

Study Guide for the Confession

Introduction: Some history leading to the Confession

In June of 1994, The Presbyterian Church in Canada adopted an important statement that was an admission of its participation in colonial practices and policies. That statement was called “The 1994 Confession of The Presbyterian Church in Canada Regarding Injustice Suffered by Canada’s First Nations Peoples,” and it was a response to a deepening understanding that the church had harmed Indigenous people through its work and mission. The policies and practices the Confession repented of were aimed, as it says, at “assimilate[ing] Aboriginal peoples into the dominant culture.”

Since a large part of the PCC’s collaboration in these policies was through our administration of Indian Residential Schools, much of this study guide focuses on our involvement with those schools. It is important to remember, though, that it is not just the schools the Confession repents of. It also acknowledges “that the roots of the harm we have done are found in the attitudes and values of western European colonialism and the assumption that what was not yet moulded in our image was to be discovered and exploited.” These attitudes, values, and assumptions that caused such harm are thus also at the heart of what the Church confesses here, seeking transformation and forgiveness.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada operated a total of eleven Residential Schools at twelve sites between the mid-1880s until 1969. The names of those schools are: Ahousaht Residential School in British Columbia, Alberni Residential School in British Columbia, Birtle Residential School in Manitoba, Cecilia Jeffrey Residential School, first located in Shoal Lake, Ontario and relocated to Kenora, Ontario, Crowstand Residential School in Saskatchewan, File Hills Residential School in Saskatchewan, Muscowpetung (later known as “Lakesend”) Residential School in Saskatchewan, Portage la Prairie Residential School in Manitoba, Regina Industrial School in Saskatchewan, Round Lake Residential School in Saskatchewan, and Stoney Plain Residential School in Alberta.

A the time of Church Union in 1925, four of the Presbyterian schools were already closed and the newly formed United Church took over the operation of all but two of the remaining schools. The Presbyterian Church transferred these two schools—Birtle Residential School in Manitoba and Cecilia Jeffrey Residential School, which had first been located at Shoal Point and was then moved to Kenora, Ontario—to the Government of Canada in 1969. They were closed in 1970 and 1976, respectively.

In 1976—the same year Cecelia Jeffrey closed—The Presbyterian Church in Canada joined the ecumenical group Project North, a predecessor of the Aboriginal Rights Coalition, which is now part of KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives. The PCC continued working as part of the coalition, and in 1987, the church signed a joint statement called “A New Covenant: Towards the Constitutional Recognition and Protection of Aboriginal Self-Government in Canada.” Among other issues, the “New Covenant” described the importance of constitutional rights for Indigenous peoples and affirmed that the church’s support for Indigenous rights arose as a direct response to the Gospel.

However, also in the 1980s, stories of abuses suffered by students at residential schools began to be heard. Some of these abuses included physical and sexual violence, racism that included banning Indigenous languages and spiritual practices, malnutrition and poor medical care leading to increased rates of student illness and death, and even medical and nutritional experiments performed on students without their or their parents’ knowledge or consent. Others pointed to the high numbers of children who died at the schools or who never made it home. Missing children and unmarked burials would eventually form part of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was launched as more knowledge of abuses at the schools become more public.¹

As Survivors began to speak out about the abuses that took place in the schools and about the experience of being separated from their families and communities, the PCC entered a listening process and began more closely examining our involvement with the schools. In 1991, a report to the General Assembly argued that justice, peace, and truth are required in dealing with Indigenous rights issues. That Assembly then, acknowledging the need for truth to pursue justice and peace, authorized work on a confession for the actions and impacts of the residential schools. A first version of a Confession was drafted and placed before the General Assembly in 1992, but it did not receive enough support to be adopted. The Confession was re-drafted and was then adopted by the General Assembly in 1994.

The Confession was an important step for the church toward healing and reconciliation with Indigenous people, but it was only one step. Because the residential schools operated for almost nine decades, harming generations of communities, true healing and reconciliation will require a lengthy journey to heal that harm and transform the damaged relationship between the church and Indigenous peoples. Though this, too, is only one step in a lifelong journey, by undertaking a study of this Confession, you are engaging in the important ongoing work of healing and reconciliation.



Gathering for reconciliation at the Forks in Winnipeg, 2008.

1. For more information regarding these abuses, see presbyterianarchives.ca/2018/08/17/cecilia-jeffrey-school | presbyterianarchives.ca/2018/08/17/birtle-school and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Final Report at: trc.ca/assets/pdf/Honouring_the_Truth_Reconciling_for_the_Future_July_23_2015.pdf

Opening Exercise

The 2019 General Assembly marked the 25th anniversary of the Confession of The Presbyterian Church in Canada; we are now past the first quarter century of journeying with this Confession. But what does a Confession like this mean today, and how does it still guide us? What is a confession, and how does it function in the church?

