

INDIGENOUS MINISTRIES AND JUSTICE REPORT

Origin: The Office of Indigenous Ministries and Justice

The Indigenous Church has been on a journey that has been full of incredible moments of growth, renewal, and challenges. Our journey has been full of a deep and profound commitment to who we are as Indigenous people within the United Church of Canada. Through this time of growth and renewal, the Elders of the Indigenous Church have journeyed alongside the staff of Indigenous Ministries and Justice (IMJ) so that we can continue serving our communities and determine a path forward.

Indigenous Ministries and Justice has begun the work of looking towards 2035 and part of that work is having all of our churches and manses assessed. Staff are also working to develop a revised way of gathering vital data to help us have a better understanding of how our communities are fairing.

The Indigenous Church has heard the call to be deep, bold, and daring as we look to renew the church for the next 100 years. As we look towards this vision, the Indigenous Church understands that this mission will require us to be faithful, purposeful, intentional, hard working, and strategic in how we live into 2035.

Our main goal as Indigenous Ministries is to journey alongside our Communities of Faith. We are committed to working with them to strategize, collaborate, and vision a vibrant Indigenous Church.

Governance

IMJ staff support the governing bodies of the Indigenous church. The National Indigenous Spiritual Gathering (NISG) meets every three years and is a body analogous to General Council in its decision-making responsibilities. NISG meetings also provide an important opportunity for spiritual education and renewal for members of the Indigenous church. Between spiritual gatherings the National Indigenous Council (NIC) is responsible for providing policy direction and carrying out other governance responsibilities for the Indigenous church. The National Indigenous Elders Council (NIEC) provides spiritual guidance to all bodies of the Indigenous church, the General Council, the Moderator, and the Office of Vocation.

We have reached a critical juncture in the life of the Indigenous church following the adoption of Remit 1: Establishing an Autonomous National Indigenous Organization. The Indigenous church can now dream boldly about its future and determine how it would like to live into being autonomous in its relationship with the rest of the United Church of Canada. The Indigenous church will do so in a way that allows it to deepen the various expressions of Indigenous peoples' spiritual traditions across the country. The Indigenous church faced some leadership challenges in 2024 that led to a special National Indigenous Spiritual Gathering (NISG) in Winnipeg as the year concluded. That NISG concluded first and foremost that more

time is needed for discernment and healing. The NISG charged the NIEC with the task of helping the Indigenous church move forward in a good way.

Like all councils across the church, the NIEC has faced attrition since it was first called together in 2019, so it is undertaking a process to expand its membership to ensure better representation on the Council from all regions of the Indigenous church. The NIEC will then work with IMJ staff to draw together a dreaming/visioning group which will support the Indigenous church in developing proposals for the governance of the Indigenous church, including for a new NIC, drawing on the report from the 2024 NISG.

The Indigenous church expresses its profound gratitude to the members of the National Indigenous Elders Council for so graciously and selflessly taking on additional responsibilities following the NISG. This a heavy and unexpected workload for the Elders until such time as a new NIC is put in place.

Community Capacity Development Coordinator Work (CCDC)

The three Community Capacity Development Coordinators visit and work with Indigenous United Church communities of faith and ministry leaders to support ministry and outreach. They are responsible for supporting the priorities, named by the Indigenous communities of faith, in the development and implementation of work plans that lead toward a sustainable and vibrant ministry: youth leadership development, stewardship; real property, financial/economic prosperity, education, traditional knowledge and spirituality; pastoral care; and healing models.

The Community Capacity Development Coordinators have been working collaboratively to establish a property and capital plan that addresses repairs, contract negotiations, upgrades and restoration of church buildings and manses. This plan will ensure that an accurate record of all property holdings and property transactions are maintained and that properties are adequately insured. These plans will provide the Indigenous Church with accurate and up to date information as to what types of supports are needed for our communities. The Community Capacity Development Coordinators have identified many clergy vacancies in all of the circles of the Indigenous Church. The Indigenous church will need to work collaboratively to develop effective strategies to serve the ministry needs of these communities.

Recently, a Ministers Retreat was held in October of 2024. The retreat provided much needed respite for United Church ministers who are serving Keewatin as they face extremely challenging times.

The number of deaths in northern communities is staggering and far too often, northern communities lack the necessary resources to support a community. The United Church ministers are called upon to support the community members in many different ways. They are very resilient but their work is exhausting.

The retreat provided rest, training in crisis management, and spiritual renewal. It provided the ministers with the opportunity to take care of themselves, share mutual encouragement and return home with their spirits in a better position to continue serving their communities.

The Community Capacity Development Coordinator for Keewatin, Reynold Anderson, has been working collaboratively with Glen Waterman, the Annual Giving Lead to provide pastoral care for Keewatin Ministers annually.

Recently, property assessments were conducted on Indigenous United Church buildings across Canada. This initiative was not only timely but essential for several important reasons. These church buildings are more than just physical structures—they are sacred gathering places, cultural hubs, and historical landmarks that hold deep meaning for Indigenous communities. Understanding their current condition is a vital step in ensuring they continue to serve future generations in a safe, dignified, and meaningful way.

