

The Mennonite Peacemaker Myth: Reconciliation without Truth-Telling?

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ABSTRACT

White settler Mennonites in Canada are widely recognized for their commitment to peace work and have led several initiatives to stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples. However, Mennonites in Canada have not compiled documentation on their own involvement in Indian Residential Schools, as requested of churches in Call to Action 59 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Based on an investigation of archival materials from Mennonite missionaries and employing critical race theories, this article examines the discordance between Mennonite commitment to reconciliation and the neglect of truth-telling about their own tradition regarding Indian Residential Schools.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada was established in 2008 as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) in order to provide a space for survivors of Indian Residential Schools to share their experiences in schools operated by Christian churches and the Canadian government, and for these institutions to be held accountable for their role in cultural genocide.¹ In 2015, the TRC produced its final report, which includes 94 Calls to Action, two of which are specifically addressed at

¹ “Cultural genocide” includes the following elements as stated in Article 8 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP): “1. Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture. 2. States shall provide effective mechanisms for prevention of, and redress for: (a) Any action which has the aim or effect of depriving them of their integrity as distinct peoples, or of their cultural values or ethnic identities; (b) Any action which has the aim or effect of dispossessing them of their lands, territories or resources; (c) Any form of forced population transfer which has the aim or effect of violating or undermining any of their rights; (d) Any form of forced assimilation or integration; (e) Any form of propaganda designed to promote or incite racial or ethnic discrimination directed against them.” *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (United Nations, 2008), 5. https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf.

churches. In this article I will focus on number 59:

We call upon church parties to the Settlement Agreement to develop ongoing education strategies to ensure that *their* respective congregations learn about *their church's role in colonization*, the history and legacy of residential schools, and why apologies to former residential school students, their families, and communities were necessary.”²

During the TRC's process, churches across denominations worked to retrieve archival materials and compile comprehensive reports on their involvement in the Residential schools. When I read the final report, I was surprised to learn that Mennonites, specifically those who operated Poplar Hill Residential School in Ontario, were included in the IRSSA.³ Until then, whenever I had inquired to Mennonite church leaders about Mennonite involvement in residential schools, I was assured that we were not involved.

What are the politics of this discordance? Why haven't prominent white settler Mennonite⁴ groups, regardless of denomination or geographical location, compiled a report on their involvement in residential schools, whether through the establishment and operation thereof or through the contribution of financial supports and volunteers? A brief search of the past decade of articles in national Mennonite magazines such as the *Canadian Mennonite* reveals the efforts of some Mennonite churches to engage in solidarity work with Indigenous peoples and education on the residential schools in general, but these pieces only briefly mention those operated by Mennonites from the US and Canada. Why are some white settler Mennonites engaging in reconciliation and denouncing the Doctrine of

² *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (Winnipeg, MB: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012). https://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf; my emphasis.

³ The IRSSA is the largest class action settlement in Canadian history. With a budget of \$60 million, the establishment of the TRC was one of the elements put in place through the IRSSA for the Canadian government to acknowledge the harms of the residential schools and to provide financial compensation and support to survivors and their families.

⁴ I employ “white settler Mennonite” in a similar way that feminist scholarship uses the social category of “men” to talk about forms of violence related to power constructed through gender and men, and in the way critical race theory employs the category of “white people” to talk about violence related to power constructed through race and whiteness.

Discovery, for example, but not naming and examining the theological and social norms of traditions that contributed to the harms perpetrated by Mennonites in residential schools? These are among the questions that propelled my research. I contend that white settler Mennonites in Canada have jumped too hastily into efforts toward solidarity and reconciliation (i.e., peacemaking) and have barely begun the truth-telling aspect of the TRC. This undermines the work of solidarity because it is deceitful and disingenuous, whether intended that way or not.

Assumptions and Methods of This Study

This article takes a first step in addressing Call to Action 59. I begin by reflecting on how Mennonite involvement in residential schools haunts us.⁵ The frameworks of haunting and spectrality that I use provide a way to speak about voices and experiences that are silenced in Mennonite discourses but continue to interrupt dominant narratives, questioning and challenging their legitimacy. I suggest that white settler Mennonite peace theology in North America is largely haunted by the avoidance of our involvements in residential schools, and that therefore our efforts at reconciliation are haunted by shirking our responsibility in truth-telling. I examine the correspondence of Mennonite missionaries in Ontario, and employing the work of critical race theorists I identify some of their paternalistic and racist attitudes. Finally, to begin charting the dynamics of discordance between efforts at reconciliation and avoidance of truth-telling, I draw on Paulette Regan's notion of "the peacemaker myth,"⁶ which resonates with Mennonite theological commitments to peace and nonviolence.