The word “confession” has several meanings. One meaning is as a formal admission of guilt or responsibility— a person or group can confess to a crime. Another meaning, particularly in religious contexts, is a statement of doctrine or belief, especially doctrine or belief that is considered a core part of what it means to belong to that group. One example of this is the Westminster Confession of Faith.

To begin this study, take some time to carefully read through the Confession, perhaps aloud by members of your study group or on your own if you are studying by yourself. As you read, consider in what ways you see both meanings of “confession” active. Following reading the Confession aloud, we encourage you to take a few moments of silence to honour the children who never made it home and all those Indigenous families and communities still struggling with the effects of intergenerational trauma the schools created. Some silent reflection on the themes of the Confession before looking at the study questions would also be appropriate.

The Confession of The Presbyterian Church in Canada as adopted by the General Assembly, June 9th, 1994

The Holy Spirit, speaking in and through Scripture, calls The Presbyterian Church in Canada to confession. This confession is our response to the word of God. We understand our mission and ministry in new ways in part because of the testimony of Aboriginal peoples.

1. We, the 120th General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, seeking the guidance of the Spirit of God, and aware of our own sin and shortcomings, are called to speak to the Church we love. We do this, out of new understandings of our past not out of any sense of being superior to those who have gone before us, nor out of any sense that we would have done things differently in the same context. It is with humility and in great sorrow that we come before God and our Aboriginal brothers and sisters with our confession.

2. We acknowledge that the stated policy of the Government of Canada was to assimilate Aboriginal peoples to the dominant culture, and that The Presbyterian Church in Canada co-operated in this policy. We acknowledge that the roots of the harm we have done are found in the attitudes and values of western European colonialism, and the assumption that what was not yet moulded in our image was to be discovered and exploited. As part of that policy we, with other churches, encouraged the government to ban some important spiritual practices through which Aboriginal peoples experienced the presence of the creator God. For the Church’s complicity in this policy we ask forgiveness.



A copy of the Confession being presented to Phil Fontaine by the 1994 Moderator, Dr. George Vais and Kay Cowper, then president of the WMS.

3. We recognize that there were many members of The Presbyterian Church in Canada who, in good faith, gave unstintingly of themselves in love and compassion for their Aboriginal brothers and sisters. We acknowledge their devotion and commend them for their work. We recognize that there were some who, with prophetic insight, were aware of the damage that was being done and protested, but their efforts were thwarted. We acknowledge their insight. For the times we did not support them adequately nor hear their cries for justice, we ask forgiveness.

4. We confess that The Presbyterian Church in Canada presumed to know better than Aboriginal peoples what was needed for life. The Church said of our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, "If they could be like us, they could think like us, talk like us, worship like us, sing like us, and work like us, they would know God and therefore would have life abundant." In our cultural arrogance we have been blind to the ways in which our own understanding of the Gospel has been culturally conditioned, and because of our insensitivity to Aboriginal cultures, we have demanded more of the Aboriginal people than the Gospel requires, and have thus misrepresented Jesus Christ who loves all peoples with compassionate, suffering love that all may come to God through him. For the Church's presumption we ask forgiveness.

5. We confess that, with the encouragement and assistance of the Government of Canada, The Presbyterian Church in Canada agreed to take the children of Aboriginal peoples from their own homes and place them in residential schools. In these schools, children were deprived of their traditional ways, which were replaced with Euro-Canadian customs that were helpful in the process of assimilation. To carry out this process, The Presbyterian Church in Canada used disciplinary practices which were foreign to Aboriginal peoples, and open to exploitation in physical and psychological punishment beyond any Christian maxim of care and discipline. In a setting of obedience and acquiescence there was opportunity for sexual abuse, and some were so abused. The effect of all this, for Aboriginal peoples, was the loss of cultural identity and the loss of a secure sense of self. For the Church's insensitivity we ask forgiveness.

6. We regret that there are those whose lives have been deeply scarred by the effects of the mission and ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. For our Church we ask forgiveness of God. It is our prayer that God, who is merciful, will guide us in compassionate ways towards helping them to heal.

7. We ask, also, for forgiveness from Aboriginal peoples. What we have heard we acknowledge. It is our hope that those whom we have wronged with a hurt too deep for telling will accept what we have to say. With God's guidance our Church will seek opportunities to walk with Aboriginal peoples to find healing and wholeness together as God's people.

Questions for study and reflection

Having taken the time to read through the Confession, consider the following questions. Remember that discussions about residential schools and the way the church has been complicit in colonialism can be very difficult. It is important to practice good and respectful listening, as well as empathy for yourself and others.