Many of these churches have stood for decades, often in remote or rural areas where funding has been limited and maintenance comes at a high cost. As a result, wear and tear, structural aging, and environmental damage have gone unaddressed. The comprehensive assessment allows communities and church leadership to identify urgent repairs, prioritize health and safety, and plan for renovations or restorations.

Furthermore, the assessments acknowledge the importance of these churches in the ongoing journey of reconciliation. They are places where cultural and spiritual healing happen. Ensuring they are well-maintained is a tangible way of showing respect for Indigenous voices, traditions, and the relationship between the United Church and Indigenous peoples. This work also opens the door for future funding, support, and collaborative planning that reflects the needs and visions of Indigenous communities themselves.

These assessments were a necessary step to identify buildings that were falling into disrepair, potentially leading to closures due to safety hazards and health concerns for our Ministers.

In summary, assessing the state of these buildings is about preservation, safety, respect, and commitment to a shared future. It is a necessary act of stewardship—one that recognizes the vital role these spaces play in the life, spirit, and resilience of Indigenous congregations across the country.

Healing Fund Programs

The Healing Programs Coordinator supports Indigenous community development initiatives across Canada through offering various grants related to holistic healing, leadership development and education. Faithfully pursuing healing, cultural revitalization and truth and reconciliation, the Coordinator engages all Indigenous communities, Indigenous communities of faith and the church in a relational manner that follows the sacred teachings of respect, love, bravery, humility, wisdom, honesty and truth in all aspects of community involvement.

Management of the Healing Fund, the Dorothy Jenkins Fund, the Indigenous Endowment Fund, and the Alvin Dixon Memorial Bursary Fund are critical pieces of work for the Healing Fund Coordinator and this is done in collaboration with the Task Group.

The Healing Fund and the United Church Women formed an exciting relationship in 2022 to support healing for Indigenous women, children and families. The UCW has committed to the financial relationship for 5 years. The total received effective August 2025 was approximately \$44k and that allowed for two additional healing fund initiatives to happen.

The Healing Fund Coordinator, Joni Shawana, was invited to present the Healing Fund initiatives that the UCW supported at their national meeting in September 2024. The Healing Fund Coordinator has been invited to present at a UCC congregation in early summer 2025. A UCW handout on 'how to' gift to the Healing Fund is in the works and will include a summary on each initiative that the UCW has supported, Joni also leads the Indigenous Ministries and Justice response to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples epidemic, including support for the families affected by the murders related to the Winnipeg landfills. She also participates in IMJ communications and the broader church's work on climate advocacy.

Indigenous Justice and Reconciliation Animators

The Reconciliation and Indigenous Justice Animators share responsibility for enabling and facilitating faith communities and regions of the non-Indigenous church in moving towards just and right relationships with the Indigenous church, Indigenous communities and Indigenous peoples through faithful witness rooted in United Church policy and theology. The focus is on communications, advocacy, education, resource development, project funding, and tending relationships and networks within the United Church.

Indigenous Justice and Reconciliation Animator Sara Stratton supports the Bringing the Children Home initiative to assist Indigenous communities in honouring missing children and identifying unmarked burial sites. To date we have provided financial support for three commemorative projects, and provided digital packages of archival materials to 24 communities. This represents more than 75,000 pages of documentation and thousands of images.

Sara also prepared GCE proposals on Orange Shirt Sunday, capital funding for the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, and an updated apology for United Church participation in the residential institutions system.

She has recently prepared and delivered a four-part webinar, Placing Ourselves in Colonialism, the second part of a series which was first undertaken in 2023 in order to help settlers understand their place in the story and ongoing legacy of colonization. She has presented webinars, workshops, and sermons on the report of the Special Interlocutor on Missing Children and Unmarked Burial Sites to our governance structures, communities of faith, and broader communities, and is engaged in ecumenical dialogue on further animating the report

and taking action on Settler Denialism. She has also recently organized an ecumenical public event with TRC Commissioner Marie Wilson and journalist Cynthia Reyes.

Sara is also staff resource to and the Anti-Racism Common Table, and serves on the staff group addressing reparations, in particular overseeing a research project on the history and status of United Church apologies. She also participates in the broader church's work on climate advocacy. She produces the monthly Living into Right Relations newsletter as part of her commitment to IMJ communications.

Sara worked with Anti-Racism and Equity Lead Adele Halliday on the education process for Remit 1 (Autonomous National Indigenous Organization), framing it as a key part of reconciliation and reparative justice. Sara and Indigenous and Justice Animator Lori Ransom resource the Indigenous Justice Advisory Group. Lori undertook follow-up with committee members about appointments and organized postings of appointments for vacancies. Lori also delivers presentations and sermons; she has contributed to the reparations initiative and works closely with staff of the Archives on a review of day school narrative reports. She participated in one of the Mod's Book Squad conversations on Jody Wilson Raybould's book, *True Reconciliation*. Lori coordinates the Justice & Reconciliation (J&R) Fund which supports approximately 12-15 educational and relationship-building projects annually. The J&R Fund supports United Church communities of faith, camps, youth ministries, regional councils, and other groups in maintaining focus on work related to healing, truth sharing, and reconciliation.

