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Protest over native school victims disrupts worship

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ASHANTE INFANTRY
STAFF REPORTER

A small but determined group of protesters interrupted Palm Sunday services at St. Michael's Cathedral yesterday to demand national religious institutions disclose the burial sites of children who died at Indian residential schools.

"We come with heavy hearts because the spirits and bodies of more than 50,000 innocent aboriginal children who were abducted from their homes ... did not survive the tortures inflicted upon them during a 100-year reign of terror," said Carrie Lester, 47, reading from a prepared statement.

Lester was one of seven members of Friends and Relatives of the Disappeared: Indian Residential School Survivors and Victims who crashed the standing-room-only gathering just after 1 p.m. Wearing white sweatshirts splattered with mock bloodstains, three of them, including Lester, unfurled a banner in the midst of the church near Shuter and Bond Sts.

"This not the place for this," hissed some church-goers during Lester's three-minute speech that referenced beatings, forced abortion and starvation.

"Please ignore them," said a St. Michael's staffer as he called police on a cell phone.

It is estimated that 150,000 children were removed from their families and placed in residential schools where many suffered physical and sexual abuse, and the federal government has launched a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate.

Yesterday's "Rally of Lament" was in solidarity with the group's Vancouver arm to press the Catholic, Anglican and United Churches to return the remains of those who died in residential schools.

The protesters also want the Conservatives to hold a non-governmental public inquiry into the atrocities with international observers.

"I have responsibility as an aboriginal person to be involved even though I was not affected directly (by residential schools)," said group member Katherine Gandy, 22.

The brief demonstration wound up just as police arrived. The protesters were instructed to leave but were not arrested.

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