While there are significant historical differences between the white settler Mennonites in Canada and those who came from the US for missionary work, I address Mennonites collectively for specific methodological purposes. My premise is that all white settler Mennonites in North America

⁵ When I use "us" and "we," I am referring to membership of diverse white settler Mennonites in North America within a common denomination. I recognize that there are significant historical, geographical, social, and theological differences even among Caucasian Mennonites in Canada and the US. I take self-identification as a Mennonite to be a sufficient definition of "Mennonite" for the purposes of this article.

⁶ Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver, BC: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 2010).

are involved in social relations of power and benefit from racial privileges. In 2010 Mennonite Church Canada resolved to acknowledge “that destructive individual attitudes, such as paternalism, racism, and superiority are still present among us, [and that] we as Mennonite Church Canada congregations and as individuals will seek renewed opportunities to walk with Aboriginal people of Canada, opening our hearts, minds, and ears to engage the pain resulting from the legacy of the Residential Schools.”⁷ Similarly, Living Hope Native Ministries (formerly Northern Lights Gospel Mission, an organization that operated three residential schools in Ontario) issued an apology to survivors acknowledging harms done:

For the times when we physically inflicted pain, or added to the pain of your soul by our actions, we are sorry. For the times when we underestimated or ignored the impact on you of your separation from your family, we are sorry. For the times when our ignorance or negligence caused you to suffer additional emotional and physical pain at the hands of other students, we are sorry. For the times when school personnel were not properly screened, and when personnel were not adequately trained to relate to you in culturally appropriate ways, we are sorry. For the times that we acted as though we were culturally superior to you, we are sorry. For the ways in which we cooperated with the national plan to force your assimilation into Canadian society, we are sorry.⁸

All white settler Mennonites are complicit in the racism and paternalism perpetuated by settler colonialism in Canada. When these forms of oppression are linked with certain theological commitments and socio-ethical practices, forms of violence both within Mennonite communities and in relation to Indigenous peoples go largely unchallenged. I seek to begin to interrogate dominant Mennonite theo-ethics (i.e., narrow definitions of peace and violence) by drawing on missionary correspondence and critical

⁷ Resolution from Christian Witness Council, quoted in Deborah Froese, “Sharing the pain of the Indian Residential School Legacy,” Mennonite Church Canada: <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/news/releases/2010/07/Release14.htm>, accessed March 19, 2019.

⁸ Living Hope Native Ministries, “Truth and Reconciliation,” <https://www.lhnm.org/truth-and-reconciliation/>, accessed July 29, 2019.

social theories. This methodological choice accounts for my decision not to focus on historical differences between various Mennonite groups. Indeed, as Edith von Gunten, former co-director of Native Ministries at Mennonite Church Canada, has noted, while Mennonite Church Canada did not operate residential schools, “[i]n the eyes of the general public, ‘a Mennonite is a Mennonite’ and there are no distinctions between geographical locations or denominational affiliation.”⁹

Haunting

There was something else in the room with us. That was the feeling I had walking through the Mohawk Institute Residential School in the Haudenosaunee territory that Canada refers to as Brantford, Ontario. I had it again when looking through archives of yearbooks from the Mennonite-operated Poplar Hill Residential School—a feeling that there is more than meets the eye. This is the feeling of being haunted.¹⁰ As a first-generation white settler Mennonite in Manitoba, I am haunted by the participation of my people in the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples of the land we settled on. For years as the TRC unfolded, I inquired of Mennonite church leaders about our involvement. I was told that while we settled on stolen land, we were ignorant of the dispossession that made this possible,¹¹ and our involvement wasn’t nearly as bad as that of other churches. Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling of being haunted. Thus, my research began with my situated experience and social location. However, it did not start with just a feeling but rather with a hermeneutic of suspicion cultivated through feminist theory and theology, and critical social theories—the knowledge that things are not always what they seem, that narratives are invested in securing specific identities, relations, and futures, and that there is something at stake in every discourse.

Avery Gordon writes that “haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities.”¹² This feeling led me to investigate what

⁹ Froese, “Sharing the pain of the Indian Residential School Legacy.”

¹⁰ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008).

¹¹ By “we” I refer to white settler Mennonites and the social power that people inhabiting these social locations hold.

¹² Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.

it is “in the room with us.” In many ways my research followed ghosts: tracking thin threads, footnotes, and secondhand conversations, and leafing through archival documents to decipher traces of truth between dense lines of church documents and correspondence filled with respectability politics and administrative jargon. How does one situate a specter of colonialism in the din of “settler futurity”?¹³ As Gordon explains:

Following ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look. It is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a counter memory, for the future.¹⁴

What dominant narratives circulate in Mennonite memories? What narratives, theological virtues, and ethical norms are remembered and recirculated in the Mennonite socio-theological imaginary? What are the narratives of truth and reconciliation? What are the absent presences, the specters? These are questions we must consider if we allow ourselves to be haunted by our role in the violence of settler colonialism.

