

## **How could this happen?**

Rev. Deborah Ann Taylor

Between the establishment of the first residential school in 1831 and the closing of the last in 1996, roughly 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Me'tis children were impacted by Canada's policy of assimilation through education. In its most positive light, the policy was not intended to be cruel. Many of those involved in its implementation had what they sincerely considered to be "good" intentions, based on the assumption that assimilation was a positive and necessary goal. In the minds of many Christians, this process of assimilation was in keeping with the teachings of the Bible and the will of God. In obedience to Jesus' call to "make disciples of all nations,"<sup>1</sup> the residential schools were seen as a vehicle by which Indigenous children were taught the truth of the Gospel and made members of Christ's church. To be Christian and civilized was presumed to be one and the same. Thus, one who was not Christian was *uncivilized* by default. To be uncivilized was to be in an inferior state to that of Christian/civilized Canada.

Such sincere beliefs, misguided though they be, were held for the most part without a conscious sense of malice or will to harm. Yet, harm was done, the measure of which defies our comprehension. Nor is the damage limited to the generation of children who were forcibly enrolled in the residential school system. The damage echoes in the lives of their children and will impact the lives of their children's children for generations to come.

How did this happen?

How could it be that good people thinking they were doing a good thing have enacted such incalculable harm?

If White Canadians – if White Lutherans – are to seek an answer to these questions we must begin by looking not at indigenous peoples, but at ourselves. The cultural assumptions that led to this tragedy are part of our past and of our present. They center on how we see ourselves and on how we see others in relation to us. They rest in values and attitudes buried deep in our subconscious, absorbed through our years of passage through a culture and society that doesn't encourage us to think intentionally about our place within it or to examine our perceptions about those who are different from us.

The values, attitudes and perceptions to which I refer are not as simple as matters of personal prejudice. We all have those, regardless of our ethnicity, religion or cultural identification. Prejudice colours our perceptions and blurs our reason and objectivity. Acted upon, prejudice leads to acts of discrimination in which persons or groups are treated unfairly in relation to other persons or groups. As opposed to racism, prejudice rests primarily in the purview of individuals. While a component of racism, prejudice is not its equivalent. Racism is more complicated than the biased opinions and attitudes of individuals that may lead to discrimination. Racism is more profound than repeating ethnic slurs or hurling epithets and insults. Racism is manifest in collective and systemic ways and infiltrates society in a broad, comprehensive manner, while all the while remaining largely invisible to those of us who are not directly harmed, who even benefit, by its existence. Racism not only operates from the assumption that one race is superior to others, but exercises the power to impact persons of other races in negative and harmful ways.

That word, "power," is a tricky one. We may be accustomed to think of power in terms of physical strength or civil and political authority. We may not see ourselves, as ordinary White Canadian

Lutherans, as people who possess power. But if we think about it, we can identify our power in a more accessible context: To apply for a job without fear of discrimination, to enter a store and not be suspect because of the colour of our skin, to go to church expecting to worship in a way that accommodates our cultural tastes in music and liturgy, to be identified as part of a dominant culture with access and authority over material and natural resources, to sing “O Canada” with a sense of belonging, are manifestations of power. To see these things as such becomes easier if we imagine what it would be like if we were not able – if we were *powerless* - to do and expect them.

As Canadian Lutherans seek to understand the factors that led to the residential school tragedy; these definitions of racism, power and prejudice provide a helpful framework. They help us recognize that something more substantial than individual prejudice led to the abuses brought to light in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The establishment of the residential schools was an outgrowth of something more significant, more “powerful,” than individual sentiments. There was a collective component that utilized its power to devise and carry out the removal of First Nations, Inuit and Me’tis children from their families and forcibly enroll them in schools against their parents’ wishes and without their consent. Through systems run and owned by a White government and managed by White churches, deeply held assumptions about the supremacy of White culture and the inferiority of indigenous cultures did to indigenous families what would have been unthinkable in regard to White families.

Not many Canadian Lutherans consciously choose to be racists. Few among us engage in racial slurs or epithets. We oppose discrimination and stereotype. But let us not be deceived into thinking that the same collective exercise of prejudice and power was not among the forces that shaped and defined us. The privileges we candidly assume as our right result from our participation in and allegiance to the same systems of power that imply the superiority of our race to the devaluation of others. We cannot change that this is the case or disown the troubling effect it brings us. But we can name it. We can speak the truth about it, and thus, about ourselves.

We can own and acknowledge that truth before the one who is, Himself, the Truth; whose name we bear, and by whose cross we have been... we will be... freed.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Matthew 28:19

<sup>2</sup>This Article is indebted to the words and work of Jonathan Schmidt, Phil Heinze, Allen Jorgenson and Joseph Barndt