
Journeying toward Reconciliation

Reflections on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Lessons for Canada in Its Post-TRC Era¹

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The journey toward reconciliation is not an easy one. Any attempt to repair wrongs involves time and intentionality. Healing broken relationships takes longer still.

In Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), beginning in 2009 and coming to an end in June 2015, emerged as a way to “support Aboriginal peoples as they heal from the destructive legacies of colonization that have wreaked such havoc in their lives.”² In particular, it sought to confront and raise awareness of the pain and suffering caused by Indian Residential Schools (IRS); a school system that served as a nefarious tool for colonization and dehumanization in a process that George Tinker describes as cultural genocide.³ Neil Funk-Unrau provides a good summary regarding the intentions of the IRS:

One of the most destructive expressions of the dominance of settler society over Indigenous society was the coercive imposition of an educational system designed to isolate Indigenous youth from their families, communities, and lifestyles in order to change them into exemplary Christian-Canadian citi-

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1 This article is adapted from Andrew Suderman's presentation at a February 26, 2015, event at Conrad Grebel University College (Waterloo, ON) coordinated by the Centre for Peace Advancement. Although the author no longer resides in South Africa, this paper was initially written while he was living there.

2 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Canada's Residential Schools: Reconciliation: The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, vol. 6,” (2015), 4.

3 George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993).

zens. By isolating the children from their families, communities, and cultures, the authorities of the day were also able to more easily isolate the next generations from the lands and resources cherished by their ancestors.⁴

In seeking healing from this legacy, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission sought to establish not only a process through which the painful truth would be brought to the fore but also a foundation on which reconciliation could be built—a foundation that could establish and maintain respectful relationships.⁵ Such a pursuit could establish the possibility of healing. The report stated that “reconciliation must inspire Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples to transform Canadian society so that our children and grandchildren can live together in dignity, peace, and prosperity on these lands we now share.”⁶

Canada and South Africa have a close relationship, learning from each other over the years. South African government officials, in the early to mid-twentieth century, visited several countries, including Canada, to learn how they “dealt with the native problem.” South Africa became particularly interested in the reservation system that the Canadian and US governments employed, and they began using a similar system as one of the basic building blocks for their own system of apartheid or “separateness” that began in 1948.

Forty-five-plus years later, upon the official demise of apartheid in 1994, South Africa utilized a TRC process to confront and deal with its painful history to create the possibility of a new future in which its people could be reconciled. As South Africa learned from Canada about how to “deal with the native problem,” Canada, in turn, has since gleaned insights from South Africa’s TRC process in confronting its painful history of abuse against a segment of its own people—a history connected at least in part to Canada’s own story.⁷

As Canada now enters its post-TRC era, it may also want to learn from South Africa’s post-TRC experiences.⁸ Toward that end, this paper seeks to ar-

4 Neil Funk-Unrau, “Small Steps toward Reconciliation: How Do We Get There from Here?,” in *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land Justice, and Life Together*, ed. Steve Heinrichs (Kitchener, ON, and Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2013), 77.

5 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Canada’s Residential Schools,” 11.

6 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 4.

7 This is not to suggest that South Africa was the first country to use a TRC process or the only one from which Canada learned. There have been many such processes in many other countries.

8 This has actually already been happening. For example, March 1–3, 2011, the Canadian TRC held a conference in Vancouver—“TRC Sharing Truth: Creating a National Research Centre on Residential Schools”—that gathered experts and survivors from places of genocide around the world to share how they engaged the public post-TRC with the

ticulate some of the challenges South Africa has faced and the lessons we can glean since the end of their formal TRC process, in the hope that these learnings will help Canada walk further along the path of confronting a painful past to reach a more hopeful future.

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

Apartheid, an Afrikaans word meaning “aparthood” or “separateness,” was a strict policy of racial segregation. While apartheid became law in 1948, the practice of racial separation and white European dominance had been common since the arrival of the first settlers in the seventeenth century. The official introduction of apartheid was accompanied by an evangelical zeal that justified ever-increasing forms of violence and repression in order to maintain the desired separation. Apartheid created an inherent privilege for the white minority in South Africa, with governmental policies that increasingly oppressed the majority of the population, who were considered to be “nonwhite.”

