hinge point in the wider context and process of reconciliation: settlers would need to allow themselves to become unsettled, and this would not be comfortable, nor would it be welcomed by some. She was concerned about sharing and hearing only the story of AVUC. Yes, it was important for the congregation to hear and hold their own story, but the story also needed to be unsettled for reconciliation to move forward. This led to further reflections—“Whose story is not in the room?” Would it be important to invite the story of a First Nations elder or to invite a witness to the stories that AVUC was to share? It would be easy to fall into the narrow belief of our own story in ways that keep us comfortable. As we opened up the stories to the possibility of transformation, there was something about how we held the question that would keep calling us back to our purpose, and there was something about the need for a witness to the stories. Minnie’s dream was to create and facilitate a process that would make it possible for the largest group of people possible to be there in truth and honesty and be unsettled. These questions challenged, shifted, and unsettled the design process in ways that would open it to new possibilities.

The second significant concern that came out of the November 20 planning meeting was an awareness that in our planning we could be colonizing the process. “Are we designing a process that is colonizing? How does this reflect the ways we continue to colonize the process of reconciliation?” The pressure to contain the conversation, to make it safe and comfortable for settlers, was in direct contradiction to the need for unsettling. We wanted to control the stories and the process. We talked in earnest about “owning the stories,” about “building” a collective story that could be made visible and

shared. Even though the intentions and the principles focused on transformation through embracing a variety of stories and allowing and encouraging a wide berth of experience, there was still a desire to hold onto control. This could be seen as we discussed the process of deciding who would share stories, and what stories would be shared. How would we manage stories that felt destructive to the purpose or stories that might offend the status quo? Always on the edge of this was the danger of centering the settler story and defending the story of good intentions, without offering a counter narrative. Were we perpetuating and preserving the colonial identity of the church in our storytelling, or was there a way that we could use this opportunity to enter into each other's stories as witnesses, allow those stories to change us, and build a collective memory that would be diverse enough to unsettle the settler narrative?

### **3.2.5. Limiting Beliefs**

In the chaordic steps planning method there is an opportunity for the team to look at "limiting beliefs." This is based on the idea that innovation requires discovering new ways to approach the work and that our old models and ways of thinking can block innovation if we do not consciously examine them. Blocks will often emerge as fears, so the design team spent time identifying fears and anxieties, unpacking these beliefs so that they did not unintentionally drive the design and so we didn't build in ways to mitigate our fears that would in turn keep us stuck in old patterns and beliefs.

From the outset, there was a big fear of "push back" from the congregation. Those on the design team had experienced this push back in other situations and were afraid of it emerging again. When the congregation began acknowledging the traditional territories at the beginning of each service, there were congregants who resisted this and who the team were afraid might continue to block the conversation or sabotage the work. A common refrain in resistance was "we / they need to get over it already." But rather than hold this in fear, the team approached this possibility with compassion. They held onto a principle of being willing to sit in discomfort and acknowledged that settlers have also been shaped by colonialism. They discussed what to do with their own reactions if these questions rose up in the conversation and they strategized about ways to call the conversation back to the principles of respect, listening, and witnessing each other's story.

These fears emerged in the wider congregation as well when the invitation to the conversation was extended. At a coffee hour conversation after a presentation to the congregation in November of 2016, I was approached by a congregant with a similar caution that I had heard at the Council meeting. He wanted to be sure I knew what I was getting into and that I understood the history of “trauma” that the congregation had undergone. The tension was present currently in the reactions that had risen up when the congregation began acknowledging the Indigenous territory and reciting the Nuu-Chah-Nulth prayer at the beginning of each service. There were those in the congregation who thought this would be a bad idea because it just opened old wounds. These fears again highlight the space of privilege, the ability to control the conversation, resist discomfort, and erase the reality of trauma experienced by Indigenous peoples under colonial rule.

There was also a fear of “hate” being expressed by resistant congregants that might do damage to relationships. There was a worry that if there were First Nations people in the conversation they would be hurt or offended by the stories that were shared or the comments that were made. To manage this fear, the design team spent some time on the questions of hate, conflict, and resistance and what do we do if it rose up during the conversation.

We did not answer all of these questions but held them in conjunction with the principles as we continued to bridge into the concept and concrete design of the conversation.

### **3.2.6. Concept and Structure**

As the team worked to co-create the design of the conversation, the structural components began to emerge. They had an image of using a circle as the framework which would become populated with the stories shared by congregants to create a visual picture of a collective story that could then be shared. “We want to hear each other’s stories. We want to know each other’s stories.” It was clear that they wanted to hear about the experience of reconciliation: when it was successful, when it had been painful, where they experienced hope and saw opportunities for reconciliation emerge, as well as when they came together in times of crisis and needed reconciliation as a path to healing. They were interested in hearing both the stories of individuals as well as the

stories of the congregation. It was also clear that they wanted there to be a structure that would set the tone and protocol of respect for the sharing. The goal was not to try to identify “what we did wrong,” but “what are the stories” that are told and how can we witness and hold the diversity of stories in the circle. They did not envision a dialogue on reconciliation, but rather the sharing of stories that would simply be witnessed.

As I listened with the team, I introduced the idea of a Collective Story Harvest as a facilitation method that might serve this conversation well. The method resonated with the team and we began to explore it further, filling out the structure with details.

Collective Story Harvest methodology is based in the Art of Hosting practice approach to leadership and group facilitation. It has been developed over the past seven years within the Art of Hosting practice network, particularly through the work of Mary Alice Arthur. It combines storytelling with a collective group meaning-making process to surface the insight and learning that exist within the stories and within the storytelling (Art of Hosting 2018).

The process begins with an invitation to storytellers. The storytellers do not need to script their story, nor have it polished. The story does not need to be complete, but the invitation is to tell a story from one’s perspective and experience about a particular event. In this case we were asking participants to share a story of reconciliation that they thought would add to the learning and collective story at AVUC. Not all participants in the conversation needed to prepare or share a story. The design we planned allowed for 50 minutes of storytelling from an open floor.

The second piece of the Collective Story Harvest is called “harvesting the arcs.” The design team would suggest a number of listening arcs based on where they wanted to focus the learning from the stories. During the start of the conversation, participants would be invited to listen for a particular arc throughout all the stories, to make notes, and then to report back to the group what they had heard. These listeners were called wisdom catchers.

The story sharing would take place in a circle, using a talking piece, with one person sharing at a time. There would not be dialogue or conversation with the storyteller at the time of sharing, but a moment of silence once the story was finished and then the invitation to the next storyteller. After all the stories had been shared the



wisdom catchers would share their reflections on what they had heard through their particular arc.

### **3.2.7. Choosing the stories and the arcs**

At first the idea was to choose four or five particular stories that the team thought were needed to build the collective and multifaceted picture of reconciliation at AVUC. They would then issue specific invitations to key individuals who had been directly involved. In a brainstorm they came up with a list of stories they thought most important to hear:

- The apology and feast hosted by St. Andrew's;
- A story from someone who had been engaged in the work of social justice / reconciliation from St. Andrew's and then had left the congregation;
- AVUC members being at the TRC event and hearing the survivor stories;
- Michael's story—why do I feel called to reconciliation?
- Receiving the sacred prayer and sharing it with the congregation;
- The Intergenerational / Inter cultural camp in the summer of 2016;
- The story of a youth member of the congregation singing at the cultural music festival feast in Bamfield;
- The fear of reconciliation; the story of former minister Kevin Annett; and
- A story from the 1960s about the UCC connection to the school before it closed.

They then came up with a list of criteria that might help them choose which stories to tell. This included ensuring that the stories spanned time, included key or pivotal moments in the congregation's history, and related to reconciliation and AVUC. They could be personal stories of one's own journey with the question, but needed to somehow be connected to AVUC's story, or they could represent a communal story of an event, experience, or process at AVUC. In further conversation at the final design meeting, the team reconsidered its decision to prompt for particular stories; it felt too

much like colonizing or controlling the process. They decided to open the invitation to anyone who wanted to share a story.

To choose the listening arcs, the team focused on arcs that would elicit insight and learning that could then be applied to continued engagement in the question of reconciliation: what needs to be “witnessed” and made visible to support the ongoing work at AVUC? They came up with the following list of arcs: Healing, Relationships, Feelings and Emotions, Transformation, Moments of Discomfort, Connection to the Bigger Story, Grace and Spirit, Theological Reflection, Reconciliation, and Questions.

### 3.2.8. Harvest

Though written as a linear process, the chaordic steps function as an emergent and iterative process, with each step building on the last, and as the planning proceeds the steps are revisited and deepened. This is particularly true with the Planning for the Harvest step. Throughout the planning process one must be mindful of how the outcomes of the work will be collected and shared in service of the stated need and purpose. These outcomes are both tangible and intangible – both need to be planned for. The intangible outcomes are the shifts in understanding, the new knowledge created, the meaning making and relationship building results from the shared experience. The tangible outcomes are the records and the artifacts that are created, the outputs. These might be reports, plans, decisions, or new structures that will be implemented. The intention is to make the output and the emergent results visible and useable. Storytelling presents a particular challenge. As Michael Jackson (2002) explored in *The Politics of Storytelling*, it is the process of storytelling and witnessing the story that can transform the conversation, not necessarily the facts and outcomes of the story. It is gathering in a circle and sharing in the meaning making that shifts the discourse. Still, it is important to remember and to reflect back on the event as a moment in an ongoing and evolving story, and having a visual record allows the meaning making and learning to continue and to be shared with the larger community.

In alignment with the principle of making the work visible, the design team decided to hire a graphic recorder to capture the stories and the arcs in a way that could be a tangible reminder of the stories and a visual witness to the meaning making. This decision shifted the conversation far more than the team anticipated.

Through connections with other Art of Hosting practitioners, I contacted Kelly Foxcroft-Poirier, a graphic facilitator and process design consultant in the Alberni Valley. Kelly and I first talked by phone in January 2017. Upon hearing about the project, Kelly was both excited and cautious. As a member of the Tsechat First Nation, reconciliation was close to her heart, but she was also cautious at first. Her concern was that the church members might not feel as free to share their stories if she was there because she was from the First Nations community. "I don't want my presence to have a negative impact on the ability of the group to be able to share honestly with each other and do the work they need to do." This echoed a fear from the design team; they didn't want to hurt or offend or do further damage to any First Nations people who were part of the conversation. There was the worry of embarrassment about how some of the congregational members might interact, what they might say and how that could impact perceptions about AVUC, and the shame of having that be part of the congregation's story. Kelly offered to meet with the team and discuss how she might be involved.

