



Leaders demand proof graves exist
Pastor claims he has physical evidence of human remains buried at old school

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Local First Nations leaders are calling on a long-time activist to come up with proof of sensational allegations made last week, concerning the location of grave sites at the former Alberni Indian Residential School site.

The school site is located on the traditional territory of Tseshaht First Nation. On Monday, chief councillor Les Sam said his nation will welcome a forensic investigation by qualified parties, with proper authority.

"If there is information that can confirm, we will be taking the lead on getting an investigation done," Sam said, adding that any forensic work would likely be done by RCMP. "Tseshaht will be working with the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council to come to some form of resolution on this issue."

Last week, former Alberni United Church pastor Kevin Annett, who now bills himself as Eagle Strong Voice, announced that a newly-created body known as the International Human Rights Tribunal into Genocide in Canada has evidence of 28 residential school gravesites across Canada, including a location 100 metres west of the present Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council office, which sits on Tseshaht First Nation property, at the site of the old school.

Annett has made similar inflammatory revelations since leaving the local church in the mid-1990s, but, speaking to the Times on Friday, the residential school crusader says he has physical proof.

"A year ago, we had a team of people who investigated the area behind the NTC office," Annett said. "They discovered a number of sink-holes, consistent with old grave sites."

That included anomalies in the soil and vegetation, he explained. Annett said the team did not conduct any digging. That would require a court order, in a site with overlapping jurisdictions. But they did map the area using GPS technology, he added.

"They're not a forensic team. They're a body recovery team from Vancouver, that goes in to locate bodies," Annett said. "When they heard what we were doing, they volunteered their time."

According to the tribunal, another site has been identified in the basement of the former residential school on Meares Island. The building is now part of the Kakawis Healing Centre.

Any search for human remains must be conducted with full consultation with Tseshaht, Sam said.

"Tseshaht is certainly not going to stand in the way of any investigation. We want to get to the bottom of this," he said. "But we're not going to allow people wandering around on our property

without proper monitoring."

Margaret Eaton is a counsellor who has worked extensively with sexual abuse victims, both children and adult survivors of residential schools. She's now acting as legal assistant to F.J. Scott Hall Law Corporation, which is handling the class action suit launched by residential school survivors.

Eaton believes Annett may be doing more harm than good with his scattergun revelations of past abuse.

"I haven't had any contact with him, but I've had lots of contact with survivors," she said, suggesting that the former pastor has lost a great deal of credibility since leaving the Valley.

"Annett doesn't even acknowledge the local survivors," Eaton said.

For those who are still dealing with the legacy of decades-old abuse, it's been difficult to get constructive attention. That's what makes Annett's sensational claims of mass murder even harder to deal with, she explained.

"Both my parents are survivors," Eaton said. Both were told repeatedly not to talk about what was done to them. Eaton said, when her father was required to testify in court, it was like being thrust back into childhood terror. But that is changing, with time and intensive counselling.

"Now, finally, some of the survivors are feeling safe enough to talk about it, and they've been validated, Eaton said.

Sam noted that, because Tseshaht people historically lived in close proximity to mainstream schools in the Alberni Valley, the proportion of members who attended Alberni Indian Residential School is lower than other nations.

"Many of our people only attended on a day-school basis," Sam said. "That's why we want to work closely with the NTC on this, because the other Nuu-chah-nulth nations has a higher proportion of their people in the school."

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