

Interfaith speakers work to heal wounds exposed by TRC

Marie Wilson recalls recently walking through Spain's popular Camino de Santiago – or 'Way of St. James' – pilgrimage route, and taking note of the beautiful Camino wilderness.

For her, it was a way of healing from another, gruelling pilgrimage she made – a seven-year journey that she spent serving as a commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

"The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been for me, and I think for Canada in its own way, its own kind of pilgrimage," said Wilson, speaking to more than 150 attendees at the annual North American Interfaith Network Conference, July 31.

"It was a pilgrimage of healing, both for individuals and for our country."

Wilson spoke about her experiences during the TRC and how they had affected her emotionally and spiritually. Hearing hundreds of accounts of abuse and trauma suffered by former residential school students made the work "heartbreaking" and ultimately "spiritually torturous," she said.

More than 150,000 First Nations, Metis and Inuit children were taken from their parents and sent to 150 residential schools. Many were physically, mentally and sexually abused, and at least 4,000 children died.

From 2009 to 2015, the TRC collected over 70,000 statements from survivors of the Canadian government's residential school system, which was aimed at assimilating Indigenous people. The schools were operated by four Christian churches, including Catholic religious orders.

While there has been progress in reconciliation efforts between the churches and residential school survivors, Wilson says that more work needs to be done in educating individual parishes on the work of the TRC.

"I think at the congregational level, it's very inconsistent. Some congregations have been well briefed and well engaged and are very active, and for others, it's like it's almost new for them."



Stephen Kakfwi Chris Berthelot, Grandin Media

Wilson was joined by Stephen Kakfwi, her husband and former premier of the Northwest Territories. Kakfwi also shared his own experiences as a survivor who spent eight years in a residential school.

Through song and music, Kakfwi shared his experiences of physical and sexual abuse while in the school. But while he lived with the trauma for years afterward, he also found the strength to forgive.

“Some of us in residential school never got beyond the pain and incredible suffering that we went through. It is a very difficult thing to do, to forgive.” said Kakfwi.

“(But) I’m still standing, I’m still here. I’m learning to smile and be at peace.”



Doug Currie Chris Berthelot, Grandin Media

Doug Currie, a United Church member from Grande Prairie, Alta., said faith-based communities play an integral role in continuing the reconciliation efforts sparked by the TRC.

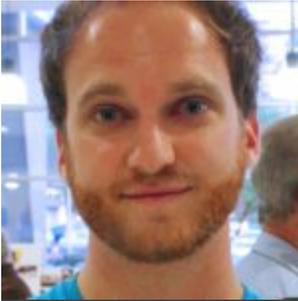
“Specifically, Christian faith-based communities were a major part of residential schools, so they have to take major responsibility for reaching out,” said Currie.

As a pilgrimage, TRC leaders and participants journeyed together and shared their grief and pain, as well as their forgiveness and – in the case of government and faith leaders – repentance.

But the path of healing isn’t complete.

The TRC released 94 “calls to action,” ways that the government and other sectors of society can further the reconciliation process, something that Wilson says is a Canadian responsibility.

“Reconciliation, and the challenges and harms created by the residential schools were not an ‘Indian’ problem – as the government sometimes wrote – or an Indigenous problem, but a Canadian problem,” she said.



Johnny Martin Chris Berthelot, Grandin Media

Johnny Martin, a Muslim conference attendee from Phoenix, Arizona, said hearing Wilson and Kakfwi talk about their experiences was enlightening – and unsettling.

“I’m very aware that these types of conversations are not happening in my country, or certainly at least not to the degree that they should be,” said Martin, adding that the interfaith movement can help heal. “When you have people from different traditions coming together, there’s a whole new type of healing that’s possible. It’s not just healing internally, as a member of whatever community you’re from.”

Wilson recalls her own moment of reconciliation with the TRC, while walking the Camino.

Wilson placed stones at the foot of the Cruz de Hierro, the highest peak of the Camino and an important milestone marked with a tall iron cross. Pilgrims often place stones at the weathered marker.

She placed stones for family, friends and a heart-shaped one in honour of the thousands of children who died in residential schools. Wilson says she found her peace in front of that cross.

“From that moment on, the wind whipped my eyes and finally helped me cry tears held back through many years of our TRC work. To cry, and cry, on and off all day through that splendour of Camino wilderness.”

The North American Interfaith Network is the oldest volunteer-based interfaith network in North America. The theme for this year’s conference is Pilgrimage: Journeys of Discovery.