Kelly met with the team twice in January 2017. She was able to articulate a passion for the work of reconciliation and wanted to offer her gifts as a graphic recorder as witness and in service to the conversation. In describing her role, she explained "The place of service that I (offer to) the group today is a practice called graphic recording. My job is to allow the dialogue to move through me and through my pens to create an image and icons to express the conversation. It's a gift to the group ... a piece for reflection, for continued dissemination, or to take to your community to say, 'here's what happened' ... a really beautiful way of expressing artfully the work that people are doing." She also named the concern of how her participation might influence the conversation. In the end, Kelly's presence did change the conversation in the design team and in the congregation. Her skill in process facilitation added a richness and energy to the conversation. Her perspective as a First Nations person opened the team to the possibility of relationship.

With the structure for the conversation in place, the process of inviting congregants into the conversation continued. At the end of January 2017, I attended worship with the congregation. The plan was for me to take between five and seven minutes during the sermon time to talk about my project and invite people to attend the storytelling event. I spoke about why the project was important to me and to the United Church. I talked about stories, why we tell them, and encouraged people to think of their

own story of reconciliation. About midway through my talk, the children from the congregation returned to the sanctuary from their Sunday school classes. There were about 10 children aged 5 to 12 years old, and they came in with a chatter, finding their parents, excited to show them what they had done in Sunday school. It took a few minutes for the group to settle and then I continued.

Later that afternoon, the planning team met to discuss the final preparations for the event. As we checked in, Brenda shared an insight. She was recalling the moment the children returned to the sanctuary that morning, and commented on the joy and laughter that they brought. She then reflected on the juxtaposition with our stories of reconciliation, imagining the experience of residential school. “In that moment, I was imagining what it must have been like in the village when they came and took all the children away.” There was a moment of silence as the truth of her words struck home, and then she added, “This is why we do this work.”

## Chapter 4.

### Conversations of Reconciliation

The facilitated congregational conversation took place on the morning of March 4, 2017. The invitation was for a three-hour gathering to witness and hear each other's stories and build a sense of the collective story of reconciliation within Alberni Valley United Church. Twenty-one people attended the event, in addition to Kelly Foxcroft-Poirier and me as facilitators. There were 17 congregational members who had heard about the event through the church announcement. Three people attended from the Huu-ay-aht Nation. They had not previously had any connection to AVUC but had heard about the event through Kelly. One woman of settler descent from Port Alberni had seen the event online and decided to attend as well. Though the intention was for the conversation to be for the congregation, as one of the planning team said, "It's okay—the people who are here are meant to be here" and that anyone who came through the door was welcome in the community.

The creation of sacred space was a critical part of the process. There was a centre table with cedar branches to purify the space and as a sign of healing and connection with the land and with the Nuu-cha-nuth peoples. There was also a candle, which was lit during the opening prayer as is custom in Christian practices. The team recognized that there could be pain or grief in the stories and wanted to ensure support and care was given. Two people were asked to be intentional support people. They were introduced at the beginning and were available throughout the conversation to provide emotional support. As part of the ritual nature of the conversation and in keeping with the principle of making the space safe, tissues boxes were placed throughout the circle as well as baskets for collecting the tissues after they had been used. The tissues would be burned at a later date as a sign of honouring the tears shared. This practice had been part of the Truth and Reconciliation events, where the tissues containing the tears of survivors had been collected, burnt and then the ashes placed in the TRC Bentwood box. This practice also has roots in the Christian tradition as Psalm 56 in the Hebrew Scriptures tells a story of God collecting the tears.

The morning opened with a welcome to set the tone and intention to create the space for holding the stories in a sacred manner. This included an acknowledgment of the unceded territories, an opening prayer and a song, an introduction to the process, as well as the RESPECT guidelines for conversation (Kaliedescope Institute 2015), and the opportunity for each person attending to “check-in” with a simple introduction of their name, how they are connected to the congregation, and their hopes for the day.

The plan was for 50 minutes of storytelling, where the circle would be open for anyone to share a story of reconciliation, while volunteers listened for the specific arcs in the stories. We would take a break and then return to the circle to hear the reflections of the listeners for 25 minutes and then have 30 minutes for a conversation on insights, takeaways, or something new that had emerged. We would close with an opportunity for the storytellers to respond to the listeners, a reflection from the graphic recorder, and then a closing ritual of offering gratitude.

Twelve people volunteered to share their stories of reconciliation: Minnie Hornidge, Brenda West, Michael Villette, Dennis Andow, Bruce Hornidge, Kerry Robertson, and two others who did not wish to be named are members of the AVUC congregation; Alicia La Rue is of settler decent and had no previous connection with AVUC; Heather Thompson, John Alan Jack, and Deborah Cook attended from the HUU-ay-aht Nation. John and Deborah are members of the First Nation, and Deborah is a survivor of the Alberni Residential School. Heather is of settler decent but works for the HUU-ay-aht Nation. They were not members of AVUC. Seven people volunteered to be wisdom catchers with one person listening for two arcs. Of the arcs that the team had chosen, two themes did not have a specific listening volunteer: theological reflection and reconciliation.

The conversation did not unfold exactly as planned, though in reflection the disruptions to the plan added significant learning opportunities on the nature and process of reconciliation and the need to unsettle the conversation.

#### **4.1. Reflections through the Arcs**

When the Council of AVUC said yes to being part of this research, it was with the hope that the conversation would help the congregation learn more about itself and learn

how it could better engage the questions of reconciliation. This theme of learning was carried throughout the design process with the planning team. Using the Collective Story Harvest process, the team selected nine arcs – broad themes or lens – through which they wanted to learn. Using a theoretical frame of critical discourse, my analysis on the conversation is based on the harvest of the arcs, as well as a thorough reading of the stories shared during the conversations, and the notes from the planning sessions.

In offering this analysis, I would like to acknowledge those who participated and offered their stories in this project. Throughout the research project, it has been my intent to maintain positive, collaborative, and respectful relationships with all participants and with the congregation of AVUC. By working collaboratively to design the research project, I wanted to ensure that my research and writing connected with expressed needs and aspirations of the congregation. I endeavoured to offer respect through sound practice and facilitation in collecting the stories and reflecting them back to the congregation for their own meaning making. The goals of this research project were manifold. I wanted to work directly with a congregation in the United Church who were engaging the questions of reconciliation. Through the use of participatory design and leadership practices, my hope was that AVUC would fulfill its intention and be empowered to share and witness stories of reconciliation together so that they would have a deeper understanding of who they were and where they wanted to take the process. I believe that conversations are transformative—that when people gather in community and share their stories, shifts in understanding can happen and new ideas emerge that could not have come into being without the conversation. If reconciliation is about relationship building, mutual respect, and trust, it was important that this project be grounded in these values and endeavor to live into them throughout the design and the writing, with the congregation of AVUC, the community of Port Alberni, the First Nations people on whose territory I work, and especially the survivors of the residential school who have borne the weight of colonialism and reconciliation.

#### **4.1.1. Questions**

Certain arcs are recommended as standard in the collective story harvest process. Of those arcs the team chose “Questions” and “Feeling and Emotions” to include as learning opportunities in the conversation.

Questions emerge at many different levels. As a researcher there were questions I was bringing to the project, such as “How are congregations in the United Church talking about reconciliation?” and “How would talking together allow for learning and transformation to occur?” The design team was focused on the purpose question they had identified in the planning process: “What is our story of reconciliation at Alberni Valley United Church?” and, expanding on this, “How can we hear each other, through this collective story, so that we will gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and the work we feel called to do in the Alberni Valley?” But as the design team worked together in the months leading up to the conversation, many more questions emerged. Most significant were the questions around colonization. How do we not colonize this process? How do we unsettle our settler story enough so that we might be able to see a different story? These questions would come back often throughout the design and would cause the team to pause and reflect again on the process.

During the March 4 congregational conversation, the arc of questions was defined for the listeners as “What questions arise for us in this story that we can take forward into our work as a community?” The listeners were asked to listen specifically for the questions that arose as the stories were told. There seemed to be a pattern of questions, from shock, “Why or how did this happen?” through a defensive not understanding, “Why weren’t we told, why are they angry?” to a common refrain throughout the conversation, “What do we do now?”

Alicia shared her initial reaction when, at the age of 24, she first learned about residential schools, “I remember when I first heard about it [residential schools], I just started crying. Are you joking me? That that actually happened. How could that happen?”

For those who had lived in the Alberni Valley as children and had gone to school with First Nations children living in the residence, the questions centered on “Why did we not know?” Three AVUC members reflected on this experience. Dennis, remembered coming home as a youth and asking his parents, “Why? I got some friends at school and they’re angry, they’re just angry. Why are they? Why are they mad at me?” Another member said that she feels “aghast” now in knowing what had been happening.

I find it very difficult because I feel that I was totally given a completely different idea of what was going on in the Indian residential schools than



what was going on. I mean the harsh punishments and the work and the experimental things they were doing with the kids. None of us knew that.

The third congregant, who had attended elementary school with Dennis in Port Alberni as well, said, "I couldn't believe what I started to hear when I was working for the tribal council." In summing up many of the stories there was a common question, "What do we do and where do we go from here?"

John is from the Huu-ay-aht nation. His question offered a different perspective and insight "Can you see?" he asked, "Can you see the problem of identifying some First Nations people as the good ones? What does that say about what you think of all the other First Nations people?"

The intention of listening for questions was not to find the answers, but to be aware of the areas that people are grappling to understand and notice the edges of what is unknown. Exploring these edges can lead to new knowledge and deeper understanding. A further analysis of these questions is contained in the "Moments of Discomfort" arc.

#### **4.1.2. Feelings**

Identifying the feeling and emotions in the stories was an opportunity to listen differently. Rather than listen for content, the listener was asked, "What feelings and emotions come up in the story, and in the telling of the story." This accesses a different learning, an emotional knowledge that Dian Million refers to as felt theory. Dian Million's felt theory was developed in the context of First Nations women challenging western academic rhetoric, the construction of truth, and the politics of decolonization, though the fundamentals of that theory are relevant here as well. The emotional knowledge expressed through feelings offers a more complex telling of the story (Million 2008). The feelings and emotions that arise in the lived experiences as well as those that are elicited in the telling of the story are an alternative embodied knowledge that is engaged, relational, and deeply social (Million 2008). The process of reconciliation is a relational one, and thus requires that this emotional knowledge be included in the discourse.

