

The next residential schools chapter: No truth, no reconciliation

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The hopes of many Canadians are riding on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that began operations on June 1.

The three commissioners - Mr. Justice Harry LaForme of the Ontario Court of Appeal, lawyer Jane Brewin Morley and health-care specialist Claudette Dumont-Smith - and their staff have been allocated \$60-million to accomplish a series of ambitious tasks over the next five years: acknowledge the residential school experiences and their impact, provide an appropriate place for former students to tell their stories, "promote awareness and public education of Canadians" about the schools, "and create as complete a historical record as possible" of the residential schools system.

If these goals are to be achieved, it is important that several key considerations be taken into account.

First and foremost, it is critical that the truth commission recognize that the residential schools story is one that involves many parties. Not only are members of the three aboriginal communities central to residential schooling history, but also people from the Christian community whose churches actually operated the schools, and the Canadian public, in whose name governmental people, both from the political and bureaucratic areas, acted. The residential schools story had three actors, and it is vital that people from all three of those sectors make their voices heard.

Why is it essential that all three actors from the past be involved as the commission carries out its work? Well, it will be impossible to assemble "as complete a historical record as possible" if one or more of the agents are excluded or choose not to participate. Former students who have positive, or partially favourable, memories of the schools need to have their stories heard. They have not been to this point. Former church workers in the schools also have recollections of the residential schools experience.

Reconciliation will be impossible without the participation of church members and representatives of the public, along with native students in the schools. The aboriginal community cannot bring about reconciliation by itself. All of us must be engaged if reconciliation is to be reached.

How can the commission ensure that all the actors in the residential schools story become involved? At the moment, the commission's mandate refers explicitly to "former students, their families and communities," and says that means must be found to ensure that "they come forward to the commission." But the commission must also find a way to let former school workers from the churches know they are wanted, and needed, as participants in the reconciliation process. Similarly, members of the general public with an interest in the subject must know that their input is also desired.

The most effective way of extending the commission's reach beyond the essential aboriginal participants is to approach the churches that ran the residential schools. All of them have networks of people experienced with the residential schools and interested in the healing process. If such people testify to what they know about residential schools, we will find at the end of the five-year

mandate that the commission has provided a more comprehensive, balanced historical account, and advanced the cause of reconciliation between non-native and aboriginal Canadians.

Conversely, if the commission's public or community events turn out to be solely a venue for the majority of former students who had only negative experiences, the results will be unfortunate. The small minority of students who had different memories will not want to step forward lest they appear to undermine their fellow students. Former workers from the schools, whose experience with public discussion of residential schooling to date is one of being beaten up, will similarly stay away from the process. The general public, which has mainly heard stories about abuse in the residential schools for the past 17 years, will turn off and tune out.

So, yes, the hopes of many are riding on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. How it serves as a forum for talking about the past will largely determine the degree of success it will enjoy over the next five years.

Jim Miller is the author of

Shingwauk's Vision: A History

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