

EPISODE 5: RELIGION & THE CHURCH

EDITOR'S NOTE: This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity. For media inquiries related to *Survivors*, or to obtain a copy of this podcast and/or its transcripts for broadcast or educational purposes, please reach out to news@cjsw.com.

DISCLAIMER / CONTENT WARNING: Please be advised: the following program contains stories and accounts of true events from the lives of residential school survivors. Due to the sensitive subject matter, some participants decided to remain anonymous.

These testimonials may include accounts of physical and sexual abuse and may be triggering to some listeners. If you or someone you know is experiencing pain or distress as a result of the residential school experience, you're not alone. Please call the Residential School Crisis Line at 1-866-925-4419. They are there to help and they're available 24 hours a day.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: Oki nikyokowawaa. Kiitkanakyimatyinohpowawaa. Nohkkyistyikoyii nitakokapayanakippa kitawasinnonii. Anakaa asiksikkapoyiwaa. Anakaa siksikaityitapiwaa. Anakokaa siksikawaa kainaiwaa pikanii. Oki aniksyii matsyitopikskii. Anikaa innestyokakstyimanii. Siksikainnestyisinii. Anikyikokyawaa saahsiwaa sahsahsokitakiwaa. Anikyokyawaa nityiyanakipaa nohkakyistyiyii.

Welcome, my relatives. I'd just like to acknowledge the land that we reside in: the land of the Blackfoot-speaking nations at Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, and also, after Treaty Number 7, we also acknowledge Stoney Nakoda and Tsuut'ina. A rightful acknowledgement of the people and the land that we reside in.

CAMERON SIFERD: This is *Survivors*: an eight-episode podcast made in partnership with CJSW and the Department of Canadian Heritage, providing insight into the lived experience of residential school survivors and their families.

The residential school system ran across Canada from 1883 to 1996. Throughout its lifetime, over 150,000 Indigenous children were removed from their homes, stripped of their cultures and forced through a system created to destroy their senses of identity. The lasting negative impact of the residential school system continues to devastate communities of survivors.

My name is Cameron Siferd. I'm a Métis individual studying the topics of sociology and international Indigenous studies at the University of Calgary.

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GRACE HEAVY RUNNER / POKSIKAINAKI: Oki, hello, my name is Grace Heavy Runner. My Blackfoot name is Poksikainaki. I am from Kainai First Nation, Alberta. I'm a residential school survivor who attended the St. Mary's Residential School, which operated from 1898 to 1988. This is my story, but also the story of many.

CAMERON SIFERD: The residential school system ended under the control of the government. But it wasn't always this way. The government had partnered itself with different Christian denominations: the United Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Anglican Church, and the Catholic Church. Images of nuns walking up and down the rows of students are staples of the system you can see in textbooks, or with a Google search of the term "residential schools." The churches did not only help the government run the schools, but they were involved right from the beginning. They had their hands in the creation and maintenance of the rules, curriculum, practice, and staff from the establishment of the schools. Without question, the churches were complicit in generations of abuse, spiritual oppression, and the destruction of Indigenous identity.

It was common for the churches to fight tooth and nail to deny wrongdoings, including slander and shame of victims, or use of lawyers against those who tried to bring light on the truth of what happened. It is important to note that the criticisms of the church we are going to outline can't encompass every member or every experience. There are a significant number of children who found comfort and hold faith in the religion introduced to them or their families through the schools. A notable number of residential school students went further and pursued employment as nuns and priests becoming part of the system that engulfed their lives.

In addition, there are many stories of teachers, nuns, and priests who were genuinely supportive, caring and had the best interest of children at heart. Throughout many autobiographies and shared experiences, children had a favourite teacher, nun, priest, or caretaker. Sadly, these stories are often intertwined with further examples of abuses which were received, or in comparison into their particularly callous or infuriated coworkers. The concern of the involvement of religion in the residential school system focuses on the way these belief systems were imposed on indigenous people.