It is exactly this emotional knowledge that fuels the real discursive shift around the histories and stories of residential schooling. One of the most important features of these stories is their existence as alternative truths,

as alternate historical views. Native women told truths that challenged Canadian settler truths (Million 2008:64).

Throughout the morning of conversation at AVUC, there were moments of laughter as well as deep sadness. Many participants cried as they told their stories and heard the stories of others. The conversation design had an intentional element of safety planned into it. The team wanted there to be room and support for participants to be able to express their feelings, creating a safe space can also work to prevent disruption and uncomfortable feelings. By the use of the RESPECT guidelines, participants were encouraged to take responsibility for their own feelings and to be empathetic and sensitive to others' communication styles. The planning team had discussed their fear that hate would arise in the conversation and developed strategies to contain that if it surfaced, including calling participants back to the RESPECT guidelines. There were no incidents of expressed conflict between participants during the conversation and though feelings of rage, anger, and hurt were described in the stories, there was limited expression of these emotions in the moment.

As the stories were told there were moments of nervous and tentative caution as well as bravery and courage. Deborah expressed her uncertainty in sharing within a church group: "I wasn't too sure how I was going to try to share some of this information, but being it is with this church in the community I needed to share some positives." As a residential school survivor, she shared some of her positive experiences with the families she boarded with while attending school in Port Alberni but was able to share the traumatic experiences as well, of being separated from her home, her family, her culture and her language as she was taken away to residential school. She described what it was like to be separated from her brothers and sisters when they first arrived at the school.

It's hard when you're very close to your brother and sister to see when getting off the bus, you're told that you can't have your brother with you and he's literally snatched from your arms. You're crying and screaming because they won't let me go with him.

She also reflected on the lasting embodied impact of the residential school on her life:

I am now finding that a lot of the times when I had shut down the feelings, they are catching up with me as an old elder. Now that I don't have my

children in my home and my grandchildren aren't with us, I have a lot of time to think. My body is starting to take some of that damage and I still need to find ways to try to fix it. To make it better. So that I don't suffer with my body.

Many participants connected their emotional response with their moment of learning. Minnie reflected the experience of hearing the elders at the Bread of Life center, a local charitable organization that provides food, support, medical services, and meals to those in need, "that just went so deep into my core that I said I have to be involved in this." Brenda explained her emotions and her experience of others as she spoke of a time she made a mistake while working at the Haahuupayak<sup>16</sup> school in Port Alberni. Though she didn't share the nature of the mistake she offered her reflection:

I cry when I share myself so, I'm not sad it's just who I am. I didn't realize until I made a mistake at the school how quickly people are reduced to the history that is still so deeply entrenched in their hearts. And I still reflect on the mistake I made. And understand that no matter how far you come from trauma, it rises in the moment even if the intention is not to hurt.

Others spoke of the shame they felt as they heard the stories of the residential schools and of seeing the anger when survivors talked about their experiences. An AVUC member commented, "At times I felt like heading under the table—is there somewhere to hide?" and Michael described his first encounter hearing a survivor's story,

Then for the next hour or hour and a half, seemed like a week, his feelings of anger just poured out. He just vomited this hellish story of, not reconciliation by any means, but residential school experience. He did not have anything positive to say. I was still very ignorant.

Frustration, anger, shame, guilt, sadness, hurt, fear, confusion, betrayal, and resentment came up in the storytelling as well as feelings of passion, joy, empathy, pride, tenacity, and a sense of commitment to the ongoing work of reconciliation. The circle ended with an intentional sharing of gratitude, and through this participants again engaged their felt knowing, expressing it through words such as empathy, courage, respect, and acceptance, as they touched into the embodied experience of the morning.

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<sup>16</sup> Haahuupayak school is an independent elementary school in Port Alberni that offers education consistent with Nuu-chah-nulth cultural teachings and values.

Other final reflections included, “Vulnerable hearts held deeply” and “gratitude for the way this day makes everything in me tremble.”

During the debrief with the planning team after the conversation, emotions such as sadness, grief, gratitude, and hope were shared as the team described their experiences of the conversation. Michael summed up his experience again using an embodied description: “it is like the feeling after a long hike or a day when you’re tired but feeling good, feel spent but can’t do anything more, but it feels good to savour the moment and just be happy.”

#### 4.1.3. Grace and spirit

In a similar way, listening for grace and spirit offers an alternative way to access knowledge. In *Tsawalk, A Nuuchahnulth Worldview*, Richard Atleo discusses the alternative knowledge experienced through spirit and faith. In the Nuu-chah-nulth language, *heshook-ish tsawalk* means “everything is one,” both physical and metaphysical. The theory of Tsawalk provides a worldview that does not rely on reason alone but incorporates a holistic understanding of knowledge. Atleo quotes John Ralston Saul as he unpacks the manner in which Western science has fragmented knowledge. “Reason began, abruptly, to separate itself from and to outdistance the other more or less recognized human characteristics—spirit, appetite, faith and emotion, but also intuition, will and, most important, experience” (Saul 1993:15 cited in Atleo 2004).

Atleo continues,

Reason, or rationality, is a cornerstone of science. Saul does not argue against reason but against what he considers to be an “extreme” emphasis on it, almost to the exclusion of other human characteristics that may be termed metaphysical, such as spirit and faith. The implication, from my perspective, is that reason, or human cognition, may not be the sole source of knowledge, that “faith and spirit” may also play a significant and alternative role to human reason (Atleo 2004:xii).

This sense of spirit resonated within the design team as part of the faith community of AVUC in which the conversation took place. Spirit was intentionally welcomed through prayer, song, ritual, and ceremony in the opening and closing of the conversation. The team brought cedar boughs into the circle and lit a candle as ways of holding the space sacred. This sense of faith grounded the planning team with an

understanding of being called to the work of reconciliation as a church by a force greater than their own human strength. After the event, they talked about how the energy in the sanctuary had been changed by the conversation and the manner in which the space would hold the stories with them. Through the conversation, the sacred was articulated in words such as trust, ripples, dignity, connection, truth, light and, welcome as the listener was asked to identify where grace showed up in the story, where there were “God moments,” and “where the spirit was stirring.”

#### **4.1.4. Healing**

The desire for healing was present at many different levels: healing within an individual, within a family, healing communities, and healing the broken structures that continue to impact the lives of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous peoples in the Alberni Valley today. The theme of healing was important to the design team and they were hoping that healing would begin in the congregation as they shared their stories with each other.

Many of the stories had elements of healing present. Participants shared their desire to bring healing to situations in which they encountered distress. Minnie talked about her involvement in the Bread of Life Centre. As Minnie volunteered there, she would hear the people being served talk about the food they received. On a couple of occasions, she heard First Nations Elders say, “Not only do we get gruel, we have to line up like they made us line up at residential school.” Hearing this touched Minnie to her core. Seeing the institutionalization of food as a legacy of the residential school she said, “I’ve really got a passion in me to do this work and to help with healing wherever I can.”

Some participants said they believed that healing would come to First Nations peoples and settlers if they offered dignity and respect, if they listened to others as they told their stories of harm. This is a belief that also underscores the work of the TRC: healing will begin when people are able to share the truth of their stories and be witnessed in that truth. Reconciliation is intrinsically woven with the idea of healing throughout the TRC reports: mending of broken relationships, reparations for damage done, and recovery from the experience trauma. For healing to be meaningful and embodied it also must result in real change to the material conditions of Indigenous

peoples, with the restoration of land and resources and a decolonization of power structures.

In the TRC report, under “What have we learned - Principles of Truth and Reconciliation”, principle three states: “Reconciliation is a process of healing of relationships that requires public truth sharing, apology, and commemoration that acknowledge and redress past harms” (TRC 2015a:3). This belief was evident throughout the stories shared in the AVUC conversation, both as a way to bring healing within the congregation and as a path toward reconciliation with First Nations peoples in the community. The design of the conversation centred on the idea that truth sharing was central to healing as participants were encouraged to share their story of reconciliation. Throughout the morning, there were stories of experiencing a sense of healing. For example, Minnie’s sharing of the story of her father, who at 90 years old, told her of his years growing up in Kildonan and the injustice he felt at not being able to attend school, because the only school in the area was the “Indian school.” Another member shared about experiencing the respect and acceptance from First Nations peoples as she worked with a public health initiative on the West Coast of Vancouver Island. Healing was recognized in the giving of gifts. The offering of gifts during the 1997 apology was seen as a bridge to healing relationships between AVUC and the First Nations community in the Alberni Valley, as an offer of trust and vulnerability. Michael also shared his experience of healing when the congregation received a Tsawalk story from the local First Nations community.<sup>17</sup>

When that story was read I mean it was amazing that Deb was here and shared the story and then really amazing when she gifted us with the story, just hearing it read in that space it's healing, there's some healing that happens that I can't understand.

Through the process of the conversation, participants felt like there were experiences of healing in the moment as well. Participants shed tears as they told difficult and personal stories of their experiences while other listened, attended, stood beside, and laid hands on their shoulders as support. When Deborah told her story as a residential school survivor, and in particular when she was able to sing a song from her childhood, there was a sense of awe in the circle. This experience was shared in the debrief session with the design team: healing was experienced through listening to the

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<sup>17</sup> See Appendix E, “Hišukiš-tsa-waak.”

stories, being witness to the vulnerability, and in seeing the bridges that were created. As Kelly reflected in the debrief, “Michael when you said the prayer in my language and I just thought, it just makes me hopeful. I didn't know those things happened. I didn't know those things happened in our town.”

Along with the stories of healing there were also stories about a desire or need for healing to happen. Minnie described her deep desire, “I've really got a passion in me to do this work and to help with healing wherever I can. I can't not do it. I can't not be part of the solution.” There were many stories of brokenness, places where healing was still needed. Connected to this yearning for healing were stories of sadness and grief and a wish for healing of the lost culture and language that was the result of the residential school system.

Relationships had been damaged though the experience of residential school. Deborah talked about the loss of connection with her family, with her siblings as they were separated from each other at the residential school, how she was separated from her language and culture of the Nisga'a, and the devastating impact this had on her relationship with her grandparents and parents.

The school successfully closed my mouth to the language so that every summer I'd go home and became less and less close to my grandmother and I wouldn't talk to her. If I was, I'd always say “Grandmother English.” We never really were very close after. To help heal any of the damage that the school had done in that they took us away was to make sure that my children never experienced it.

Alicia also talked about the relationship she had with her ex-husband, whose mother was a survivor at residential school. There was grief in the intergenerational disconnection between mother and son, and she felt that this impact was in part the reason why her marriage ended.

