

An excerpt from “The United Church of Canada’s Response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action (June 2021)”

<https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/ucc-response-trc-calls.pdf> pages 6-9

This document deals specifically with the fourteen Calls to Action that call for specific action from the United Church of Canada. These four “calls” deal with the cemeteries/gravesites at the former Indian Residential Schools.

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.

On a related Call to Action, on 30 September 2019 the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation launched the National Student Memorial Register online at memorial.nctr.ca. The United Church issued a Memorial Prayer for Children of This Land to accompany reading of the register.

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 will, where appropriate, work in cooperation with Indigenous communities and the federal government in any further initiatives. These matters are under discussion at the regular meetings of the parties to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) which the United Church attends.

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 has been designated a provincial heritage resource. In 2017, a monument was erected at the graves of four students buried in the Red Deer City cemetery. The former Assiniboine Presbytery coordinated 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.

For more information, contact the Reconciliation and Indigenous Justice Animators in the Aboriginal Ministries and Indigenous Justice Unit of the General Council Office:

Sara Stratton sstratton@united-church.ca 1.800.268.3781 ext 2742
or Lori Ransom lransom@united-church.ca 1.800.268.3781 ext 3564