GRACE HEAVY RUNNER / POKSIKAINAKI: When I think back, I remember how religion played a big role when I attended the residential school. I felt so confused, especially at a very young age. I was brainwashed into thinking that my culture was



nothing, and religion was everything. You were shunned if you didn't believe in Jesus Christ or attended church, so I did everything to be part of the Catholic religion.

The residential school I attended had nothing to do with culture. There was no Blackfoot language spoken, or songs or ceremony. I attended mass and spent time with the nuns as much as possible. And in those days, the nuns didn't treat me or the other kids [badly]. Not that I know of. Although, when I went home on the weekends, my family members would tell me stories on how the nuns would hit them and punish them. I couldn't believe my ears on what I was hearing. And as time went on, now I understand. Now I know how destructive and abusive the nuns and priests were to my mother and father.

STEVE KOOTENAY-JOBIN / NATOYA PIIKSKI: Aba wathtech, oki, dadanast'ada, tawnshi, my name is Steve Kootenay-Jobin and I am Iyarhe Nakoda from Stoney Nation in Treaty 7 Territory. My traditional name is Natoya Piikski which translates to Holy Bird in Blackfoot. When we talk about residential school and religion, it's such a big mix, and I have, you know, people in my family who are Mormon, I have those who are Christian, I have people who are Catholic, I have others who have went back to our traditional ways and spirituality and pray to wakâ, Creator. So it's really interesting whenever there are family functions.

I sometimes, when explaining religion or spirituality, as a teaching when students come in, I always share, I'm like, you know, sometimes you don't know, I don't know who I'm referring to, it could be whichever elder or whoever it is in my family, but these are all from them being taken away, Sixties Scoop, taken away by Mormons. This was one family going to a Christian residential school. It was another family going to a Catholic residential school. It's my father who's Métis. So this strong mix of Catholicism, and then also people in my family, you know, who broke free of those intergenerational trauma and effects of being forced into Christianity or Catholicism, who have started to go back to our ways.

CAMERON SIFERD: It started right in the beginning. During the 17th century, the French monarchy insisted fur traders work alongside missionaries to spread Christianity on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church. Various evangelical Christian denominations tried unsuccessfully for decades from the 1840s onwards, attempting to establish boarding and custodial schools. Eventually, based on the American system, Canada established their very first industrial schools, which were run by the Catholic and Anglican churches in 1883.

STEVE KOOTENAY-JOBIN / NATOYA PIIKSKI: It was interesting growing up because, as Nakota people, we are the largest Siouan community and our community is, like, still, our language retention is really, really, really strong. The children are still speaking it. But it's really interesting because deeply vested within our language, but then also heavily influenced by, like, religion. So I remember growing up, going to the family's house and prayers and everything, all through the Bible and all that. But all done within Stoney, within our language.

CAMERON SIFERD: Historically, some particularly devout missionaries, who worked in residential schools could not accept resistance or failure. When their methods of teaching or preaching did not work, they didn't try new methods, learn, adapt, or consider reasons why their methodology wasn't successful. By their logic, it was the children who were at fault. Resistance to the teacher was resistance to the church, which was viewed as a rejection of God. Worse, the working conditions attracted far too many employees who were able to abuse children sexually and physically in remote unsupervised places.

ANONYMOUS: And they instilled in you to be afraid of everything. Every time they told you, if you didn't listen, you're going to go to hell. You're going to burn up in hell, and they show us pictures of a burning place with people burning and looking like they're trying to get out of the fire. I mean, of course, that kind of stuff that, between the ages, I mean, from grade ones to six, you'd be, you'd be traumatized seeing them. Soon as you get home, they talk about the devil and to me that's a lot of... I was scared half of the time.

CLARENCE WOLFLEG / MIIKSIKA'AM: Oki, nistowonnakoka Miiksika'am. My name is Red Crane. That's my Blackfoot name. My name is Clarence Wolfleg. I'm from Siksika Nation, not too far from Calgary.

