An Invitation to Heal a Broken Place in our Shared History

The Role of Christian Churches in the Destructive Legacy of Indian Boarding Schools

During the 19th and into the 20th century, Native American children were forcibly abducted from their homes to attend Christian and government-run boarding schools. The purpose was to "civilize" the Indian and to stamp out Native culture.

The churches may have taken on this mission with the best of intentions, given their shared beliefs at the time. But in fact, the schools carried out a deliberate policy of ethnocide and cultural genocide. Cut off from their families and culture, the children were punished for speaking their native languages, banned from conducting traditional or cultural practices, shorn of traditional clothing and identity of their native culture, taught that their culture and traditions were evil and sinful, and taught that they should be ashamed of being Native American. Often placed far from home by design, they were frequently neglected or abused physically, sexually and psychologically.

A Lasting Legacy of Shame and Trauma

The effect was that the children were intentionally and systematically inculcated with shame for being Indian through ridicule of their religions and their life-ways. The shame became internalized as self-loathing and emotional disenfranchisement from their own culture. These children passed on the legacy of the boarding school policy, returning to their communities, as deeply scarred human beings with none of the skills – community identity, parenting, extended family relationships, native languages, or ceremonial and cultural practices learned by those raised within their own cultures. The effects of this policy continue today.

The loss of culture, language, and other devastating impacts of the Boarding School policy continue to affect Native American individuals, families, communities, Tribes, Pueblos and Alaska Native villages throughout the U.S. The lasting legacy is reflected in elevated levels of alcoholism, disproportionate rates of incarceration, large numbers of children still being removed from their communities and placed into non-Native foster care, low levels of educational achievement, high rates of domestic and other violence, mental health concerns including the highest suicide rates in the U.S., economic disparities, high rates of poverty, and rampant dissociation in family settings.

Kevin Gover, (Pawnee) Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, Department of the Interior raised this reminder at the Ceremony Acknowledging the 175th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, on September 8, 2000:

The trauma of shame, fear and anger has passed from one generation to the next, and manifests itself in the rampant alcoholism, drug abuse, and domestic violence that plague Indian country. Many of our people live lives of unrelenting tragedy as Indian families suffer the ruin of lives by alcoholism, suicides made of shame and despair, and violent death at the hands of one another. So many of the maladies suffered today in Indian country result from the failures of this agency [the Bureau of Indian Affairs]. Poverty, ignorance, and disease have been the product of this agency’s work.
First Steps

A National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition has gathered around a vision for healing. Telling the truth about what happened is a first step. To take further steps to secure justice for Native American individuals, families, communities, Tribes, Pueblos and Native Alaskans in the U.S., government and churches must acknowledge responsibility for this damaging policy and its implementation.

The coalition recommends that the United States create a Commission on Boarding School Policy with the full and active participation of affected Native Americans. The commission should

- provide accurate and comprehensive information to the United States government, Indigenous Peoples and the American public about the Boarding School Policies, including their purposes and the human rights violations that ensued;
- gather information from survivors, their families and others about the treatment of children in the schools, including abuse and neglect, and the number of deaths that occurred in the schools;
- receive recommendations for redress and programs to facilitate and support healing for individuals, families, Native communities, Tribes, Pueblos and Alaskan Natives Villages; and
- recommend legislation to remove barriers to access to justice for individuals, Native communities, Tribes, Pueblos and Alaskan Natives Villages, and to provide financial and other resources to support Indigenous communities in designing and implementing programs and processes for healing the longstanding inter-generational and historical traumas that continue to plague them, including programs to reverse language loss.

This brief summary has been excerpted from a publication of the Native American Rights Fund. For a fuller treatment of this topic, please visit: http://www.narf.org/pubs/nlr/nlr38-2.pdf

Which Churches Were Involved?

In 1872, as the boarding school program got underway, the Board of Indian Commissioners allotted 73 Indian agencies to several denominations, as follows:

- Methodists, fourteen agencies in the Pacific Northwest (54,743 Indians)
- Presbyterian, nine in the Southwest (38,069)
- Episcopalians, eight in the Dakotas (26,929)
- Catholics, seven (17,856)
- Hicksite Friends, six (6,598)
- Orthodox Friends, ten (17,724)
- Baptists, five in Utah, Idaho and the Indian Territory (40,800)
- Reformed Dutch, five (8,118)
- Congregationalists, three (14,476)
- Christians, two (8,287)
- Unitarians, two (3,800)
- American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in Indian Territories of Oklahoma (1,496)
- Lutherans, one (273)

A Vision for Healing

Support for communities, families, and Nations in the healing process must be based on community-driven, culturally appropriate healing using Indigenous principles and understandings. The quest for a fully participatory process—one that results in meaningful and just redress, reconciliation and restoration of what can be restored—will involve engaging impacted Indigenous individuals and Peoples to define what justice, healing, and redress look like for them. This vision may differ among and between distinct communities. It is imperative to begin collecting input now as to what measures are needed in each Nation and community to begin to reverse the bitter legacy of this policy—a policy of deliberate genocide. It is time for all of us—indigenous nations and colonizer institutions—to begin healing.

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