Mennonites and Indian Residential Schools

The church denominations that operated residential schools were Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, United, Baptist, and “a Mennonite ministry [that] operated three schools in northwestern Ontario in the 1970s and 1980s.”¹⁵ The Mennonite-operated school named in the TRC final report

¹³ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1.1 (2012): 1-40. These authors use “settler futurity” to refer to how both structures and interpersonal relations of power are invested in securing the future of settlers over that of Indigenous peoples.

¹⁴ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 22.

¹⁵ *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, 56. http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Honouring_the_Truth_Reconciling_for_the_Future_July_23_2015.pdf

is Poplar Hill Residential School, which operated from 1962 to 1989.¹⁶ The report states that “Schools run by the Mennonite or Anabaptist community of churches were added to the Settlement Agreement after it came into force.”¹⁷ It includes a statement signed by the Evangelical Mennonite Conference, Brethren in Christ Canada, Mennonite Church Canada, Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, and Mennonite Central Committee Canada.¹⁸

As already noted, Mennonite organizations in Canada have not submitted a comprehensive report of their involvement in residential schools to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR). This is in part because the aforementioned conferences of Mennonites themselves did not operate such schools and the three schools in Ontario (including Poplar Hill) were operated by Mennonite missionaries from the US. Overall, Mennonites from both countries operated, funded, and volunteered at three residential schools in northwestern Ontario (Poplar Hill, Stirland Lake, and Crystal Lake), two day schools in Manitoba (Pauingassi and Bloodvein), and Montreal Lake Children’s Home in Timber Bay, Saskatchewan.

The three Ontario residential schools were operated under the auspices of Northern Lights Gospel Mission (NLGM), an organization founded by Irwin and Susan Schantz, Mennonite missionaries from Pennsylvania. NLGM established their headquarters in Red Lake Ontario in 1952.¹⁹ Here I want to give a sense of the attitudes with which white settler Mennonite missionaries approached Indigenous peoples. The first excerpt, published in the NLGM newsletter to constituents and supporters, contains a missionary’s assessment of the convertibility of Indigenous peoples at Flag Island:

We find three distinctive classes of people here among the people of the bush. [. . .]

First Class. These are our elder people from the forties on up. In appearance there is little difference from the rest of the tribe. But their thinking is anything but rational. They have been modeled in the days of the medicine man. [. . .]

¹⁶ Ibid., 359.

¹⁷ Ibid., 378.

¹⁸ Ibid., 393-95.

¹⁹ Mary Horst, *A Brief History of Northern Lights Gospel Mission* (Canada: NLGM, 1977), 5.

Second Class. These are the young braves. Friendly almost to the point of equality. [. . .] They think in terms of progress. They realize the importance of seeing their children educated. [. . .] In spiritual things they realize their old tribal traditions could not meet the needs of the hungry hearts. [. . .] Yet these minds and hearts must be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. [. . .]

Third Class. Our hope. No wonder Jesus said, “Suffer the little children and forbid them not to come unto me.” Like clay in the hands of a potter, so are these innocent ones. Unspoiled, fallow, ready to be planted, and what a blessed privilege we have to sow the Word of God.²⁰

In addition to the evident colonial superiority complex, religious conversion and cultural assimilation through education are regarded as necessities for Indigenous peoples, and as something that the more “rational” younger people recognize and welcome, rather than a result of colonial pressure to assimilate.

Other missionaries saw some of the negative effects that assimilation efforts were having on Indigenous communities but remained entirely unself-reflexive about it. In a 1962 NLGM newsletter, David, Elva, and Lynn Burkholder wrote this from Pikangikum: “The transition from the old Indian culture to that of the white man’s is being forced upon today’s Indians, but not without problems of readjustment on their part.”²¹ Similarly, as Mary Horst records in her brief history of NLGM: “Technical progress and modern civilization have made definite inroads into the northern communities and this has meant improved living conditions for the Indian people. At the same time it has had an upsetting influence on their way of life, affecting particularly the young people as they try to find their place in a white man’s world.”²²

A common thread running through the newsletters is an emphasis

²⁰ Paul Stoll to Alvin Frey, January 1963, *Northern Lights Gospel Mission Newsletter*, NLGM fonds, Mennonite Archives of Ontario, XV-10.2 (hereafter NLGM fonds, MAO).

²¹ David, Elva, and Lynn Burkholder, May 1962, NLGM fonds, MAO.