If somebody puts his hand, that's a signal to make sure you cover your face. But that teacher puts his hand up and I jumped back. He says, "No, no, no, it's okay. It's okay." Oh, wow, these guys are really nice people. They don't hit you.

CAMERON SIFERD: When the government and church were establishing the residential school system, deals had to be made. One of those was that the schools were funded based on the number of children they housed. With that, the church had their motivation

to get as many children as possible into the system. Despite the planning by the authorities involved, there was something that was never considered: the belief systems of the Indigenous people across Canada. Indigenous beliefs and tradition were treated as an affront to the truth. Anything outside of an approved Christian belief was thought of as a pagan superstition, and should be erased. This both enforced the demonization of different beliefs of Indigenous people and minimized their importance, making it easier to enforce their goals.

GABRIELLE LINDSTROM / TSAPIINAKI: Oki, nisto nitaanikko Tsapiinaki nyomhtoto kainaiwaa. My name is Gabrielle Lindstrom, or Weasel Head. My Blackfoot name is Slanted Eye Woman. That name was given to me by my dad when I got my master's degree.

I find it hard to believe that before Catholics got here or before Christians got here that we were just wandering aimlessly around without any souls for tens of thousands of years, that we weren't happy.

ANONYMOUS: Just as soon as they start the sermon, I know exactly what they're... I could probably say or do the service myself because you could still hear a lot of the repetitive stuff.

CAMERON SIFERD: One of the reasons that children were kept in a boarding school was to make it easier to enforce ideas of the evils of their families and loved ones. When children did return home for the few months a year the system allowed, they were told to avoid the evils of home.

J. R. Miller retells the experience of a student from the Oblate St. Philip's School by staff officials: "They told us that our parents, our grandparents, all our people out there, whenever they have these things going, they were chanting to the devil. And if they could hear the drum begin nearby on the reserve, they'd tell us to go inside, so we won't listen to them drums because you're chanting to the devil. Inside, we'd all kneel down and pray that our people would change."

At school, she was taught that all the things she had learned at home were ugly, and meant for the devil. With the result being that she became ashamed of being Indian.

DALLAS YOUNG PINE: I went through so much at a young age. To be able to endure that trauma... to be here today to talk about it... I can tell others that they can do the same, provided you honestly, you know... there's a creator out there. I call him The Lord

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Jesus, is my, you know... There's slogans in AA, "but for the grace of God, I'm here today."

ANONYMOUS: That school was, was one of the toughest places that I can think of right now. We'd get up at, uh, like, at six o'clock in the morning and be ready by seven. You go to church for a full service and you go to class by eight o'clock, and then before noon, 11:30, we go in for another church service and then go to school till about 3:30. And then you do all your chores around the... around the college and then once you're done, then you had a little bit of free time. But you're put into church duties right throughout the whole year. You have to be some, you have to take part in some, some part of the church service. Friends of mine and I, we tried to get out easy. So we jumped on to the choir, but that backfired on us because we didn't know that choir went to three church services on Sunday, so we never had a break Sunday, and once you sign up, you can't back out.

CAMERON SIFERD: The churches often look the other way when it came to staff that would sexually or physically abuse children. There were numerous accounts across the board of churches denying the experience inside the schools and protecting their employees. Often, there would be an attitude that those outside the church or residential school system did not have the ability to properly judge the behavior or qualifications of the staff. The worst punishment administration usually saw was a transfer, and even those were rare.

Historian John Milloy details one case in particular, from 1907, which stands out. The principal of Crow Stand School, Mr. McWhinney, while collecting some children who had run away from school, tied ropes around their arms and made them run behind the buggy from their houses to the school. When the Presbyterian Church received the reports and complaints of the incident, the church refused to act because its investigation had found that the principal's action could not be faulted. He had, it was claimed, only tied the boys to a wagon, because there was no room inside. The distance had only been some eight miles, and the boys did not have to run the whole way, as the horses trotted slowly when they did trot, and they walked a considerable part of the way, even when the horses trotted. The boys could and did help themselves along by clinging to the buggy.