This oppression became more apparent in the latter half of the twentieth century as the struggle against apartheid increased in tenacity. In the end, unfathomable atrocities were committed by both the regime struggling to maintain inherent privilege and those who fought against it.⁹ After the official demise of apartheid in 1994, South Africa was left to deal with its history of violence, atrocities, and injustice. How does a country deal with such a past?

To wrestle with its painful history, South Africa established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1995. The TRC was designed as a mechanism to work toward national restoration, reconstruction, and healing. Desmond Tutu, the appointed chair, noted: “We were a wounded people, all of us, because of the conflict of the past. No matter on which side we stood, we all were in need of healing.”¹⁰

The South African TRC confronted the gross violations of human rights with the intent of obtaining a clear and truthful understanding of the violence and dehumanization stemming from apartheid, so that forgiveness and reconciliation could potentially be possible for the nation as a whole. To paraphrase Tutu: “In order to forgive, we must know whom to forgive for what.”¹¹ Truth

legacy/history and work of restorative justice. Participants included people from South Africa, Guatemala, Chile, East Timor, and Holocaust survivors, among others.

⁹ For accounts of these atrocities, see Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998).

¹⁰ Staff Reporter of *The Mail & Guardian*, “Tutu: ‘Unfinished Business’ of the TRC’s Healing,” April 25, 2014, accessed February 21, 2015, <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-04-24-unfinished-business-of-the-trc-healing>.

¹¹ Staff Reporter of *The Mail & Guardian*, “Tutu: ‘Unfinished Business’ of the TRC’s Healing.”

needed to be stated publicly so that reconciliation could follow. As Piet Meiring observed: “Finding truth goes far beyond establishing historical and legal facts. It has to do with understanding, accepting accountability, justice, restoring and maintaining the fragile relationship between human beings.”¹²

The commission proved to be an innovative and creative way of grappling with the brokenness of South Africa’s history. Indeed, it has become an example for others. The process was meaningful and eye-opening for the country. Those who were oppressed, repressed, and dehumanized by the apartheid regime were able to share their experiences, their stories, and, ultimately, their pain and suffering. They were able to regain a sense of dignity and humanity from having their past recognized. For once, they actually mattered and were heard. Whites, on the other hand, could no longer hide behind the pretense of ignorance as an excuse for the horrid cost paid for their privilege and comfort.

The TRC served several significant purposes. It provided a venue for the truth to be told about apartheid—the atrocities that it had created and justified as well as the society it had engineered.¹³ The TRC provided an avenue through which victims could release what had happened to them and find their collective humanity. One victim recalls: “When I was tortured at John Vorster Square my tormentor sneered at me: ‘You can shout your lungs out. Nobody will ever hear you!’ Now, after all these years, people are hearing me!”¹⁴ After a particularly difficult testimony in East London, a Xhosa mother shared the terrible events and tortures inflicted on her fourteen-year-old son and remarked about the relief she finally felt in sharing her experience and her truth: “Oh yes, Sir, it was worth the trouble [to testify]. I think that I will immediately fall asleep tonight—for the first time in sixteen years. Perhaps tonight I will be able to sleep without nightmares.”¹⁵

The TRC also lifted the shroud of secrecy that had clouded much of South Africa’s history. This was, and has continued to be, liberating. Many secrets were revealed; they no longer had to be maintained. Piet Meiring offers an example:

On the final day of his appearance before the TRC when he had to testify to his role in the Khotso House (headquarters of the South African Council of Churches) bombing, former Minister of Police, Adrian Vlok, said: “When the final question was asked and when the legal team of the South African

12 Piet Meiring, “Bonhoeffer and Costly Reconciliation in South Africa,” in *Bonhoeffer Consultation* (Stellenbosch, South Africa: Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch, 2015), 7.