²² Horst, *A Brief History*, 14-15.

on saving souls and spiritual warfare against traditional Indigenous cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices. After a house burned down in Deer Lake, missionary Alma Halteman reflects: “Yes, we do everything humanly possible to rescue someone from a burning house. Let’s be in such earnest to save souls from eternal destruction.”²³ After the funeral of a six-month-old baby at Poplar Hill, Lydia Hochstedler wonders: “The grief stricken parents have had this experience three times. Why don’t they turn to the Lord? We must pray more!”²⁴ Missionaries Paul and Mary Stoll request intercessory prayers through their letter from Lake of the Woods: “We have a tremendous burden for the lost here especially the Indian people. Please pray for us and with us for a harvest of souls.”²⁵ Norman and Dorothy Schantz, missionaries at Grassy Narrows, conclude that “[t]his past year three Indian men died, because they were taken captive by Satan at his will, supposedly by a curse. . . . intercession could change these conditions.”²⁶ David King wrote from Grassy Narrows, asking supporters to “continue to pray for the work and ministry among the Indian people. Prayer is a very vital but little used weapon in our warfare against Satan.”²⁷

In these letters, the writers express a strong connection between salvation and suffering, i.e., suffering occurs when one turns away from God but is relieved through salvation. Ralph and Tillie Halteman at North Spirit Lake express the causal perspective on sin and suffering this way: “The Bible says the heart is wicked, so if [the Indigenous people] would give their lives over to the Lord Jesus who delivers them from sin, the heart trouble would flee. These people have a religion that does not deliver them from sin, therefore the heart trouble will continue.”²⁸ Beatrice Benner from Grassy Narrows reflects a similar attitude: “Then God looked upon all His other sheep still outside the safety of His fold. His heart ached for them as the grouped and stumbled about. He saw them yielding again and again to strong drink. He permitted the disabling of their transportation vehicles to and from

²³ Alma Halteman, January 1964, NLGM fonds, MOA.

²⁴ Lydia Hochstedler, January 1963, NLGM fonds, MOA.

²⁵ Paul and Mary Stoll, March 1963, NLGM fonds, MOA.

²⁶ Norman and Dorothy Schantz, March 1963, NLGM fonds, MOA.

²⁷ David King, April 1963, NLGM fonds, MOA.

²⁸ Ralph and Tillie Halteman, January 1964, NLGM fonds, MOA.

town, sickness, and close calls to death, to remind them of His sovereignty.”²⁹ One letter even suggests prayer as a solution to domestic abuse: “In need of your prayers: [For] Sister Annie, for a forgiving spirit. Her husband Charlie, for victory in controlling his temper, and to show love instead of wrath.”³⁰ Theologically, these letters portray Mennonite missionaries as the source of hope for Indigenous peoples. The emphasis on conversion to Christianity partnered with the Mennonites’ racism and paternalism is striking but not surprising, given the history of residential schools documented by survivors and other churches.

Throughout their work in Indigenous communities, missionaries were highly regarded by their constituencies. Like their international counterparts, they were seen as going directly into the “heart of darkness,” sacrificing their comfortable lives in order to “rough it” in the wilderness in faithfulness to Jesus.³¹ Still today, in my own white settler Mennonite circles, those missionaries deemed more culturally sensitive than others are idealized as exemplary disciples of Jesus. Overall, however, the missionary work, whether culturally sensitive or overtly paternalistic, depends on a notion of superiority—the assumption that white Christians have something that Indigenous peoples do not have and that it is something they need, namely to be saved from eternal hell. For the missionaries this assumption is displayed primarily through a notion of benevolence, which I will return to later.

The Mennonite “Race to Innocence”³²

When I talk about my research with other white settler Mennonites, I receive a mixture of responses—usually surprise, incredulity, curiosity, and sometimes disdain. The most common response is, “I didn’t know Mennonites ran residential schools.” This suggests a mixture of naiveté, ignorance, negligence, and defensiveness in addressing our complicity in Canada’s colonial violence. Although many white settler Mennonites

²⁹ Beatrice Benner, January 1964, NLGM fonds, MOA.

³⁰ William Moyer and family, January 1963, NLGM fonds, MOA.

³¹ Horst, *A Brief History*, 4.

³² Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack, “The Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations among Women,” *The Journal of Gender, Race & Justice* (1998): 335-52.

across Canada who attended national TRC events and churches at local and conference levels have taken steps to stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples, by and large it is not evident that we recognize ourselves as perpetrators of the violence associated with the settler-colonialism of Mennonite-operated residential schools. Neil Funk-Unrau merely mentions Mennonite involvement in residential schools and Mennonite colonization of Manitoba in his chapter “Small Steps Toward Reconciliation: How do we get there from here?” in *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry*.³³ Mennonite Church Canada published three special issues of *Intotemak* including important reflections, confessions, and calls to responsibility. Mennonite-operated residential and day schools, however, are strangely not mentioned.³⁴ Where are the truth-telling aspects of “truth and reconciliation”?

