

NATIONAL INDIGENOUS MINISTRIES COUNCIL

*Report as adopted by the 2023 General Assembly, The Presbyterian Church in Canada
(A&P 2023, pp. 28-9, 219-222)*

To the Venerable, the 148th General Assembly:

WHO IS THE NATIONAL INDIGENOUS MINISTRIES COUNCIL?

The National Indigenous Ministries Council (NIMC) is a council where the Indigenous ministries in The Presbyterian Church in Canada gather to share each others' stories of success, learn from each others' strengths, hear each others' struggles and give mutual guidance. The council also works to identify, enable and support Indigenous individuals for ministry within the church; to encourage the church to support Indigenous ministries and to direct funds for them; to speak prophetically to the church about issues of importance related to Indigenous peoples and to assist, encourage and challenge the church to live out healing and reconciliation. The council has grown over the last two decades from a collection of ministries with a common purpose into, as of 2021, a standing committee of the General Assembly.

The council is comprised of eight member ministries that send representatives to meetings as well as two members at large appointed by the General Assembly. It may also appoint resource people to assist with its work. The eight ministries within the council are Cedar Tree Ministries (Vancouver Island, British Columbia), Edmonton Urban Native Ministries (Edmonton, Alberta), Hummingbird Ministries (Vancouver, British Columbia), Kenora Fellowship Centre (Kenora, Ontario), Mistawasis Memorial Church (Mistawasis, Saskatchewan), Place of Hope Indigenous Church (Winnipeg, Manitoba), Saskatoon Native Circle Ministry (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan) and Winnipeg Inter-City Missions (Winnipeg, Manitoba). The work of the council focuses on Indigenous peoples, strengthening relationships between Indigenous people and the church, promoting Indigenous ministries and Indigenous justice. It is working with the church to become grounded in self-determination and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, but it notes that both the council and the church are still learning what self-determination means in this context and that further discussions will be needed.

THE WORK OF THE COUNCIL SINCE THE 2022 GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The council met four times between June 2022 and February 2023; three of those meetings were virtual and one was in-person at the Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre outside of Winnipeg. The in-person meeting was a time to re-connect as a council, as it was the first in-person meeting since before the pandemic. There, the council had time to consider issues as well as hear teachings given by an Indigenous Elder who is the Keeper of the Circle at Sandy Saulteaux.

Among the themes the council discussed at its meetings were: Indigenous spirituality, the needs of the various ministries within the council and the possibility of a service of lament to highlight the work of reconciliation needed within the church to mourn the harm the church caused to Indigenous people. The council also gave feedback on a draft text of a Covenant of Reconciliation (which is Call to Action 46 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission); connected with the Associate Secretary of Ministry and Vocation in the Life and Mission Agency regarding the possibility of alternative paths to ordination for Indigenous people within The Presbyterian Church in Canada and gave feedback on grant applications for ministries seeking to work with Indigenous people.

OVERTURE NO. 15, 2022 (A&P 2022, p. 335–36)

Re: Repatriation of the Manitou/Iniskim Stone

The council also consulted with staff of the Life and Mission Agency regarding Overture No. 15, 2022 re repatriation of the Manitou/Iniskim Stone, which was referred the Life and Mission Agency in consultation with the National Indigenous Ministries Council. After hearing from the Moderator, Bob Faris, who spoke about his visit with Indigenous Elders involved in the movement to return the stone, the council and agency staff affirmed the vital importance of returning artefacts stolen from Indigenous communities as part of the process of reconciliation. The council notes as well that Article 12 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which The Presbyterian Church in Canada has recognized as a framework for reconciliation, also recognizes the right of Indigenous peoples to have all such artefacts be repatriated. The council therefore recommended that The Presbyterian Church in Canada express its support of the Manitou Stone being returned and contribute to the funds for doing so. This recommendation is part of the Life and Mission Agency's report to General Assembly (see Recs. LMA-008 and LMA-009, Life and Mission Agency Committee, p. 152).

Recommendation NIM-001 (amended, p. 28)

That, as a matter of urgency, congregations, ministries, colleges, camps, presbyteries, the national office, archives and the Presbyterian Church Heritage Centre examine their holdings to ensure they have no Indigenous cultural or spiritual artefacts taken without informed consent and if they do, that they are repatriated.

THE ONGOING CRISES THAT COUNCIL MINISTRIES FACE IN THEIR MINISTRIES: A TAPESTRY OF SORROW AND DESPAIR SEEKING HOPE AND LOVE

A regular part of the council meetings is a sharing circle discussing the ongoing crises faced by the ministries, as well as the successes experienced. At the meetings in February and March of 2023, council members shared the particular crises they are facing, now three years into the pandemic.