13 How much of the truth is a different and contested question.

14 Meiring, “Bonhoeffer and Costly Reconciliation in South Africa,” 7.

15 Quoted in Piet Meiring, *Chronicle of the Truth Commission* (Vanderbijlpark: Carpe Diem, 1999), 371.

Council of Churches indicated its satisfaction . . . my heart sang, I got a lump in my throat and I thanked God for his grace and mercy to me.”¹⁶

As South Africa transitioned from apartheid to its new democratic dispensation, the TRC played a particularly crucial role as—in essence—a pressure cooker valve. The apartheid system had generated so much pent-up tension and steam that a full-scale “explosion” seemed inevitable. The TRC, however, despite a significant amount of violence (especially in the lead-up to 1994), can be credited for preventing such an explosion. South Africa is often touted as an example of a relatively peaceful transition of power, and the TRC was one of the mechanisms that allowed for the relatively peaceful birth of a new nation, a new South Africa. This is surely worthy of praise.

But today, more than twenty years after the TRC’s conclusion, obstacles in South Africa’s journey toward reconciliation are becoming increasingly apparent. Pressure is increasing once again. The violent and repressive imagination that apartheid created still dominates. Recent violence directed at African foreign nationals—labeled xenophobia—as well as the police’s ongoing use of excessive force (resulting in the killing of thirty-four striking miners at Marikana in 2012) are but two examples of this.

In the years following the TRC, two challenges have emerged regarding its process, the difficulties it has faced, and, possibly, its shortcomings. The first pertains to the meaning of “reconciliation.” The second asks, Who is responsible for pursuing and working toward reconciliation? It is worth, I think, paying attention to these two challenges, as I suspect they would also arise in other contexts.

What Does “Reconciliation” Mean?

Although the TRC served a critical role in releasing pent-up steam, South Africa continues to grapple with what “reconciliation” actually means and what it practically looks like.

Notions such as “reconciliation” and “peace” carry a lot of baggage in South Africa (as they also do elsewhere¹⁷). These terms were often used during apartheid as a way of encouraging civility between races without substantially changing the apartheid-created social order. This had the effect of pacifying those who challenged the status quo while justifying, ironically, the violence required to maintain “the peace.” For some, reconciliation encouraged living and acting together in a civilized manner but not challenging the existing social order. This

¹⁶ Meiring, “Bonhoeffer and Costly Reconciliation in South Africa,” 7. See also Meiring, *Chronicle of the Truth Commission*, 357.

¹⁷ See, for example, the final two chapters of James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997).

approach maintained the logical inevitability of separation, inequality, and injustice.

But for others, reconciliation meant a radical altering of the apartheid-created social order so that justice and equality could exist for all. This was understood as true reconciliation and is more in line with the biblical notion of reconciliation, which shares close ties with justice.¹⁸ It is also deeply unsettling for those who want to maintain the way things are, the status quo. A biblical understanding of reconciliation tirelessly pursues right relationships with God, with one another, and with creation. In order to make right relationships possible and a priority, it challenges and alters our ways of being and living. In South Africa, those who sought this form of reconciliation were often depicted as “disturbers of the peace.”¹⁹

After the demise of apartheid, even those who were battle-hardened in the struggle against it and were skeptical of notions such as “reconciliation” were willing to begin talking about it. The anti-reconciliatory system had now been eliminated, at least in theory, thus making room for the possibility of true reconciliation. The positive traction of the TRC process highlighted the deep desire for reconciliation.

Unfortunately, the many different understandings of reconciliation became a stumbling block for the TRC and beyond. First, there was the question of whether justice would be integral in the pursuit of reconciliation. There were, for example, significant questions as to whether the TRC would seek retributive justice or restorative justice. The former, Tutu contended, was more characteristic of African jurisprudence.²⁰ The latter, which is ultimately the direction Tutu encouraged, was “not retribution or punishment, but in the spirit of *ubuntu*, the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships. This kind of justice seeks to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he or she has injured by his or her offence.”²¹

18 See, for example, the analysis and response that the authors of South Africa’s *Kairos Document: A Challenge to the Church* provided regarding “reconciliation.” See “The Kairos Document: A Challenge to the Church (1985)” in *Kairos: The Moment of Truth: The Kairos Documents*, ed. Gary S. D. Leonard (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research, UKZN, 2010), 15–17.