In a recent article in the *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Anthony Siegrist provides a detailed overview of NLGM’s missionary work in Ontario, drawing on some of the same archival sources as I have used. Unfortunately, he avoids making moral claims about Mennonite complicity in the violence of settler colonialism, focusing instead on his conclusion that “reducing the lives of all involved [in the residential schools] to either passive victims or malevolent perpetrators is a political act more than a historical reality.”³⁵ What Siegrist fails to recognize is the politics of this statement itself. In this case, the pursuit of nuance—distinguishing between politics and history—avoids wrestling with how Mennonite involvement in residential schools haunts us. Emphasizing nuanced perspectives on violent histories benefits the victors—those already holding the most social power. Writing history is always a political act.

³³ Neil Funk-Unrau, “Small Steps Toward Reconciliation: How do we get there from here?” in *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry*, ed. Steve Heinrichs (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2013).

³⁴ *Wrongs to Rights: How Churches Can Engage the United Nations Declaration 75-84 on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, special Issue of *Intotemak*, ed. Steve Heinrichs (Winnipeg, MB: Mennonite Church Canada, 2016); *Yours, Mine, Ours: Unravelling the Doctrine of Discovery*, special Issue of *Intotemak*, ed. Cheryl Woelk and Steve Heinrichs (Winnipeg, MB: Mennonite Church Canada, 2016); *Quest for Respect: The Church and Indigenous Spirituality*, special issue of *Intotemak*, ed. Jeff Friesen and Steve Heinrichs (Winnipeg, MB: Mennonite Church Canada, 2017).

³⁵ Anthony Siegrist, “Part of the Authority Structure’: An Organizational History of Mennonite Indian Residential Schools in Ontario,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 93, no.1 (January 2019): 38.

Although the lack of knowledge about Mennonite involvement in residential schools is surprising, it is not unique to white settler *Mennonites* in North America. Whiteness and settler colonialism is something European Mennonites share with the rest of Euro-American society. As critical theorist Sara Ahmed has observed, “whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it, or those who get so used to its inhabitation that they learn not to see it.”³⁶ Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo observe that “being perceived as White carries more than a mere racial classification. It is a social and institutional status and identity imbued with legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges that are denied to others.”³⁷ White settler Mennonites benefit from the same social rights and privileges as other white settlers in Canada and the US. Sometimes described by Mennonite historians as an ethnic minority, many Mennonite refugees and immigrants—with their protestant work ethic and European social norms—assimilated to a North American culture of whiteness more easily than refugees and immigrants of color. White settler Mennonite attitudes towards Indigenous peoples and the “Other” more broadly were, and still are, more deeply aligned with white settler society than often acknowledged.

Sensoy and DiAngelo define racism in North America as “White/settler racial and cultural prejudice and discrimination, supported intentionally or unintentionally by institutional power and authority, and used to the advantage of Whites and the disadvantage of peoples of Color.”³⁸ While there are historical, theological, and social differences, for example, between Russian-German Mennonites in Manitoba and Swiss Mennonites from the US operating in northwestern Ontario, understanding how elements of settler colonialism—such as racism, sexism, classism, and

³⁶ Sara Ahmed, “A Phenomenology of Whiteness,” *Feminist Theory* 8 (2007): 157.

³⁷ Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 2017), 122. For critical race theories see Sherene Razack, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, W.E.B. Du Bois, Wendy Fletcher and Cathy Hogarth, and Andrea Smith. For theologians and ethicists who address the interlocking oppressions of Christian theology, settler-colonialism, and/or racism, see Traci West, Emilie Townes, Delores Williams, Kelly Brown Douglas, Andrea Smith, Laura Donaldson, James Cone, J. K. Carter, Willie Jennings, Robert Warrior, George Tinker, and Vine Deloria Jr.

³⁸ Sensoy and DiAngelo, 119.

paternalism—operate across Euro-American Mennonites allows us to see patterns of oppression that are otherwise overlooked.

A common temptation is to reach for stories of good relationships between Mennonites and Indigenous peoples in order to save face and to serve as counter-narratives to settler-colonial violence. Consider these examples: “My friend is Indigenous, so I’m not racist,” or “My church didn’t run a residential school,” or “I went to this reservation once and they said they liked the Mennonites.” Sensoy and DiAngelo counsel against the use of such anecdotal evidence: “[f]ocusing on exceptions or unanalyzed personal experiences prevents us from seeing the overall, societal patterns. While there are always exceptions to the rule, exceptions also illustrate the rule. [. . .] But the historical, measurable, and predictable evidence [in this case given by the TRC] is that this is an atypical occurrence.”³⁹ Following their lead, I encourage white settler Mennonites, myself included, to take up the practice of examining patterns as a crucial guide to engaging critical social analysis and understanding oppression. This practice is critical for truth-telling, social justice, and healing.