In these stories of broken relations, there were not many instances of healing, but there was a strong sense of hope for healing mixed with a profound sense of not knowing what to do to repair or heal the damage. Alicia commented, “Is it just sitting at a table and saying, ‘We're sorry for doing that,’ and them saying ‘OK. Ya. We'll move on.’ I'm not sure it's that easy.”

The commitment and hope to make things well was present, though for most of the settlers the healing focused primarily on helping others heal. “I want to be part of helping the language, the culture, the family”; “But what I really want to know now is ‘how can we, what can we do, what do First Nation people want us to do to help?’; “Teach me, teach me, I want to learn!” There is truth to this need, but there is also danger. The discourse on healing can become focused again on a benevolent settler culture supporting the healing of Indigenous peoples or alternatively expecting that it is Indigenous peoples who need to do what healing is required and then teach settlers. Just as important for the work of reconciliation will be the recognition that settlers need to take responsibility for their own healing: understanding the way they have been impacted by colonialism, recognizing the damage done, and working toward change in relations and structures.

The Reverend Stan McKay of the United Church, who is also a survivor of residential school, believes that reconciliation can happen only when everyone accepts responsibility for healing in ways that foster respect. He said:

[There must be] a change in perspective about the way in which Aboriginal peoples would be engaged with Canadian society in the quest for reconciliation.... [We cannot] perpetuate the paternalistic concept that only Aboriginal peoples are in need of healing.... The perpetrators are wounded and marked by history in ways that are different from the victims, but both groups require healing.... How can a conversation about reconciliation take place if all involved do not adopt an attitude of humility and respect? ... We all have stories to tell and in order to grow in tolerance and understanding we must listen to the stories of others. (TRC 2015a:9-10)

Healing was also named as a need in the debrief conversation. Sharing and witnessing these stories requires difficult emotional work. Conversations of reconciliation elicit grief, sadness, guilt, and can be emotionally draining for participants. Though the design team felt like significant and important work had been done, they also were exhausted from the experience.

The team shared ideas for practices that would bring healing after the experience. Kelly started this conversation by describing her own practices.

Part of healing as an individual is to put that behind you, and there is some real physical work things that you might need to do to take care of yourself. When I go home, I'll probably brush myself off with some fresh cedar or do some smudging. Energetically things will attach to you that aren't yours.



Other things like a bath in salt is also very healing; it very much removes anything that shouldn't be there energetically, and you can get clear and be with your family and be present.

Others from the team added ideas from their own practices. Minnie said that she would “be sure that I have space to go for that walk so it just has a way to move through me”, and Brenda said, “I might have a salt bath.”

The team also discussed communal and ritual practices that are intended to bring healing. Kelly spoke of calling on Elders to perform a particular ceremony after intense work. As a way of honouring the healing and engaging in ritual practice, the team had collected the tissues with tears and they planned to burn them; they also had cedar branches present and were going to take these back to the river as part of the ritual of cleansing and healing.

#### **4.1.5. Transformation**

Where healing is about restoring wholeness or repairing damage done, transformation is about a shift or change in awareness, in understanding, or in even opening a completely new worldview. The design team had hopes that the conversation would elicit transformation in individuals as well as for their community. The expectation was not necessarily that transformation would happen immediately, but that in having the conversation, by taking the opportunity to write their collective story of reconciliation and witness who they were, they would be changed. The listeners in the conversation were looking for moments of transformation, or pivotal breakthrough moments shared in the stories. Through this listening, the team was hoping for insight into what contributes to moments of transformation, as well as what can be learned about how and when transformation happens. In the instructions and invitation sent out before the conversation, participants were encouraged to think about their story of reconciliation in advance<sup>18</sup>. They were asked to think of a challenge that they had faced and the breakthrough or learning point in their story. Many of the learning points in the stories were considered moments of transformation for the participants.

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<sup>18</sup> See Appendix F “Alberni Valley Collective Story Harvest Invitation” adapted from Amanda Fenton’s Collective Story Harvest – Storyteller Support Information (Fenton 2014)

The most common insight as the stories were shared was that hearing another's story and listening to another perspective can lead to a transformed understanding. Alicia, Brenda, Heather, Michael, and two other participants all talked about the moments they first heard about the treatment and abuse of First Nations students at residential schools and the impact that the residential schools had had on survivors.

One member shared of her experience of first hearing the stories in the mid 1980s.

It essentially changed my life in many, many ways.... I couldn't believe what I started to hear when I was working for the tribal council, the stories that I would hear. I heard about when we were children how First Nations people had to ride at the back of the bus. And I thought, this is Canada. This is Port Alberni. I've heard some stories of how some people did make it through the school. But I've heard more stories of many people that didn't. I heard a lot of the stories. It changed my life. It also made me who I am today.

For Brenda, an experiential workshop changed her understanding of reconciliation. "They came to talk to us about it and they gave us an immersive experience that I will never forget. I think this is what really moved me to understand that reconciliation is going to be a forever journey." The workshop was called "Building Bridges Through Understanding the Village" and was developed by facilitator Kathi Camilleri. It involves participants roleplaying an experience in a First Nations village when the RCMP come to take the children away to residential school.

We started with Alan and Agnes describing residential school, but then we were set in a village and my coworker Tracy and I were sisters and we were on the beach and we were playing on the beach, and we were making sand on the beach or making sandcastles and playing with shells and we were doing our thing, and they really set the village tone with children playing and elders talking and sharing and hunters and gatherers and whalers and it was a thriving community. And then the decision was made by the government that those children were to be removed. And I was this little sister and my sister Tracy was going to be taken. And Alan and Agnes came dressed as government officials and took her, and in that moment it was real. She was gone. The village went silent. And the family that I knew was gone. And I know that it was only an experience of forty-five minutes. But this was someone's life. My tears are for the silence. My tears are for the history, the culture, the language that is now fighting for its life. And I want to be part of helping.

It was in the moment overhearing First Nations Elders talk about their experience at the Bread of Life Centre that Minnie felt transformed. In a similar way, Kerry was struck when she heard survivors expressing anger at the apology event hosted by St. Andrew's United Church in 1997. The planning team had hoped that some of the St. Andrew's apology story would be shared during the conversation as it still had a significant impact on the life of the congregation. Kerry's story was brief. She remembered that St. Andrew's had offered the apology even though the United Church of Canada would not make an apology at that point. She had been involved in video recording the apology, though she said she was "pretty ignorant going in, so unknowledgeable. I had never seen that many First Nations people together." Then she shared the part of the story that had had the most impact on her: the small group of people who were protesting.

And I remember this man getting up and speaking and he was so angry, so, so angry, and so hurt, and there'd been people who'd spoke that said, 'we accept the apology and now we're moving on' and he could not. His group could not, and they protested outside drumming and stuff, and that, that just really hit me. That was the first time I had been aware of the effect, and in seeing that, I think it's a very hard process, a really, really hard process.

Heather's story was about the reconciliation that can happen when people enter into relationship with each other. She described her experience on a "Pulling Together" paddling trip, a reconciliation project that brings the RCMP, Department of Fisheries officers and youth together on a multi-day voyage of learning and relationship building. On this particular trip the weather shifted, and they ended up becoming stranded as they headed to Benson Island. The group had to wait near Salmon Beach for the entire day.

But what happened that day was probably for me the most amazing part of the trip for me because we were stranded, and all these kids were stuck on a beach and there was no entertainment, and I think that's when reconciliation really took part.

As the kids and the RCMP officers built villages and towns in the sand to entertain themselves, they also talked about what makes community.

I couldn't believe the bonds that formed, and after that we were different. We were different after we got stuck on that island. And so for me, reconciliation is about being stuck on a beach together and having those conversations and just having it be part of your life.

Bringing kids together from different communities and different upbringings, it was the small everyday things that made the difference, as simple as having someone different at their supper table.

Highlighting the importance of relationship in transformation was part of Michael's story as well, though through a different lens. It was through two experiences of trust and relationship that Michael had his most powerful connections to what reconciliation meant for him. The first was when Deb Masso gifted AVUC with a Tsawalk story and the second was the gift of a prayer from Jean Thomas, which is spoken in Nuu-chah-nulth at each worship service at AVUC. In the gifting Michael realized that they were saying "I trust you with this gift." Michael learned to say the prayer in Nuu-chah-nulth, and in saying it he felt he honoured Jean in the gift and the trust.

As with the arc of healing, there were also stories of wanting transformation and change. In John's story, the listeners heard the desire to challenge the cognitive dissonance that happens when he does not fit other people's image of a First Nations man. He describes himself as being viewed as "one of the good ones" but understands that this manner of thinking is what needs to change if there is to be reconciliation.

It's not enough for people to think of a single First Nations person as my friend, but they're different. Because everyone's thinking about their lives and the way that they live their lives. They don't have a lot of time to think about other people and it's that empathy, that takes time. That's why the work is so important and so difficult.

As part of the research I was curious to see if there were moments of transformation during the sharing of the stories, not just as people reflected back on their stories. In the listening and telling of story, would there also be an experience of being changed in some way? This wondering was echoed as the conversation began. "I have personally gone through some reconciliation programs, but I feel like we really didn't make much difference doing it. I am here today to try to do better." And from another participant: "I am here to learn and listen and challenge myself to change some attitudes that I have in my head from my school experience."

Deborah's sharing of her story as a residential school survivor was significant for the participants, not only in hearing her story, but in the fact that she was willing to come into a church and share in such a vulnerable way. Deborah had begun her story

remembering a song from Sunday school that she had learned in her village before coming to residential school, a song she had sung at her mother's bedside when she passed away. But she wasn't sure about singing it.

At home there was a lot of singing, there was a lot of hymns. I remember a song sung at Sunday school in the village before coming to the residential school. I don't know if I feel comfortable trying to sing it here but I need to continue on with my, I guess you could say, residential school experience.

Deborah finished by reflecting on the stories and songs of her Grandfather:

Before coming to the school, I remember my grandpa telling us stories. Lots of stories. And for him to have to repeat them over and over and over again, I now realize now, that that was their way of making sure that you knew the story and it would go on and on and on. But it stopped when I came to the school so I don't have the memory of those stories.... I do remember sitting down and listening. He'd sing songs. But he'd sing the songs in our language. It's one of the things that always stays close to my heart. And warms it. When you listen to the songs in any of the languages being sung and danced to. I might not understand what they're saying but thank the creator that they're still here and they're still sung. I think to honor my auntie, a school teacher, I will attempt to sing the Sunday school song.