The first ever evaluation of the J&R Fund, including a survey of 50 previous grant recipients, was completed. An evaluation committee reviewed the findings and was pleased to note strong affirmation for the J&R Fund and how it is managed. They identified some refinements to Fund operations which are being implemented.

Lori led a multi-year ecumenical project on Addressing Spiritual Violence which has produced a resource for denominations. The document is with Communications for finalization. Lori is working with the ecumenical team and United-in-Learning staff on an animation plan. Lori serves on the executive of the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC) and has collaboratively led work of the CCC's Christian Interfaith Reference Group on outreach to Indigenous spiritual leaders and traditional knowledge keepers.

Youth Leadership Coordinator

The Youth Leadership Coordinator has responsibility for the development of youth leadership, focusing on living in balance and building stewardship capacity in relationship with Indigenous communities as a whole. The Youth Leadership Coordinator does this by coordinating and overseeing this component at all levels both inside and outside The United Church of Canada.

The Youth Leadership Coordinator with Prairie to Pine, has worked hard to offer Neechi Camp to young people in Manitoba. Neechi is a reconciliation program that brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people together so that the seeds of friendship can be planted. The youth engage in land-based activities that may include building smoke houses, smoking meat, drying medicines, picking traditional medicines as well as camp like activities.

Neechi was created due to the need of addressing the anti-Indigenous racism that exists in Manitoba. By creating space, that intentionally brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people together, it is hoped that cycles are broken.

Neechi's leadership is mostly comprised of Indigenous folks and this fosters a sense of pride for the Indigenous campers. The non-Indigenous campers often do not have the opportunity to learn from Indigenous people and Neechi provides them with this opportunity. It is extremely important for non-Indigenous folks to see Indigenous people in leadership positions.

The Indigenous and Racialized Scholars Program

The Youth Leadership Coordinator, with Growth Coordinator Migrant/Diasporic/Racialized Communities, Emo Yango, provides support for Indigenous scholars.

The program allows for six youth between the ages of 18–26 years old who identify as Indigenous or Racialized, and are interested in participating in a 10-week research program. The program provides a space for three Indigenous and three Racialized youth to highlight their racial identities and the issues that impact their communities, through doing research on a topic of their choosing, writing an essay, and presenting their findings in creative ways.

Each researcher aims to reflect “bold discipleship, deep spirituality, and daring justice” from the lens of current youth realities.

The Indigenous and Racialized Youth Retreat provides space for 10 Indigenous and 10 Racialized young people to come together at the Sandy Saulteaux Spiritual Centre. The Indigenous and Racialized youth Retreat is a unique space as it allows the participants to gather and not worry about reconciliation or having to explain their lived realities. The young people learn about social justice issues, explore issues about racial identity, and speak candidly about the challenges of being an Indigenous and Racialized youth in Canada and the United Church of Canada.

The retreat also provides space for the youth to celebrate their identities and learn about the other's culture and spirituality. The youth have been engaged in a wide range of activities, such as advocating for the search at the Prairie Green Landfill, Orange Shirt Day, and participating in educating YAYA Leadership is culturally safer youth programs.

The Youth Leadership Coordinator has supported the wider church in recruiting Indigenous young people to participate in global learning opportunities, offering leadership for Rendez-Vous, Youth Forum, offering workshops to communities of faith, and committee work.

There is a need in the United Church of Canada to lift up Indigenous youth and the Youth Leadership Coordinator has been working with others across the church to create space.

Indigenous Office of Vocation (IOV)

For six years, the IOV has supported the leadership and formation of leaders for the Indigenous Church. This involves supporting Pastoral Relations work with Regional Councils, supporting the Mission & Service Working Group in resourcing ministry, the development of the Indigenous Candidacy Pathway, strengthening the relationship with Sandy Saulteaux Spiritual Centre, and continuing the building of an Indigenous Ecumenical relationship with the Indigenous Sacred Circle of the Anglican Church of Canada.

In the area of pastoral relations, our ministers have increasingly demanding needs to respond to the significant impact of drug overdoses and suicides in their communities. As noted above, the Ministers retreat held last year was one of the steps taken to support our Ministers who are deeply committed to this challenging area of ministry work. We anticipate that the demands of this work will continue to increase and we hope to build new ways of bringing support to not only our Ministers, but also the communities that they serve.

In relationship with Regional Councils, we have been able to support the policy and best practices that Regions are implementing in fulfilling their responsibilities with the Indigenous Communities. This work continues to improve relations from year to year.

The Indigenous Candidacy Board has been able to finish a first draft of the Indigenous Candidacy Pathway after a year long process that included developing our own Indigenous resources through a community engagement process. These resources are the “Parallel path” and the “Identity Wheel.”

For the last three years, the IOV has been working with the Indigenous Right Relations Coordinator and the National Indigenous Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Canada to develop shared training resources for non-Indigenous Ministers that serve Indigenous Communities of Faith.