In 2010, *Canadian Mennonite’s* August 16 issue covered the opening TRC events in Winnipeg, Manitoba.⁴⁰ This issue was mailed to approximately 14,336 Mennonite homes and churches.⁴¹ Four correspondents covered the event well, and named each of the Mennonite-operated residential and day schools, and gave a brief overview.⁴² Somehow this knowledge had been lost amid the din of searching through church records and having national conversations about the TRC. Even diligent readers of *Canadian Mennonite* seem to have forgotten this part of our history; the frequency of ignorance of Mennonite involvement in residential schools that I encountered in

³⁹ Ibid., 12. They add: “Focusing on the exceptions also precludes a more nuanced analysis of the role these exceptions play in the system overall.”

⁴⁰ *Canadian Mennonite*, August 16, 2010.

⁴¹ Circulation numbers provided by Lisa Jacky, *Canadian Mennonite*, personal correspondence October 17, 2018. At time of writing there were approximately 200,000 Mennonites in Canada.

⁴² Evelyn Rempel Petkau, “How complicit are Mennonites in Residential School Abuse?” *Canadian Mennonite*, August 16, 2010, 4-7; Janet Plenert, “A first step towards healing,” *Canadian Mennonite*, August 16, 2010, 8-9; Deborah Froese, “MC Canada shares the pain of Indian Residential School legacy,” *Canadian Mennonite*, August 16, 2010, 9, 11; Rachel Bergen, “With God, all things are possible,” *Canadian Mennonite*, August 16, 2010, 11-12.

my research was unexpected. For some reason, our involvement was not committed to collective memory amidst engagement with the TRC.

Perhaps it is easier for white settler Mennonites to point to the atrocities committed by Catholic, Anglican, United, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist residential schools, since these have been the focus of the TRC and national efforts to educate about such schools. For example, a Mennonite church staff member once told me that our involvement was “not as bad” as that of other church denominations. This sense of “we were not as bad” establishes a hierarchy of innocence. Others insist on nuancing discussions of Mennonite contributions to the harms of settler colonialism by focusing on how Mennonite residential schools did try to support Indigenous identity. This is akin to asking that discussions on harms of the slave trade include discussions of “good” slave owners to provide a balanced perspective. Behind the desire for nuance is “the race to innocence,” rather than a willingness to let ourselves be haunted.

Indeed, Mennonite missionaries among Indigenous peoples in Canada are consistently portrayed by church leaders and constituents as more culturally sensitive than our denominational counterparts, and even radical for their time. However, in my experience in Mennonite churches, communities, and schools, I have noticed that prejudiced and racist views are prevalent. A common attitude is: “We came here as refugees with nothing and we made it, why can’t you?” This attitude arises from a fundamental attribution error: judging others by attributing behavior only to character contributes to the discriminatory systems of power that disenfranchised Indigenous people in the first place. Instead of responding with empathy to their trauma and suffering, many Mennonites respond defensively and judgmentally. This is counterintuitive, given the significance of suffering in white settler Mennonites’ collective memory.

Solidarity between people who experience different forms of oppression often fails because of “competing marginalities.” Sometimes when a group of people advocate for social change, they perceive other advocating groups as competition, even barriers to achieving their own aspirations for change. Groups can produce hierarchies of oppression, each vying for the position of most oppressed, most innocent, and therefore most legitimate in their appeal. This is “the race to innocence.” At best these “additive oppressions”

merely lead to an impasse, but at worst they perpetuate harm. Sherene Razack and Mary Louise Fellows draw on an alternative framework of interlocking oppressions that covers “relationships among hierarchical oppressions,” and highlights how “systems of oppression come to existence in and through one another so that class exploitation could not be accomplished without gender and racial hierarchies; imperialism could not function without class exploitation, sexism, and heterosexism, and so on.”⁴³

The race to innocence functions in dominant Mennonite narratives. First, prominent historical accounts and autobiographies of Mennonites during the Soviet era in Russia position Mennonites as innocent victims of a mercurial communist regime. While the Stalin era must certainly be condemned, only a handful of Mennonites have begun accounting for their own social location on the Ukrainian Steppes as settlers, some as wealthy landowners who exploited local peasants on their estates. Secondly, by focusing on certain forms of violence (military violence and state power) and certain forms of peacemaking (conscious objection, nonviolent direct action), Mennonites have neglected forms of violence in their own communities—the ways they are both contributors to peace and justice as well as perpetrators of violence, especially sexual violence and the silencing of survivors. This is well documented by such scholars as Marlene Epp, Carol Penner, Lydia Harder, Stephanie Krehbiel, Jay Yoder, and Hilary Scarscella. Thirdly, both Mennonite men and women produced a hierarchy with regard to Soviet Mennonite refugee women, who were seen as morally corrupt and therefore inferior (an example of sexism and misogyny). Finally, the ways Mennonites have perpetuated racist attitudes towards Indigenous peoples and participated in their cultural genocide have largely been ignored under the guise of innocence and through the legitimation of missionary work. The letters of Mennonite missionaries in Poplar Hill and other Indigenous communities in northwestern Ontario attest to this.