Then she sang the song "Walk with the Light" in both Nisga'a and in English.

In the debrief with the design team there was a profound sense of transformation in that moment:

I think it was transformative: there were people that were in here and that's powerful. I think everybody changed, and the people who come to church tomorrow will be changed by the energy that's in that room. This was a powerful experience.

So grateful for the different perspectives we heard today. We heard lots of life that came and so many more people who aren't necessarily what we consider connected to our church came and shared in their stories and their witness.

I wanted to cry lots of times today, but not because I was sad, but because I just felt a very profound grief—Michael when you said the prayer in my language and it just makes me hopeful. I didn't know those things happened. I didn't know those things happened in our town. It changed me to know that happened.

It's healing. There's some healing that happens that I can't understand.... I thought I was going to start to weep and not stop, it was one of those moments for me.

“I wept.”

Ironically, in looking back, it was the desire for transformation that was also at the root of the residential school system. Into the 1950s and 1960s, the prime mission of residential schools was the cultural transformation of Aboriginal children.

Missionaries viewed Aboriginal culture as a barrier to both spiritual salvation and the ongoing existence of Aboriginal people. They were determined to replace traditional economic pursuits with European-style peasant agriculture. They believed that cultural transformation required the imposition of social control and separation from both traditional communities and European settlements (TRC 2015c:37).

There needs to be caution in attempts to impose transformation onto First Nations peoples once again, to believe that the problem is a First Nations problem. Even in the stories shared there were shadows of this.

I do believe that though reconciliation is in all of our hearts, mostly First Nations hearts, that they can see themselves as being that strength, that power, that creativity, that they can really be such a leadership for all of us. And now the questions is: “How do they get there?”

The desire to fix perpetuates the colonial agenda of control and superiority, and dismisses the voice and knowledge of Indigenous peoples in the conversation. There is a much greater need for transformation within the settler culture before reconciliation can truly have impact. Colonization has resulted in vast extremes of injustice and inequality. Transformation in settlers will be seen when it is accompanied by just reparations, when land is returned, and the colonial systems of oppression are dismantled.

#### **4.1.6. Moment of Discomfort**

Though the planning team wanted to create a safe and hospitable space for participants to share their stories they also knew that it was vital to the process of reconciliation for there to be an unsettling of the story. There was a desire to lean into the discomfort as a means toward transformation. The instruction to the listener of this arc was to listen for “where there was discomfort in the story and for what unsettles us.” Every story shared had moments of discomfort. Identifying, understanding, and learning from these moments will be key in moving the work of reconciliation forward.

Minnie told a story of legacy and inequity. Her father's story of his childhood was a story of inequity that he had carried with him his whole life. As Minnie reflected on the story she realized that she could now understand her father and his "negative biases" with a deeper awareness and that her passion for justice was rooted in this same story, seeing inequity causes her discomfort and she needs to act. "When I see an inequity, I know I need to be part of the solution ... because there is inequity in our community, and I see that what we do here as a church and myself as an act of reconciliation."

Alicia stated, "It's been a hard work for me to understand [reconciliation]." She talked about the discomfort of not knowing, how she wants to learn more but is not sure how to ask questions without seeming like she was disrespecting First Nations culture or appropriating it. "I don't want to overstep my boundaries. I don't know. Am I stepping on toes?" From the listener's perspective, the discomfort for Alicia was in gaining insight or understanding into her own role in colonization, why she wants to learn, and whose responsibility it is to teach her. There seems to be an unrecognized disconnect embedded in her statement, "As far as reconciliation, I want to inspire First Nations people to really look into the mirror and see how awesome they are and see how awesome their culture is," that is related to the discomfort she experiences.

For some, the challenge came to the fore when they saw anger expressed in relation to residential school experiences. Kerry saw it when St. Andrew's United Church offered their apology to the Nuu-cha-nuth peoples in 1997 and there were protests outside the ceremony by people who would not accept the apology. Brenda experienced it when she was confronted with a mistake she had made working at a First Nations elementary school. Dennis remembered the anger he saw in his First Nations friends in high school, but he did not understand where it was coming from at the time. One participant was shocked when she began to hear the stories of residential school and the "lambasting of white people" at tribal council meetings, and Michael's "blissfully oblivious" childhood was shattered when he attended a workshop and heard a survivor share his residential school story.

Being in the face of the anger expressed by First Nations people who have experienced residential school and who continue to be confronted by systemic inequality, injustice, and oppression causes discomfort for settlers who are being challenged to change. Quelling this discomfort is as much a part of the storytelling as is

the expressed desire for reconciliation. Critics of the TRC process identify it as simply a means of appeasing settler guilt without actually resulting in real and material change. The story of benevolence is so deeply and culturally entrenched that there can be a tendency to soften the anger and make it more palatable, less confrontational when settler discomfort is expressed. John was listening for the “connection to the bigger story.” In his notes, he wrote his own interpretation of what he was hearing in the stories from the church members.

We are shocked by the truth, and we do not know what to do about it, besides feeling guilty.

We are sometimes disheartened by the anger and seeming rejection of our earnest efforts, though we are beginning to understand the reasons for the anger and grief that some First Nations people express.

Bringing equality and justice will require continued deconstruction of the benevolent peacemaker myth and recognition that anger may be the most appropriate reaction to the harm done so that right action is more compelling than apology. John saw the disconnection between hearing the stories of anger, abuse, and injustice while upholding the peacemaker myth as a type of cognitive dissonance. It must also be the responsibility of settlers to see and to challenge these ongoing disconnections.

There were many points in the stories that identified the discomfort of being challenged to hear a new truth, and the most difficult story to unsettle was that of unknowing. There is discomfort when hearing another’s story that contradicts what we believe we know. In the three stories shared by church members who had grown up in Port Alberni and had attended school with many of the First Nations children who were living at the Indian school residence, there was an adamant refrain of “we didn’t know” and “we thought of them just like us and had no idea what was happening to them at the residence.” They recall growing up, playing the same games, being on the same teams, and attending school together with First Nations children. “They weren’t any different than the rest of us. We were just kids.”

I honestly didn't know what was happening in residential schools and we treated them the same as the rest of them and a lot of how we treated them was how our parents raised us. Like everybody was the same as we were treating them the same at school.



But there was a disconnect even at the time. As a child, one participant wondered about why the First Nations children had been sent away from their parents to go to school; she made sense of it by comparing it to upper class kids being sent to private school.

We just thought it was a chance for them to get out and learn more and have more opportunities, and just like the kids from here that went to the Qualicum Boys School or the Chemainus school or the girls that went to St. Margaret's and they were always the upper upper class. So that's what we thought—the First Nations children that came to the residential school were the upper upper class of those First Nations because they could afford to go to those schools.

For Dennis, these were his friends, he knew them, and worked with them throughout his career, and still he struggles with not knowing what to do with the anger. He tries to make sense by looking for the ways they are friends and wanting to treat everyone as friends.

There is a truth in what they shared; they did not know of the abuse and treatment of the First Nations children at the school. It was not talked about, and, as children, they could not see or understand it. However, just as much of the not seeing was a result of the cultural story that was prevalent at the time. The fact that children were being separated from their families, that their culture and language were silenced, was justified through a belief in assimilation and white cultural superiority. To be “just like the rest of us” was the goal. There is discomfort as they are now faced with the truth of how that policy of assimilation and cultural genocide was exercised.

John offered his story from the other side of the challenge. “My story's about being one of the good ones.” He described his experience at school in his community of Parksville: “People in authority I never had difficulties with, and part of that I believe was because I was identified as being one of the good ones. And that's being intelligent, assimilated. I have a future.” He has now come to understand it as “cognitive dissonance.” He is treated as “one of the good ones” because, for the most part, people in his wider community have an image of First Nations people as being of “dubious worth.” This was particularly evident in relation to friends and family of his wife. “I'd interact with people close and connected to her who looked at me with a wary side eye. They saw me as a First Nations person, as an Indian.” He noticed that when they met him they would try to justify their preconceived beliefs by singling him out as different.

So you start to make justifications and the easiest one is that 'I am special. I'm not like all of the other Indians out there.' What you're not saying is that you think all of the other First Nations people are, or all the other Indians are, that way.... You can see the difference in that line of thinking. That's what matters and that's the hard work.

More difficult to ascertain was if there was discomfort occurring during the story sharing conversation. As the conversation closed, participants expressed gratitude for the morning, but in the parking lot after the event a member of the congregation approached me. They wondered how I was going to write the story of the church because there were people who came who were not part of the church. They had found it difficult to be able to speak honestly when they didn't know everyone, and in the discomfort, they were not sure that we had achieved what had been hoped for.

Sitting in that discomfort will be part of the story, creating spaces where we are hearing the stories that are not just our own, but being challenged to hear another experience and another truth. For the design team this was also connected to a story of belonging. They wondered if opening the door to reconciliation was challenging long time members of the church in their sense of belonging. If they welcome and make space for new people, will some feel like they are being pushed out. It was also connected to privilege. As I commented in the debrief,

Letting go of your privilege can be a real challenge for some. When I've always had my voice and I've always been in control of who belongs and who didn't belong and now I have to let go of that, it's very uncomfortable.

Lastly, as a reflection of discomfort, there was a common story shared by Kelly, Deborah, and John as they navigated the work of reconciliation, the work of healing in their First Nations families and communities, the choices they were making, and their own experience of identity and belonging. Deborah spoke about tension she experienced within her family of origin as she and her husband agreed that their home would be substance abuse free, but how she also did not feel accepted in the white community.

It was not easy. We were told we didn't love them because we didn't go out drinking with them. Both my husband and I had agreed when we first started out that our house was going to be substance abuse free. Zero tolerance. They didn't think kindly of us. They didn't have kind words. So we got it from that side. We weren't always all that accepted either from the white community because of course they had their views of what an Indian

was supposed to be like, so trying to live in their community wasn't the easiest either.

This echo's John's story of being one of the good ones.

It has an effect in not only the community that I exist in here but in the wider community. Has an effect with my own First Nations communities because I wear a suit jacket and a tie, because I don't act like a 'real Indian.' But at the same time, I'm not fully in the community either in a lot of ways. And so it makes things very complicated when people start seeing the world differently. It's not enough to be one of the good ones.

Kelly related her own experience to these stories in the debrief.

I think some of the things that John Jack talked about and some of the things that Deb talked about, I heard them through my own lens—I don't belong where I'm not Indian enough, a lot of the places I go I'm not cultural enough, and I'm not white enough either.