Ministries spoke of the profound and ongoing effects of intergenerational trauma. Increased barriers, stemming from the pandemic, to accessing funding and for people to access healing programs were also highlighted. Death and bereavement in communities – whether from illness, violence or substance-related issues – was also a theme shared among the ministries of the council. The council named the following issues facing members:

- Core funding issues and lack of grant funds for administrative and staffing costs
- Capacity development – staffing issues, educational resources
- Mental health resources for staff, elders, youth and adults
- Facility and safe space deficiencies
- Need for land-based and healing initiatives
- Ministry members of the NIMC are often first responders in crisis and this takes a toll
- Lack of transportation enabling people to access programs, difficulty connecting people in need of a program with the program itself
- Lack of a working road (so lack of access to do programs)
- Death from COVID-19 and bereavement
- Ministering to Indigenous people while also dealing with personal impacts of colonization
- COVID-19 compounding marginalized individuals' existing barriers
- Complex poverty
- Colonial trauma, intergenerational trauma

Council members submitted written responses as well, and excerpts from those are included here in the report as they give voice and truth to the list above:

“Our mainly young Indigenous people, who are living the intergenerational trauma effect, are in great jeopardy with lack of supports and services. Many of the young people we serve have been gravely impacted by the pandemic and ensuing drug and mental health crisis which has led to numerous overdoses and life impacting negative results. We have a responsibility of reaching out and offering life promotion. Time is of the essence.”

“The issues that face the community are very delicate matters...there have been many deaths in the community in the past year. The types of deaths will give you some idea of what kind of healing programs need to be offered in this ministry. We have seen deaths from suicide and gang violence. It is very sad to watch families who need to grieve at wakes and funerals but first they have to get over the shock. There are also cases of domestic violence and police and ambulances are slow to respond because of the isolation of the community and the lack of such resources in the province...Just recently the Elders of the community have been told that Elder’s care and homecare have been cancelled due to the shortage of funds in the healthcare system. This puts a strain on the large families who are already struggling to make ends meet.”

“Poverty [among program participants] makes accessing programs difficult regardless of free program status.... Transportation costs including bus fare, vehicle, etc. can impact people’s ability to access healing programs.”

“Some find the truth about Canada’s dark history hard to come to grips with. The purposeful ignorance towards such an issue that bestows shame and guilt is nothing one wants to deal with directly. This attitude feels arrogant towards the affected ministries in family with the same church where these issues happened (genocide, residential school, land holdings etc.). In many ways, the ignorance to our truth as Indigenous leaders in ministry within the Presbyterian Church of Canada leave us feeling betrayed and ignored. This is an issue not all want to come to terms with, but it’s an issue in which we have to deal with amongst our ministries and some, for ourselves.”

The complexity and urgency of the many issues facing ministries within the National Indigenous Ministries Council highlight the immense challenges as well as the vital role ministries play within communities. There is need for increased support of the ministries as they do this work.

UNMARKED GRAVES AND 30 YEARS SINCE CONFESSING THE CHURCH’S ROLE IN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

On Tuesday, February 21, 2023, Tseshaht First Nation released findings from their search of the former site of Alberni Residential School. Alberni was one of the schools operated by The Presbyterian Church in Canada until 1925 and thereafter by the United Church of Canada. The nation announced that they were able to verify 67 deaths of students at the school through a detailed search of records and that ground penetrating radar and other geophysical research identified 17 possible unmarked graves on the areas of the former site they were able to search. There are more areas of the grounds yet to be searched and so further unmarked graves may still be located.

The council notes that 2024 will mark 30 years since The Presbyterian Church in Canada made confession of its sin in operating residential schools. As there is now greater understanding of the profound harm these institutions caused and continue to cause, to generations of Indigenous people, the National Indigenous Ministries Council believes it is time for The Presbyterian Church in Canada to give a renewed apology that takes a fuller account of what survivors have said and all the church has learned. The council notes in particular that this call for a new apology is in line with one of the Calls to Truth and Justice that Tseshaht First Nation made when they released their findings of the search of the former grounds of Alberni residential school.

This renewed apology need not replace the 1994 Confession, but would affirm the church's ongoing commitment to reconciliation, as well as acknowledging in repentance its deeper understanding of the profound harm residential schools caused. Developing a communication strategy to ensure the renewed apology is heard in all the places it needs to be heard will be vital. The council recommends that the group that would draft the renewed apology be comprised of two to three people named by the National Indigenous Ministries Council; two to three people named by the Life and Mission Agency; and two to three people named by the Assembly Council.

In light of all the above, the words of survivors and the need to continue on The Presbyterian Church in Canada's path of repentance and reconciliation, the National Indigenous Ministries Council makes the following recommendation.

Recommendation NIM-002 (amended, p. 29)

That The Presbyterian Church in Canada develop a renewed apology for its role in colonization and in the operation of residential schools, to be presented to the 2024 General Assembly.

Mary Fontaine
Convener

Allyson Carr
Secretary