GITZ CRAZYBOY: Oki, nikyokowa nitahnikko Paahkyikoyii... My name is Gitz Crazyboy. I am Blackfoot and Dene.

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You had people that were conditioned and colonized. And, like, horrifically, so this is not, like, saying they're, like, cowards. But, like, if they were -- if you were a child, and you watched someone get beat to death, like, right next to you, or you heard them being beat to death, you learned out of survival to just shut the fuck up and not say anything, no matter what they're doing to you.

ANONYMOUS: In the earlier years, the nuns and priests still, still ran the school full time. Right from grade one to probably grade six. I remember all the nuns and we had to go to church. Like even at noon time and a lot of times the... most of the teachers that were there were the nuns. Most of my homeroom teachers, right from grade one till about grade six were all nuns. But then after that, when I got into junior high, things started to change. There was less nuns and priests. By the time I got into high school, and when I went back into residential school, I think it was the late '70s, you know, there was still the presence of mostly just priests that ran the church ceremonies back then.

CLARENCE WOLFLEG / MIIKSIKA'AM: Pope Francis, you know, the great, well, the holy father, when he was talking about institutions, institutions deal with churches, governments, things were -- man-made laws are used to create institutions that drift away from the way the creator wants us to do things. And, look, like, when you look at man-made laws are taking precedence in all our lives. And the residential school mentality. They never really, they did a quick visit with us, with the people that suffered residential school. But then they already had a prepared way of how they're going to address it. Typical government, 'cause that kind of system of institutions, it's all about authority, who holds and wields the power of authority.

GABRIELLE LINDSTROM / TSAPIINAKI: I get so angry and I get so mad at the Catholic Church, like, I get so disgusted with priests, with brothers. I get so angry sometimes. And so I have to stop myself and then I'll smudge, I'll pray, I'll... you know, just do whatever I can to ground myself and not get angry with these people.

CAMERON SIFERD: It took over a decade, but the churches began to realize the need to start to make amends for what they had taken part in. In 1986, came the first attempt at an apology from a member of the United Church.

Moderator Bob Smith delivered that, "Long before my people journeyed to this land, your people were here, and you received from your elders an understanding of creation, and of the mystery that surrounds us all that was deep and rich and to be

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treasured. We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal, to tell you the good news of Jesus Christ, we were closed to the values of your spirituality. We confused Western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ. We imposed our civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel. We tried to make you like us. And in doing so we helped to destroy the vision that made you who you were. As a result, you and we are poorer, and the image of the creator in us is twisted, blurred, and we are not what we are meant by God to be. We ask that you forgive us, and to walk together with us in the Spirit of Christ, so that our peoples may be blessed, and God's creation healed."

This apology was notable for acknowledgement of colonization as a problem, but only addressed a fraction of the issues of the residential school system. During spring of 1991, the Roman Catholic representatives, during a national meeting on Indian residential schools did not issue an apology, but a statement in which they expressed regret at negative experiences of the residential schools. The goal was to distance themselves from fault as much as possible by placing blame solely on the government policy while attempting to maintain a public face with half-hearted attempts at legal-washed acknowledgments. As of February 2022, the Pope has yet to apologize. However, in light of the increased coverage of the residential school system, there has been a shift. Where there was once refusal, the Pope has now expressed an interest in visiting Canada with an intention to address the residential school system. The results of the visit are anxiously anticipated, but critics question the sincerity and purpose.