For Kelly this is the core of her own reconciliation story.

That feeling of not belonging anywhere has been, that's my reconciliation story. I just have never felt like I belonged. So when I saw it this morning, well that's where it needs to be—don't worry about belonging so much. Just keep doing the work, keep serving, just keep doing.

## **4.2. Disrupting the Conversation**

If a foundational principle in this process was that the dominant white settler narrative needs to be unsettled before reconciliation is possible, then in what way were the conversations at AVUC disrupted, or at least potentially of disruption? In looking at the process as a whole, there were particular moments of disruption that impacted and changed the conversations. There were also moments when there may have been an opportunity for disruption, but the pull to maintain the status quo was stronger than the motivation to disrupt.

The design team had crafted the agenda to host the AVUC conversation that followed a prescribed process and timeline. There was flexibility built in, and we did not want to predetermine the learning outcomes, but we had a particular goal in mind for the flow of the conversation and the nature of outcomes that we expected. The opening ritual and introductions were designed to set a tone and frame for the conversation.

After the opening practice, I introduced the storytelling process and explained the research and consent aspects of the conversation. As I was bringing the introduction to a close, three new people arrived. They were unknown to me, but I did not know how they were connected to the congregation. It shifted the energy in the room, as Brenda got up to welcome them and more chairs were brought in. In this moment the space was disrupted and there was nervous laughter. “You know you are on the edge, right?” remarked Brenda as the circle was expanded and there were chairs very close to the edge of the raised platform that we were on. The members of the congregation had to move their chairs and open up the circle to welcome these newcomers, these strangers into their circle. The new people introduced themselves as members of the Huu-ay-aht nation. Kelly had told them of the project and they were interested in the conversation, though Kelly had not told the team they were coming. No one refused the guests, but the tone and language shifted in various ways. Leaders such as Brenda and Minnie jumped up to attend to the welcome. Others looked for direction. Was it okay that people not from the congregation had come? It wasn’t asked out loud, but the question was definitely in the room. Brenda responded to what she knew were concerns in an attempt to quell resistance—“Anyone who comes through the doors are members here.” During the storytelling portion, each of the non-congregant participants shared a story of reconciliation, though not all of the congregational members did.

There was no further explicit reference to welcoming the strangers during the event, but later in the parking lot, two congregational participants approached me with concern: “That wasn’t our church, how are you going write this story because that was not the United Church.” The space and the story had been disrupted and it pushed the story into unknown territory. On reflection, I think it *is* the story. When the conversations of reconciliation are isolated and disconnected from those with whom we seek reconciliation, the church is not hearing the full story. Disrupting the space may have shut down some congregational members from speaking, but it opened a new door to connection and relationship.

The design planning team had decided to open up the space for whoever wanted to share, and I had planned for 50 minutes of storytelling. My expectation was that people would take about 5-8 minutes to tell their story. I was choosing not to interrupt the storytellers, allowing each story to unfold and the storytelling went longer than anticipated. As we approached the one-and-a-half hour mark, I imagined that we could

hear one more story before taking a break. I wanted to make sure there was enough time to hear the listeners. Michael began sharing; he had come prepared with his story, as well as the story gifted to the congregation and a song. He spoke for twenty-five minutes, and I chose not to interrupt his story. As he finished, I told the group that we were going to take a break and then return to hear the listeners. The participants began to move to the refreshment area, and Deborah approached me. My stomach sank, knowing that I had closed the storytelling without allowing her the opportunity to speak and had allowed the space to be dominated by settler stories. She graciously asked if she could share her story of residential school. We returned to the circle and opened the storytelling again. Reflecting back, this was a significant moment in the learning. The space of storytelling belonged to the white settler, and Deborah was seen by participants as a guest in that space. She was welcomed and listened to with respect and compassion, but her story could have easily been missed had she not asked for space. It was also important for me to recognize that the space was not solely mine to manage. Deborah knew that the storytelling was not finished, that we needed to hear more. My work was to trust Deborah's knowing, welcome that disruption, let go of my agenda, and step into the discomfort of my own unknowing. Her presence and her story challenged the notion of "we did not know," unsettled the agenda, and disrupted the story that reconciliation could be achieved in the abstract or absence of relationship.

Given the time constraints of the agenda, we did not have time to hear fully from the listeners, but they had recorded their thoughts on note paper to be used in compiling the research. The event ran overtime by thirty minutes, and some of the participants needed to leave before it was finished. This further disrupted the space as we intended to close with a ritual of shared gratitude and gifts to the participants. The closing was not as smooth as planned, though befitting of a process in which we are still learning how to listen to one another, learning how to make space, and learning how to be in relationship in the discomfort.

## Chapter 5.

### Conclusion

#### 5.1. Relationship and Transformation

Reconciliation happens in relationship. The saga of colonial oppression has been one of a relationship mired in violence and injustice, a relationship based in attempts by the settler nation to maintain power and control over Indigenous peoples, land, and resources, a relationship of broken trust and broken treaties. Reconciliation will require establishing and maintaining mutual and respectful relationships that create a new story of equality and integrity. It will require real change in distribution and ownership of land, resources, and decision-making power. The harm caused by the Indian residential school system is indicative of a system of colonial injustice. The IRSSA offers a national response through apology, financial compensation, health and healing programs, commemoration, and a public witness through the TRC. These are important steps in addressing the historic wrong. However, transforming the current relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and making real reparations to rectify the inequalities takes reconciliation a step further.

I believe the site of that transformation will be in the everyday lives of people living in community, engaged in conversation, and in public and political action. In her dissertation on Hannah Arendt and the “Understanding Heart,” Mary Pittenger describes the task of a citizen as being to try and understand what is happening in the world in one’s own time, by facing the realities of evil, enlarging one’s thinking and participating in the world through responsible speech and action guided by a sense of *amor mundi*, love for the world (Pittenger 2011).

The stories shared by the members at AVUC were examples of moments in relationship, moments when a shift in understanding occurred and when the moral imagination was engaged to see a new perspective. For some this felt transformative, others wondered what difference it would make. The people in the circle had shared a history of working together, going to school, caregiving, and family connections that extended back generations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the Alberni Valley, yet there continues to be barriers in the relationships. “We knew them,

but we didn't know." What risks will be required so that knowing and listening and understanding can lead to relationships of equality and solidarity for a transformed social world?

The design team had put forth a set of principles and hopes for the conversation that might further the work of reconciliation in their community. In the debrief session, they said they felt that relationships had changed and the work of reconciliation had been made visible in the stories shared through the conversation. Following the event, the ripples of relationship continued. Members of AVUC joined with other First Nations and Alberni Valley community groups on a walk for reconciliation when the Port Alberni Council was to consider the proposal for street name changes and receive the report from the Tsehaht and Hupacasath Nations on reconciliation. There is a commitment by the leadership in the congregation to continue the conversation.

Did transformation occur as a result of the conversation? Was there any real or tangible difference made in the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples? Were lives changed, did power shift, was inequity challenged and restored? Or did we simply feel good about ourselves for trying, while remaining happily secure in maintaining our position of privilege with good intentions?

Transformation is not a linear trajectory toward an ultimate truth, but a process of emergent and dynamic change that continues to unfold through each interaction and through each story and the witnessing of that story. Reconciliation is not an endpoint but a condition of relationship. If we truly seek to decolonize our social structures and institutions, then we must decolonize our relationships. Relationships are the transformative bridge between truth and reconciliation, from words to action, from apologies to decolonization. A decolonized society would mean a recognition of mutual relations and Indigenous sovereignty, centering Indigenous concerns, incorporating Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, returning land and resources, shifting from power over to power with, and transforming the colonial worldview impacting both settlers and Indigenous peoples (Regan 2010; Smith 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012 Wallace 2013).

## 5.2. Narrative of Solidarity

In the debrief meeting with the design team, Kelly summed up the step that she felt the congregation had taken that day:

I think wise action makes itself known when it's ready to be known. I keep coming to this place of truth before reconciliation, and I feel like we're forgetting the truth part. What you guys did today was about the truth part.

Acknowledging the truth about the residential schools and about the realities of colonialism that shape the story of Canada is a first step in establishing a reconciled relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. This will require that settlers unbind themselves from the myths of benevolence, of good intentions, and of peaceful conquest. The violent displacement of Indigenous people, colonial occupation of land, and the ongoing structures of colonialism continue to impact relations. The denial of this reality not only allows colonial privilege to be maintained unchallenged, but essentially renders Indigenous experience, voice, and identity invisible. A relationship of mutual respect cannot begin under conditions of invisibility.

Without truth, justice, and healing, there can be no genuine reconciliation. Reconciliation is not about “closing a sad chapter of Canada’s past,” but about opening new healing pathways of reconciliation that are forged in truth and justice (TRC 2015a:12)

As settlers continue to hear and be unsettled by this truth, room will open for a new dialogue to emerge. Decolonizing the relationship involves settlers committing to decolonizing themselves and their worldview. Survivors should not be asked to carry the burden of decolonizing the relationship. Settlers can do much in the work to unsettle power relations, speak truth, and repair broken trust as they dismantle the legacy and history of injustice from which they have benefited and as they move from colonizer to ally (Regan 2010).

Returning to the wisdom of Hannah Arendt from *The Human Condition*:

The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing—is the faculty of forgiving. The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises (Arendt 1998:237).



Forgiveness and promise require the presence of another and are manifest in relationship. This will require vulnerability, humility, and a willingness to stay in the discomfort of unknowing (Regan 2010). In order to change the culture, we are going to need to take risks. As Brenda reflected in the conversations of reconciliation, we need to be willing to get things wrong so that we can get them right. To do this we need the capacity for forgiveness and we need the accountability of promise. This does not need to be held solely in the realm of the political but can be enacted in the local, in day-to-day relationships of people building community.

Embracing a narrative of solidarity and ally-ship with the objectives of decolonization is one way that settlers can contribute to the rebuilding of just relations with First Nations peoples in Canada. Taiaiake Alfred insists a just and peaceful relationship between settlers and Indigenous peoples must be founded in the principles of respect and friendship, sharing and cooperation, which were present in the original covenants and treaties established when settlers first arrived (Alfred 2011).

As Kelly and Brenda shared in the conversation:

Waves crashing against the shore, transformation over time and readiness. A wave cannot be anything more than itself, and in owning its work in this world, it continues to wash and crash against the shore, it breaks over and over again. Each time going out to the ocean to gather together more strength, more depth, AND more waves to join. Eventually over time, that wave and its ocean family, simply by being waves and owning their work, will erode entire shores and coastlines (Kelly Foxcroft-Poirier).

