

“It is about something much bigger than we thought”

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The Eastern Synod Lutheran – Spring Issue, 2014

The man seated beside me on an Air Canada flight in January seemed eager for conversation. He'd been rescheduled twice, kept awake for nearly twenty hours, and never could sleep on planes. A chat with a total stranger helped pass the time as he endured the interminable delays of travel in a winter of endless storms.

“What are you working on?” he asked me.

“I'm writing a series of articles for our church website about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and our church's response.”

“No kidding. You Catholic?”

“No.”

“Anglican?”

“I'm Lutheran,” I said. “We're a small church and we weren't one of the denominations that ran the schools, but we figure this involves us, just the same.”

“It's a funny thing,” he told me, “but when all that was happening, I had no idea what was going on.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“I don't know. It never made the news, I guess. Might have been different if I'd lived near one of the schools. I've gone to church all my life but I don't remember us talking about it. It just wasn't something that we heard about much and when we did, it wasn't something we thought a lot about until we were made to. My church helped run those schools. But I never had much contact with First Nations people. I never had much reason to think about it. I don't think a whole lot of people did until Harper issued the apology.”

“And now?”

“Now I'm horrified. I've read some of the testimony. When I think about those kids being forced out of their homes and taken away from their parents and being punished for speaking in their own language... I just don't understand how it could happen. How could any right-minded, church-going person possibly think that forcing children into those schools was anything but wrong? I wish somebody would explain that, because I just don't get it.”

My seat-mate was a retired public school teacher who had devoted his life to the education of children. He was also a Christian; a member of one of our partner churches. As such, he was more informed than most about this painful, and most often horrible, chapter in our collective history. While he understood that not all children raised in a residential school setting reported their experience as negative, he was haunted by the reports of physical, sexual and psychological abuse, cultural degradation, and personal trauma brought to light through the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

“Even if there weren’t any reports of abuse,” he said, “the idea that a civil authority could take children from their parents in this way is beyond comprehension. Can you imagine what that would do to a child? To a parent? I have three sons. If those children had been taken out of homes like mine – out of white homes - there would have been hell to pay! But they took how many kids from Aboriginal homes? Why wasn’t there hell to pay about those kids, too? We need to understand this. We need to figure out why this happened and why so many people – so many good Christian people – thought this was a good idea.”

The questions raised by my companion on that Air Canada flight are not far afield from those raised in “A response to the work of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) and the ELCIC’s commitment to diversity,” a motion passed by the 2012 Eastern Synod Biennial Assembly. Rev. Phil Heinze, Director of Public Policy and Service Ministries, explained the rationale behind the motion in these words:

At first, our interest in the work of the TRC came about through our relationship with our ecumenical partners, who had been involved first hand in running the schools. But it wasn’t long before we realized that this is about something much bigger than we thought. This is about the attitudes and cultural beliefs that were at the very root of the residential schools. Our own attitudes and actions contributed to the cultural climate that supported a policy of assimilation based on the repression of Aboriginal culture. The more we looked into this, the more we realized that we, too, were responsible.

In passing the motion, “A response to the work of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) and the ELCIC’s commitment to diversity,” delegates to the 2012 Eastern Synod Assembly recognized that the question, “How could this happen,” is a question about us: What are the attitudes and cultural convictions that led to the establishment of the residential schools? How are these same attitudes and convictions present in our lives today? What is racism and how does it function in society and in church? How can we move toward new relationships with Indigenous people and toward a more diverse and inclusive community of faith?

This article is the first of six aimed at exploring these questions. The articles will be published on the Eastern Synod website as a resource for you and for your congregation. Each one will evolve from interviews with persons active in the implementation of the 2012 Assembly resolution. You are invited to watch the Synod E-Notes for notice of their publication and to reproduce them for use in your community of faith.

As our plane taxied toward the gate at the Ottawa airport, I asked the gentleman beside me for his permission to share our conversation in my articles. He readily agreed and said, “I think the more we talk about this in our churches the healthier we will be. It’s a hard conversation to have, but hard conversations, if you have a little faith, tend to bring us to a better place than when we started.”

Wise words, indeed, and faithful.

If you do not have access to the internet, and require a printed copy of the articles, please notify Pastor Deborah Ann Taylor at PO Box 370, Woodlawn, Ontario K0A 3M0.