

The Inuit Residential School Experience Workshop

Early in the morning on Saturday May 9th about forty people from St. Andrew's, Knox and St. Giles Churches gathered by the Library and Archives Canada (LAC) building on Wellington Street. We formed a circle around Reepa Evic-Carleton, an Inuit elder, and her "Quilliq" or soapstone lamp. Reepa lit the lamp and, as the flames flickered, spoke movingly about the ongoing impact of the residential school system on the life of her family. She concluded with prayer in the Inuktitut language.

After this Quilliq ceremony, the group moved indoors for a workshop focused on the Inuit residential school experience. After our minister, the Rev. Dr. Andrew Johnston, commenced with prayer, the moderator, Andy Garrow, Senior Advisor at the Legacy of Hope Foundation, introduced two Inuit elders, Peter and Joe. Peter Inriq was the first commissioner of the new Territory of Nunavut and was part of an Aboriginal delegation that had a recent audience with the Pope. Joe and Peter were classmates at Chesterfield Inlet School.



Workshop planning team with Inuit Elder Reepa Evic-Carleton and Healing and Reconciliation Program Animator Lori Ransom: *From Left* Carole Fletcher, Sheila Selley, Reepa Evic-Carleton, Jim Neelin, Lori Ransom.

We sat in a circle and listened as Peter and Joe told us about their life experiences. Although they expressed gratitude for the education they received, we learned that this in no way compensated for the ongoing pain which resulted from being far removed from their families and community at ages as young as six. At school, they were isolated from relatives even within the school itself, and received corporal punishment if caught speaking their native tongue. Peter was also subject to sexual abuse. They left the school lacking knowledge of their own culture and language, and robbed of the exposure to parenting skills that would have provided them with the knowledge and sense of self-worth to enable them to fulfill their potential and to establish successful families of their own. We learned from them about the healing power of apology and confession. Jim Neelin, from Knox Church, then summarized the Presbyterian Church's involvement with residential schools and read the moving "Confession of The Presbyterian Church in Canada," a statement which was adopted by the General Assembly in 1994 with regard to the residential school system.

Before moving on to view the LAC exhibit, "We Were So Far Away," Carole Fletcher from Knox posed two questions to direct our thoughts towards ways of increasing public awareness of the ongoing effects of the residential school experience, and towards ways of involving others in the reconciliation process. Half the group then went on to the exhibit room while half remained in discussion with Andy and Reepa. In the exhibit room the Curator of the exhibit, Heather Igloiorte, an Inuit from Labrador, and Peter and Joe, the Inuit residential school survivors, supplemented the photos, slides and video presentations with their poignant recollections and observations. The two groups then exchanged places before coming together for some final words including a plea from Peter to get out the message about the history and lasting impact of residential schools. Significantly this workshop, as part of The Presbyterian Church in Canada's healing and

reconciliation initiatives, was the first of a series of events to be undertaken locally to promote healing through the improved understanding Peter was soliciting.

We were fortunate that Lori Ransom, the national church's Healing and Reconciliation Animator, was able to participate in the workshop and she expressed thanks to both participants and organizers. In addition to those already named much appreciation is due to Bob Ferris from St. Andrews Church who liaised with Andy Garrow at the Legacy of Hope Foundation and with Irene Viel at the Library and Archives. Sheila Selley of St. Andrew's coordinated participation from Knox through Jim Neelin, and from St. Giles through Carole Fletcher. The morning, both moving and enlightening, was drawn to a close with the reading in unison of "The Children's Prayer" that was introduced in Ottawa at the launch of the Aboriginal and Church Leaders' *Remembering the Children* tour in 2008 to promote the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Written by Doug and Sheila Selley