Let the waves crash on us together (Brenda West).

Reconciliation starts with witnessing a new story that acknowledges the reality of colonial relations as violent and oppressive, then coming alongside each other as friends willing to engage the struggle for just relations together. As Justice Murray Sinclair remarks, "Reconciliation is about forging and maintaining respectful relationships. There are no shortcuts" (TRC n.d.). Transformation emerges from conversation. Possibility emerges from friendship.

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## Appendix A

# The United Church of Canada's Response to the Truth and Reconciliations Commission Calls to Action (December 2016)

A year after The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released its final report in December 2015, The United Church of Canada continues to engage with and respond to the 94 Calls to Action. (The Calls to Action can be found at [www.united-church.ca/socialaction/justice-initiatives/truth-and-reconciliation-commission](http://www.united-church.ca/socialaction/justice-initiatives/truth-and-reconciliation-commission) or <http://nctr.ca/reports.php>.)

In June 2015, the churches that are parties to the Settlement Agreement (Anglican, Presbyterian, United, and a number of Roman Catholic entities) made a joint statement in response to the Calls to Action. The Response of the Churches can also be found at [www.united-church.ca/socialaction/justice-initiatives/truth-and-reconciliation-commission](http://www.united-church.ca/socialaction/justice-initiatives/truth-and-reconciliation-commission).

While The United Church of Canada recognizes the value in each of the Calls to Action, this document refers specifically to

- 1) calls directed to the churches that are parties to the Settlement Agreement or to faith groups generally
- 2) calls directed to the parties to the Settlement Agreement, which includes the churches

On the United Church website ([www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca)), you will find information regarding our response to Calls that relate to concerns for which the United Church has historically undertaken advocacy work, and continues to do so: a public inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous

Women and Girls; child welfare and education; implementation by governments of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; and mandatory school curricula re Indigenous history and culture, treaties, and residential school history.

### **Calls to Action directed to the churches and faith groups**

- 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.*

*Comments:*

The United Church, as an active member of KAIROS, has been an advocate for the adoption and implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples for many years.

A UN Declaration Task Group was formed in December 2015 to 1) develop the statement issued on March 31, 2016, and a format for ongoing reporting; and 2) develop and implement a process to engage the whole church in complying with this Call to Action, providing a mechanism with which to assess compliance in all our policies, programs, and practices. The task group has begun introductory sessions with the national governing bodies, and is looking forward to providing resources to Conferences, presbyteries, and communities of faith so they may begin to examine their way of doing things according to the norms, principles, and standards of the Declaration.

The church has been increasingly moving toward Indigenous self-determination in its structures and policies. On March 30, 2016, the United Church joined the broader ecumenical community in announcing a collective intention to implement the principles, norms, and standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation (see [www.united-church.ca/news/release-ecumenical-statement-un-declaration](http://www.united-church.ca/news/release-ecumenical-statement-un-declaration)).

On March 31, 2016, the United Church issued its own statement expressing its commitment to honouring this Call to Action ([www.united-church.ca/news/united-church-responds-call-actionun-declaration](http://www.united-church.ca/news/united-church-responds-call-actionun-declaration)). This statement was offered as the Aboriginal Ministries Council in the United Church, accompanied by the non-Indigenous (settler) church, began a process of consultation to determine its own vision and future structure. The Caretakers of Our Indigenous Circle, a group of 13 Indigenous leaders, will make recommendations to the 43rd General Council in 2018.

- 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.*

*Comments:*

In 2012, the Executive of the General Council of The United Church of Canada passed a motion denouncing the Doctrine of Discovery, and initiated a process of discerning how its own values, actions, policies and structures continue to be informed by the Doctrine of Discovery. This resulted in a resource-development workshop in August 2015, and work is ongoing in drawing attention to the instruments and impacts of colonization, particularly in worship and youth programs. A resource entitled “Acknowledging the Territory in Worship” invites congregations to acknowledge and learn the history of the territory where they gather (search “acknowledging the territory” at [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca)).

The church encourages and promotes the development and use of ecumenical resources, as well as secular resources, that help to reveal how the Doctrine underlies systemic oppression of Indigenous Peoples.

- 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.*

*Comments:*

Not directly applicable to the United Church.

- 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.*

*Comments:*

The United Church has developed and animated various educational resources and programs. These materials and an array of worship resources are available on the United Church website, notably current ones pertaining to the 30th anniversary of the 1986 apology. Histories of schools and photos are posted at <http://thechildrenremembered.ca>. The book *Sorry: Why Our Church Apologized* is available from Wood Lake Books, and the church promotes and makes wide use of the KAIROS Blanket Exercise.

- 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.*

*Comments:*

In February 2015 the United Church released a statement that acknowledges its complicity in the denigration of Aboriginal wisdom and spirituality: *Affirming Other Spiritual Paths* (see [www.united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/apologies](http://www.united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/apologies)). The document contained a number of statements made by the United Church over the past several decades affirming the inherent validity of diverse spiritual traditions. The resource *Circle and Cross: Dialogue Planning Tool* was published in 2008 as “an invitation to a conversation about spirituality and justice in the relationships among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.” In 2015, the United Church, through the Ecumenical Working Group on Residential Schools, contributed to the creation of a theological reflection paper identifying questions and learnings arising from our role in the residential school system in order to foster discussion and discernment in theological colleges and learning centres.

The Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre and the Vancouver School of Theology’s Native Ministries Consortium program prepares clergy for ministry in Aboriginal communities. Other theological institutions have incorporated Indigenous history and teachings within their curriculum. The Theological Education Circle (principals, deans, and keepers) has this Call to Action on their agenda.

The United Church has identified the need to educate student clergy, clergy already in paid accountable ministry, and clergy from other denominations and countries being admitted to ordered ministry, as well as all clergy and staff working in Aboriginal communities, particularly non-Aboriginal clergy. This will require the work of the whole church as well as the theological education centres.

- 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.*

*Comments:*

In 1994, the United Church created the **Healing Fund**, which provides \$300,000 in annual funding support to Aboriginal community-based healing projects. **The Justice and**

**Reconciliation Fund**, established in 1998, provides support \$100,000 each year to community projects that foster awareness, dialogue, and relationship-building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. **The Gifts with Vision** giving catalogue offers several gift opportunities that support community-led language and cultural revitalization, and reconciliation programs.

**The Mission & Service fund** supports many aspects of Indigenous ministries and justice. Programs like Wampum and Neechi have brought together Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth to sow seeds of friendship and right relations.

**Calls to Action directed to the parties, including the churches**

**29.** *We call upon the parties and, in particular, the federal government, to work collaboratively with plaintiffs not included in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement to have disputed legal issues determined expeditiously on an agreed set of facts.*

*Comments:*

Over 1,000 claimants in the Independent Assessment Process (IAP) have not been compensated because of the use of the “administrative split” argument by Canada’s lawyers and the acceptance of that argument by IAP Adjudicators. An IAP claimant who was denied compensation made a Request for Direction that was heard in an Alberta court. The United Church intervened in support of the claimant in this case, but Judge Nation ruled in 2015 that the adjudicators had decided rightly in accepting the “administrative split” argument of Canada’s lawyers. Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett initiated a federal review of these cases in February 2016.

The Day Scholars Class Action has been certified with the federal government as the sole defendant, involving plaintiffs who attended residential schools but lived at home, and did not receive the Common Experience Payment.

**46.** *We call upon the parties to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement to develop and sign a Covenant of Reconciliation that would identify principles for working collaboratively to advance reconciliation in Canadian society, and that would include, but not be limited to:*

- i. *Reaffirmation of the parties' commitment to reconciliation.*
- ii. *Repudiation of concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples, such as the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius, and the reformation of laws, governance structures, and policies within their respective institutions that continue to rely on such concepts.*
- iii. *Full adoption and implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation.*
- iv. *Support for the renewal or establishment of Treaty relationships based on principles of mutual recognition, mutual respect, and shared responsibility for maintaining those relationships into the future.*
- v. *Enabling those excluded from the Settlement Agreement to sign onto the Covenant of Reconciliation.*
- vi. *Enabling additional parties to sign onto the Covenant of Reconciliation.*

*Comments:*

The United Church joined in an All Party statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at its Closing Event in which the parties committed to work together on reconciliation after the TRC mandate is completed. The Calls to Action comprise an agenda for this collective effort.

- 73.** *We call upon the federal government to work with churches, Aboriginal communities, and former residential school students to establish and maintain an online registry of residential school cemeteries, including, where possible, plot maps showing the location of deceased residential school children.*

*Comments:*

National and regional archives staff have sought and identified all information the church holds on deaths, burials, and cemeteries related to United Church residential schools. The Remembering the Children Society in Alberta, with United Church staff support, has been working with the provincial Aboriginal Heritage Resources section to identify all residential school cemeteries and related unmarked graveyards in Alberta. This is critical work in the service of accountability and reconciliation, and our church and archives are open to every initiative to collaborate with others.

- 74.** *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.*

*Comments:*

The United Church has begun this work with respect to four of the residential schools for which it takes responsibility: Red Deer, File Hills, Regina, and Brandon. The church has also responded to inquiries about burials of patients from the Charles Camsell Hospital at a cemetery on the property of the Edmonton IRS—where the students dug the graves.

The federal government contributed funds to several ceremonies held in connection with the Red Deer school planned by the Remembering the Children Society. Ceremonies have also been held in regard to the File Hills IRS, the Regina Indian Industrial School, and Brandon Indian Residential School cemeteries. A sign and fence have been erected at the File Hills IRS cemetery. Markers for some of the United Church schools were obtained through the Assembly of First Nations–Aboriginal Healing Foundation “National Commemorative Marker Project.” Further work is needed to determine more of the names of those who are buried in residential school cemeteries.

The United Church would collaborate with the federal government in any further initiatives.

- 75.** *We call upon the federal government to work with provincial, territorial, and municipal governments, churches, Aboriginal communities, former residential school students, and current landowners to develop and implement strategies and procedures for the ongoing identification, documentation, maintenance, commemoration, and protection of residential school cemeteries or other sites at which residential school children were buried. This is to include the provision of appropriate memorial ceremonies and commemorative markers to honour the deceased children.*

*Comments:*

The United Church has been involved in recent years in supporting work to identify, reclaim, preserve, and document cemeteries and honour student burials related to our schools at Red Deer, Edmonton, File Hills, Regina, and Brandon.