Mennonites and Call to Action 59

Throughout the 20th century, white settler Mennonites valued peace in response to suffering and violence, defined variously from nonresistance to nonviolent direct action. On the spectrum of dominant peace theologies,

⁴³ Fellows and Razack, “The Race to Innocence,” 335.

however, peace and violence are consistently defined within a church-world dualism such that the church is never seen as a perpetrator but only as a witness to an alternative way of being in a violent world. As Mennonite feminist theologians have demonstrated, this has prevented us from addressing violence in our churches and families, and against Indigenous people.

The TRC has challenged churches to recognize their role in maintaining the structures of settler colonialism, their hegemonic ontologies and epistemologies, and their theological and ethical norms. Some churches have begun the self-reflexive work. However, their primary focus has been collecting and submitting records, and issuing official apologies. Few have taken up the Calls to Action directed specifically at churches, which would require significant changes in theologies, ethics, collective memories, education, and attention to our own histories of trauma and internal abuses of power. Perhaps we are so hesitant to attend to the specters in our archives because in the western literary imagination, ghosts are often portrayed as malevolent victims of violence seeking revenge. Perhaps we fear that we will be held accountable for our actions and for the benefits we enjoy from the actions of our forebears. However, this is the risk truth-telling requires.

Mennonites in Canada's Peacemaker Myth

Settler colonialism in the United States is often characterized as wild, lawless, and filled with mass removal of Indigenous people from their lands (e.g., the Trail of Tears) and outright massacres of entire villages (e.g., Wounded Knee, Sand Creek). By contrast, settler colonialism in Canada has narrated itself as peaceful, benevolent, generous, and orderly. Indeed, Canadian government treaties could be seen as the paragon of "benevolent" conquest, portrayed as peaceful, civilized discussions followed by unanimous agreement of terms. As historian William H. Katerberg points out, the Canadian mounted police, a prominent symbol of national identity, are "'keepers of the Queen's peace.' As such, they personify 'Canadian law and order – defined in the British North America Act by the motto 'peace, order, and good government' – [which] effectively forestalled the culture of gunplay and violence typical of the American West and its ideal, 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'"⁴⁴

⁴⁴ William H. Katerberg, "A Northern Vision: Frontier and the West in the Canadian and

But in reality, while Canada's colonization is differentiated from that of the US in some ways, it was also violent, as witness the Seven Oaks Massacre, the North-West Rebellions, and the execution of Louis Riel.⁴⁵ From more recent history, I would add land reclamation efforts at Oka, Ipperwash, and Caledonia, and the Highway of Tears in British Columbia, plus residential and day schools, and mission work in Indigenous communities.

As historian Richard Slotkin explains, the myth of Canada as a peacemaker is effective because “[t]he *moral* and political imperatives implicit in the myths are given as if they were the only possible choices for moral and intelligent human beings. . . . [Myths transform] secular history into a body of sacred and sanctifying legends.”⁴⁶ White settler Mennonites are uniquely suited to this peacemaker myth, easily assimilating into a national myth of benevolence towards its own citizens exemplified in such systems as national health care, religious and educational freedoms, an emphasis on international peacekeeping efforts, and a de-emphasis on military power (at least in comparison with the US). National heroes and sacred secular histories are replaced with the sacred texts, narratives, and martyrs that Mennonites have carried with them from place to place.

Apart from evangelical and charismatic influences among some Mennonites in North America, white settler Mennonites are generally perceived as people who profess their faith more through actions than through words. Organizations such as Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, and Christian Peacemaker Teams are faith-based humanitarian organizations. Similarly, Mennonite Church Canada and MCC missionaries are primarily sent to aid in community services and development, with evangelism included where and when appropriate. White Mennonite missionaries in Indigenous communities are no exception to this “peaceful” approach, characterized primarily by “witness”—a theo-ethic of discipleship based on the life, death, and teachings of Jesus. They have viewed themselves as benevolent, culturally sensitive, and faithful disciples

American Imagination,” in *One West, Two Myths II: Essays on Comparison*, eds. C. L. Higham and Robert Thacker (Calgary, AB: Univ. of Calgary Press, 2006), 66.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1900* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 19; my emphasis.

following God's calling, making them ideal partners in the operation of residential and day schools, and aiding assimilation through church-funded missionary efforts.⁴⁷