During the Anglican Church's second native convocation, in 1993, Michael Piers on behalf of the church acknowledged pain, hurt and suffering inflicted upon the Indigenous peoples, along with their failure: "We failed you, we failed ourselves. We failed God. I am sorry, more than I can say that we are part of a system which took you and your children from home and family. I am sorry, more than I can say that in our schools, so many were abused physically, sexually, culturally, and emotionally. On behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada, I present our apology."

In 1994, the Presbyterian Church released a document entitled "Our Confession," which outlined a new understanding of the past. They noted they were not superior to the church of the past, but they were less ignorant. The church acknowledged its presumptions of colonial superiority. The apology also acknowledged abuse in a way which distances themselves as an institution stating, "there was opportunity for sexual abuse, and some were so abused."

This acknowledgement was viewed critically because despite mentioning the travesties that happened, some felt that it tried to downplay the levels of abuse.

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ANONYMOUS: Back in '96, '97, I went to my mother, because my mother was a very strong Catholic.

I told my mother, "I'm sorry, I can't sit in a church and, and say a hundred Hail Marys. And as soon as I come out, I still have the same hateful thoughts and hypocritical things that come with churches. That doesn't mean anything for me. That doesn't... doesn't hit my heart and soul."

I said, "But when I go to a pipe ceremony, when I go to a sweat lodge, I'm feeling happy for three, four months at a time." It's made such an impact on me that, you know, I told her, "I'm sorry, Mom, I can't go to that church anymore. I have to be that native person who I was meant to be."

She didn't discourage me. She just said, "Your grandfather," she said, "he walked that journey of the spiritual ways of our life." And she said my father, he walked that same journey with our spiritual Blackfoot ways.

She said, "I have nothing against you..." In fact, she encouraged me, and she taught me some ways herself in ceremony, the things to do and not to do. And one of the things that she really encouraged me was to listen. There's always a message behind every ceremony, every song, every story that that came from, from the ceremony, and that, she said, "Don't ever add on to ceremony. Do it the way you were taught. And don't ever delete things in a ceremony because that's the way it was taught."

GABRIELLE LINDSTROM / TSAPIINAKI: Even though we have really church-going people on our reserves and all of that, have our communities improved? Any more? I don't see any improvements. If anything, it's gotten worse. And just like grandpa said, you know, "Jesus had good medicine, but we have good medicine in our people, too."

CAMERON SIFERD: The relationship between the government and the churches allowed for seemingly total control over Indigenous people in this country. The church was used to destroy cultures, demonize beliefs, and as a tool of fear to mold children. While the government funded the operation, the churches, for a great length of the lifespan of the residential schools, held the control of these operations.

The Christian beliefs forced upon Indigenous families attempted to destroy the traditional beliefs of this land. The damage done has fractured families, communities, and individuals. The views and beliefs of countless people have been affected. Whether they were promoting the causes or merely complacent, the churches involved in the residential school system played their part in aiding the domination of Canada.

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SKIP WOLFLEG / AKAINIHKASIMI: My name is Clarence Wolfleg Jr. People call me Skip. These songs belong to the Blackfoot A1 Club singers. Okay, now, I am actually a child member of the Blackfoot A1 Club, and every chance I get to honour the Blackfoot A1 Club, I try to do my best to sing their songs. But there's actually a lot of pride and that goes into these songs. They are one of the two songs they sing to honour a new membership to initiate new members into our club. We're trying to create the sound of our mother's heartbeats, because that is the very first rhythm that we hear as human beings.

CAMERON SIFERD: This podcast was produced by Grace Heavy Runner, Cam Siferd, Hannah Many Guns and Jasmine Vickaryous, with music by Matthew Cardinal and Skip Wolfleg. Special thanks to all those who shared stories about their residential school experience. This podcast was made in partnership with CJSW and the Department of Canadian Heritage.

JASMINE VICKARYOUS: If you or someone you know is experiencing pain or distress as a result of the residential school experience you're not alone please call the Residential School Crisis Line at 1-866-925-4419. They are there to help and they're available 24 hours a day.

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