The City of Regina designated the Regina Indian Industrial School (RIIS) school and cemetery site as a heritage resource in September 2016. In-kind funds allocated from the Settlement Agreement supported the RIIS Media Project and the production of the documentary *RIIS from Amnesia*, which documented the research process in developing the list of students who attended

RIIS and then visiting the descendants in 34 First Nations communities. The Red Deer Industrial School cemetery is on the way to being designated a provincial heritage resource. Work is also underway to erect a monument at the graves of four students buried in the Red Deer City

cemetery. Assiniboine Presbytery has been coordinating the development of the Brandon IRS Mobile Learning Centre to share information about that school and its cemeteries in relevant communities in Manitoba.

As information emerges regarding other sites, the United Church will work collaboratively on research, information-sharing, and commemoration.

- 76.** *We call upon the parties engaged in the work of documenting, maintaining, commemorating, and protecting residential school cemeteries to adopt strategies in accordance with the following principles:*
- i. The Aboriginal community most affected shall lead the development of such strategies.*
  - ii. Information shall be sought from residential school Survivors and other Knowledge Keepers in the development of such strategies.*
  - iii. Aboriginal protocols shall be respected before any potentially invasive technical inspection and investigation of a cemetery site.*

*Comments:*

The United Church supports these principles. In particular, our experience at the site of the Red Deer school reflected these principles and resulted in the establishment of the Remembering the Children Society, with membership from several First Nations, the Metis Nation of Alberta, and congregations in Treaty 6 and 7 regions. The Society published a handbook, *Guidelines for Initiating Projects involving Indian Residential School Cemeteries and Unmarked Burials*. One thousand copies have been distributed. The Regina Indian Industrial School Commemorative Association has followed a similar path. Regarding File Hills IRS unmarked burials on Okanese First Nation, Okanese has led all the efforts in respect of recovering, commemorating, and protecting the graveyard with support from the United Church in Saskatchewan.

- 81.** *We call upon the federal government, in collaboration with Survivors and their organizations, and other parties to the Settlement Agreement, to commission and install a publicly accessible, highly visible, Residential Schools National Monument in the city of Ottawa to honour Survivors and all the children who were lost to their families and communities.*

*Comments:*

The United Church would support and participate in such an initiative.



**82.** *We call upon provincial and territorial governments, in collaboration with Survivors and their organizations, and other parties to the Settlement Agreement, to commission and install a publicly accessible, highly visible, Residential Schools Monument in each capital city to honour Survivors and all the children who were lost to their families and communities.*

*Comments:*

The United Church would collaborate in any such initiative by a province or territory.

## **Appendix B.**

# **United Church of Canada Apologies to First Nations Peoples**

## **1986 Apology to First Nations Peoples**

Long before my people journeyed to this land your people were here, and you received from your Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured.

We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you of the good news of Jesus Christ we were closed to the value of your spirituality.

We confused Western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ.

We imposed our civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel.

We tried to make you be like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were. As a result, you, and we, are poorer and the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred, and we are not what we are meant by God to be.

We ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the Spirit of Christ so that our peoples may be blessed and God's creation healed.

The Right Rev. Bob Smith  
General Council 1986  
The United Church of Canada

## **To former students of United Church Indian Residential School, and to their families and communities:**

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."

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.

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.

“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.”

The Right Rev. Bill Phipps  
General Council Executive 1998  
The United Church of Canada

## **Appendix C.**

### **An Apology From St. Andrew's United Church to First Nations People for Harm caused by "Indian" Residential Schools**

We wish to address the issue of the continuing damage caused by the former United Church "Indian" residential schools. We know this damage takes many forms. Emotional and psychological scarring, social deprivation, and undermining of family and culture have all been identified as destructive effects of the racially segregated schools. The practical effect was to alienate young people from their families and their culture, resulting in hopelessness, confusion, anger and self-hatred – all of which fire oppressive cycles including a whole range of personal and social abuses.

Beyond the arrogance of assimilation there were additional personal tragedies experienced by victims of physical and sexual abuse. The repercussions of these continue to haunt not only the victims themselves but entire families and communities.

Some of the facts about "Indian" residential schools have become clear. In trying to come to terms with them, we hereby acknowledge and confess that many wrongs were committed in the name of the United Church under that system. We confess the past complicity of our church with the dominant culture of the day and with the federal government in perpetrating these injustices for so long. We acknowledge, as well, that those damages continue to transfer grief and violence into First Nations family, social, and cultural life. We of today's United Church apologize for these things.

We respect the integrity, strength, and hope nurtured by so many First Nations people. In the same spirit, we recognize and celebrate the healing process that is already alive, bringing with it the reclamation of dignity and wholeness. This apology is not meant to be an end but a springboard moving us into the new energy of courage and commitment needed in the task of rebuilding. Our hope is that it will further the healing process in native communities and add to the spirit of reconciliation. (Bob Stewart Archives, BC Conference Archives. St. Andrew's United Church (Port Alberni, B.C.) fonds.)

## Appendix D

### RESPECT Guidelines

**R** = take RESPONSIBILITY for what you say and feel without blaming others.

**E** = use EMPATHETIC listening.

**S** = be SENSITIVE to differences in communication styles.

**P** = PONDER what you hear and feel before you speak.

**E** = EXAMINE your own assumptions and perceptions.

**C** = keep CONFIDENTIALITY.

**T** = TRUST ambiguity because we are *not* here to debate who is right or wrong.

(Kaleidoscope Institute 2015)

## Appendix E

### Hišukiš-tsa-waak

In the Nuuchahnulth language, heshook-ish tsawalk means “everything is one.” Heshook-ish tsawalk is a Nuuchahnulth perspective that is inclusive of all reality, both physical and metaphysical. According to traditional Nuuchahnulth beliefs, experiences, and practices, reality is the sum total of existence and included both the physical universe and the spiritual realm. (Atleo 2004)

The following story was shared in the conversations of reconciliation at AVUC:

Quʔušin learned early on in life hišukiš-tsa-waak, everything is one and connected and that is why we must all do our part to care for each other and the environment. What we do to one thing affects everything else.

His parents taught him that there is a creator and we must always remember to be thankful and offer up to prayers to naas. He got up early, especially when he was preparing himself for a big event, like hunting for game like deer to feed his family and share with the elders in his community. He went to a special spot in the forest, to a river that his family had long been going. He prayed before taking the cedar from the tree to use in cleansing his mind, body and spirit. Quʔušin bathed in the icy-cold river while rubbing the cedar bough all over his body. When he was done, his mind was clear and he was ready to go forth.

The oceans and rivers were teeming with plenty of food like salmon, halibut, cod and on the beach and on the rocks he often collected chitons, mussels, oysters, sea urchins and clams. Everything was placed here for a reason and we must always be ʔiisaak-respectful and take only what we need. He went out fishing one day and caught some sockeye salmon, he could have caught more but he only needed enough to share with his family, his uncle, grandparents and a couple of the elders in the community. He took only what he needed and he cleaned all the salmon on the beach and put all the fish guts and bones back to where he got it from, because that is what he was taught.

The forest was always abundant with food, plant and trees. In the spring and in the summer, quʔušin harvested wild salmonberry shoots, salmon berries, huckleberries, blueberries, salal and thimbleberries. When certain plans were ready he went out and gathered medicine plants.

There were many involved in building and raising the children in the community and everyone had to work together. Cleansing and preparations were done to go and gather cedar trees to build big houses where up to eight families could live. The houses were built entirely from the cedar tree as well as the totem poles that told the story of the family that lived in the house. There was no wasting of any of the tree, quʔušin and his family made clothing, blankets, mats, and baskets out of the cedar bark. Bentwood boxes were made for food and regalia storage and even cooking. Masks and headdresses also were made from the wood of the cedar and used in ceremonial songs and dances.

The regalia was to be used in ʕiicʔ-tuula (eets-tootha) for his sister who was coming of age. It was their time to show how her how important she is and how much she is valued by her family and the community. There were different kinds of potlatches or feasts and quʔušin had taken part in many that celebrated or recognized: the seating of the chief, a celebration of life, a birth, drying of tears, name giving or a marriage. It was a time of connection, learning protocols, reinforcing family ties, keeping the language and culture alive and a time of pride.

Quʔušin loved his life, his family and his community. As long as he remembered hiʕukiʕ-tsa-waak he knew that he would go far in life. He was proud that he had so many teachings about prayer, cleansing, helping others, being respectful to all living things and that he played a big part in his family and his community.

**Written by Deb Masso, ʕaʔuuqʔaht-aqsup and presented to the United Church for Building Bridges and Understanding with First Nations people.**

**April 19, 2016**



# Appendix F

## Alberni Valley Collective Story Harvest Invitation

Alberni Valley United Collective Story Harvest – Stories of Reconciliation

February 4th, 2017 – 9:30 -12:30 am

### Storyteller Support Information

#### What do we want from the storytellers, and how to prepare?

- o We are gathering to witness and hear each other's stories and build a sense of the collective story of reconciliation within Alberni Valley United Church.
- o Participants are invited to share a story if they choose, though it is not a requirement of participating. There will be 60 minutes to hear a number stories of a variety of scales and scope. We invite you to tell your story for around 6-8 minutes. We will be using a talking piece and a timekeeper and there will be space for about 8 -10 people to share during this portion of the morning.
- o Think back to the great stories you've heard – they have a beginning, middle and an end and usually have a challenge at the core of them although it does not need to be a success story. Imagine the setting, how you were impacted, and the significant moments of breakthrough or learning. Your story doesn't have to be totally completed, rather, what is most important, is that we can learn from your story.
- o To prepare as a storyteller, set some time aside to do a little bit of writing. This is your real story you are telling – not one with made-up characters. Think of your story topic and make some notes along these lines (think of this as the 'spine' of your story):
  - o Here's who I am...
  - o Here is the challenge that we faced and is the challenge that I personally faced...
  - o Here's who is/was involved...
  - o Here's what happened/when/where... then because of that what happened... and because of that what happened...
  - o Here's the breakthrough point or learning.
  - o Here's where we are now...
- o You are welcome to bring your story notes to support you as you tell your story, but don't read your notes. This isn't a formal or rehearsed presentation (no PowerPoint!) – Imagine you are sitting around the campfire with your peers telling them your story. This preparation work simply helps you craft your thoughts into a story that we can listen and learn from.

Adapted from Amanda Fenton's Collective Story Harvest – Storyteller Support Information (Fenton 2014)