White settler Mennonites continue to do mission work in Indigenous communities in Canada today, usually through summer Bible camps and guest preachers. For ten years I volunteered with my church's youth group at a summer camp at Matheson Island and for three years with a different church's family camp in Pauingassi First Nation, both in Manitoba. Although we built some good relationships (from our perspective) with people in these communities and many of us found our assumptions and stereotypes challenged, we were ignorant of how our social power influenced these relationships and our work, especially theologically—something that has not yet been critically considered. In the 1990s and 2000s the paradigm of MCCanada's Indigenous Relations office changed from a "for them" to a "with them" policy. The reconceived model, called Partnership Circles, emphasizes that white settler Mennonite presence can only occur upon invitation from a community. While this is an important development, an invitation does not guarantee equal or equitable power relations, let alone truth and reconciliation. As the NLGM letters suggested, Indigenous communities who invited missionaries to educate their children did so under the duress of colonization: their way of life was being eradicated under settler colonialism and they sought to give their children a chance at surviving and thriving in the new world being imposed on them. An amendment to the Indian Act in 1920 made school attendance compulsory for Indigenous children, in stark contrast to claims by NLGM missionaries at MacDowell Lake:

Going to school is not compulsory for the Indian children, but more of them have the privilege of going to school than in times past. Some of the children can attend in the village where they live. Others leave home to go to boarding school. [. . .] Sending their children to boarding school at Poplar Hill is not an easy

⁴⁷ See Henry Neufeld, "From 'never a teacher' to 'why not?' Reluctant Teacher Recalls his Indian Day School Experience." *Canadian Mennonite*, September 19, 2018, 4; Menno Wiebe, "From Bloodvien to Crosslake: A 25 Year Synthesis," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 19 (2001): 13-24; Alvina Block, "Changing Attitudes: Relations of Mennonite Missionaries with Native North Americans 1880-2004," Ph.D. diss., University of Manitoba, 2006.

thing for these Christian parents at MacDowell Lake. However, they realize that it is the Lord's will and for the children's good, so they are resigned to it.⁴⁸

Central to the question of invitation is the question of moral agency, which can be addressed only by acknowledging social location. Only by examining the effects of social relations of power can we begin to see that invitations to settlers to operate schools or camps in Indigenous communities can be constrained by oppressive social conditions. Without critical power analysis, the Partnership Circles model risks perpetuating covert forms of settler colonialism under the guise of benevolent peacemaking. What is additionally troubling is the possibility for Canadian churches, white settler Mennonite churches and church organizations included, to absorb the TRC into the national peacemaking myth. Collecting and submitting records and offering official apologies is an important step for churches as a response to the TRC, but only a step. As Paulette Regan explains, “[t]he peacemaker myth is resilient and flexible. It is manifested today in a new discourse of reconciliation. Despite talk of reconciliation, the underlying structures and behavioural patterns of colonial violence that have shaped our relationship lie just beneath the surface.”⁴⁹ Regan is addressing public institutions and government agencies—and churches are no exception here. Without substantive theological and structural changes, churches risk reconstituting their history of shame and guilt through their contributions to TRC into a narrative of triumph and moral superiority, thus replicating the myth of settler benevolence—and Canada's peacemaking myth.

Conclusion

This article is only a step towards prodding Canadian white settler Mennonites to deeper, more critical reflection on, and engagement with,

⁴⁸ Omar, Emma Mae, and Wanda Helmuth, 1962, NLGM fonds, MAO. In 1920 the Indian Act was amended to state: “The department [of Indian Affairs] is thus enabled to establish a system of compulsory education at both day and residential schools.” Department of Indian Affairs Annual Report for 1920, Canada Sessional Papers, 1921. Reprinted in *Indian Residential Schools & Reconciliation: Teacher Resource Guide 11/12, Book 2* (Vancouver, BC: First Nations Education Steering Committee and First Nations School Association, 2015): www.fnesc.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/PUB-LFP-IRS11-12-DE-Pt2-2015-07-WEB.pdf, accessed October 10, 2018.

⁴⁹ Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 109.

the ways we are haunted by our involvement in residential schools and the broader aspects of settler colonialism. My primary concern is that our work of reconciliation and solidarity is undermined by neglecting to address harms caused by our missionary involvement, both by NLGM and Mennonite volunteers. The striking discordance between upholding Mennonite peace traditions and acknowledging the violence of settler colonialism calls for greater attention. More work is needed, especially regarding the social-theological-ethical norms and commitments of white settler Mennonites in relation to missionary work in Indigenous communities. Key questions for further consideration include these: What social norms or aspects of social location contributed to understanding the operation of residential schools as discipleship or benevolence? What theological commitments or myths undergird the understanding of white settler Mennonite involvement in residential schools and missionary work? How do we let ourselves be haunted by our role in the violence of residential schools? What does accountability require with regard to truth-telling and reconciliation?

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