Some questions for study:

1. Does any of the language in the Confession surprise you or make you uncomfortable? If so, what language, and why?
2. If we were writing a confession and commitment to reconciliation today, do you think it would be different? If so, how? If not, why?
3. When was the first time you remember hearing about the residential schools, and how did it make you feel? Who told you?
4. Try to think of a time when you have been involved in trying to reconcile a relationship where there was significant harm.
 - a. If you were the party that was wronged, what did it feel like, and what were the types of challenges to reconciliation that you experienced?
 - b. If you were the party that wronged someone, what did it feel like to try to reconcile, and what were the types of challenges you experienced?
 - c. Regardless of which side of the relationship you were on, was it easy?
5. As part of the opening exercise, we considered two meanings of “confession.” In what ways does the Confession function as an admission of guilt? In what ways does it function as a statement of core belief? How important do you think it is that both meanings are acknowledged and held when we read it?
6. The Confession was presented more than 25 years ago. What steps toward reconciliation have you seen? What steps can you take now?

Following your discussion, as you prepare to close your study, read the Bible verse below and then take some time to reflect on the justice God calls Christians to:

Zechariah 8:16–17

“These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the Lord.”



A bowl and feather used for smudging. Photo by Vivian Ketchum

It's good to end with a closing prayer. Here are two prayers to consider closing with, or you can use your own:

A Prayer in Response to the Confession

Loving and just God,

You created us in your image and you love all your children. As we study the words of this Confession, we are grateful for the strength of Survivors who brought the truth of the harm of these schools to light, though it is a truth they never should have had to bear. Keep us mindful of their words and of the stories of what was done to them and mindful of your loving commandments. Strengthen us to work to ensure that all children are treated with dignity and respect. We repent of The Presbyterian Church in Canada's part in the harm done to children, and we pray for healing for the families who experienced and continue to experience the trauma of residential schools. Just and healing God, we ask you show us the path of reconciliation and pray for the Spirit's guidance to help us walk it well. In humility, we pray that you shape our hearts and minds to pursue right relationships, as you call us to do.

In Christ's name we pray,
Amen.

Prayer of Lament for Children Who Did Not Return from Residential Schools

Creator God of love and justice, Comforter of those who mourn,
We turn to you acknowledging the actions of your church, our complicity in
running residential schools and taking children from their families. We have
asked forgiveness and committed to work for healing and reconciliation.
But we recognize that for some, that change came too late.

We now have a first list of the names of students who died and never made it
home from residential schools. We know the list is incomplete; that there will
be more names and that some names may never be known. But you know,
Loving and Healing God, their names and their stories.

For those children whose names we now know, those we do not yet know and
for the intergenerational harm still present today that grew from their absence,
we ask for forgiveness and pray for healing for those whose children, siblings,
family and friends were taken from home but did not return.

For where there was joy, and we took it;
laughter and we stifled it
play and we turned it to tears
family and we broke it

We repent and renew our commitment to walk a new path. We honour the children lost
and hold the memory of their lives in our hearts.

Comforting God, we pray for healing in the communities and families of all who
experienced residential schools, and strength for all who pursue reconciliation.

Amen.

Appendix: Where Do We Go From Here?

Some suggested steps toward healing and reconciliation and resources for further study:

- If you haven't already, research and create a land acknowledgement for your church or building, and include land acknowledgements at events you are running; reflect on what they mean, and how to live them out beyond the words.
- Learn more about the Indigenous Ministries within The Presbyterian Church in Canada: See presbyterian.ca/canadian-ministries/indigenous-ministries.
- Host a KAIROS Blanket Exercise for your congregation or group to learn about the history of colonization in what is now known as Canada; you can contact KAIROS to set one up.²
- The PCC has other liturgical and study resources on healing and reconciliation, which can be found at presbyterian.ca/resources/healing. Consider using one or more of those in your worship or for study.
- Find out more about Indigenous groups in your area and begin or continue relationship building with them; are there events you can collaborate on? What Indigenous-led organizations or initiatives can you support?
- Familiarize yourself with the 94 Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and with the Calls for Justice from the National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls—especially Calls for Justice 15.1-15.8, which are directed at all Canadians. Reflect on how you can respond to these calls.
- In response to TRC Call to Action 49, the 2019 General Assembly repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery. The Doctrine of Discovery is a set of ideas that European colonial powers had a right to appropriate lands and possessions and treat non-Christians as undeserving of rights. You can learn more about the Doctrine of Discovery and why the church repudiated it at presbyterian.ca/justice/doctrine-of-discovery.



2. KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives KAIROS unites 10 Canadian churches and religious organizations in a faithful ecumenical response to the biblical justice imperative. Members include: The Anglican Church of Canada; the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace; Canadian Religious Conference; the Christian Reformed Church in North America (Canada Corporation); the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada; Mennonite Central Committee of Canada; The Presbyterian Church in Canada; The Primate's World Relief and Development Fund (PWRDF); Religious Society of Friends (Quakers); The United Church of Canada. Online at presbyterian.ca/healing.