19 A recent biography of Desmond Tutu, for example, describes him as “a rabble-rouser for peace.” See John Allen’s *Rabble-Rouser for Peace: The Authorized Biography of Desmond Tutu* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

20 Meiring, “Bonhoeffer and Costly Reconciliation in South Africa,” 9.

21 Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (London: Rider, 1999), 51–52.

Megan Shore, in her book *Religion and Conflict Resolution: Christianity and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, notes how the transition from apartheid to democracy was based on the hope for a restoration of a moral human community.²² “If truth-telling was supposed to act as a means of including all South Africans in a shared narrative, then reconciliation should be understood more properly as a moral process that restores relationships and fosters the moral community that was broken with apartheid.”²³ The problem, Shore points out, is that reconciliation was not clearly defined.

Antjie Krog suggests there was a clash of cultural understanding regarding concepts such as “reconciliation,” “forgiveness,” “justice,” and so forth during the TRC process. In response to criticisms of the TRC, Krog—as she considers why there was a lack of revenge killings compared to other contexts such as post-WWII Europe—argues that the TRC process and the objectives that arose from it centered on an epistemological and ontological background, and therefore on a perspective, that was different from other truth commissions. It was the first commission to *individualize* amnesty; it had public testimonies; and it allowed victims from both sides of the conflict to testify at the same forum.²⁴ But one of the most significant differences, she suggests, was the TRC’s focus on “interconnectedness” (i.e., *ubuntu*) and the manner in which a person builds himself or herself into part of a community and vice versa.²⁵ This focus on interconnectedness became embedded in the process.

Interconnectedness-towards-wholeness forms the interpretive foundation of it (as well as of the theology of Desmond Tutu or the politics of Nelson Mandela). I want to suggest that it was this foundation that enabled people to reinterpret Western concepts such as forgiveness, reconciliation, amnesty, justice, and so on in a new and usable way; in other words, that these concepts had moved across cultural borders and been infused with and energized by a sense of interconnectedness-towards-wholeness.²⁶

Krog suggests that within the concept of interconnectedness-towards-wholeness,²⁷ notions such as forgiveness and reconciliation cannot be

22 Megan Shore, *Religion and Conflict Resolution: Christianity and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Farnham, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 109.

23 Shore, 109.

24 Antjie Krog, “Research into Reconciliation and Forgiveness at the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Homi Bhabha’s ‘Architecture of the New,’” *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* 30, no. 2 (2015): 211.

25 Krog, 211.

26 Krog, 211.

27 This is Krog’s English shorthand for the concept of *ubuntu*.

separated:²⁸ “The one begins, or opens up, a process of becoming, while the other is the crucial step in this becoming.”²⁹ Indeed, these notions are versions of the same root word in isiXhosa.³⁰ “And here lies the ‘newness’: in the philosophy of Ubuntu, the two concepts are indivisibly intertwined, philosophically and linguistically. This means a radical departure from the general assumption that reconciliation and forgiveness are two separate and divisible processes.”³¹

This new worldview led to some confusion about whether reconciliation was the projected outcome of the TRC process or whether the TRC was but the initial stage of a much longer process toward reconciliation.³² The perception of some was that South Africa would be reconciled upon the completion of the TRC process and that life could simply move on without continuously raising the past and trudging through it. They assumed that people would, almost magically, be able to get along with one another. It would be possible, they thought, for South Africans to now forget about apartheid and move on.

In 2005, for example, the Afrikaans rock/punk song “Nie Langer” (No Longer) containing the following lyrics hit the radio waves in South Africa:

The fact that I do not always agree
Does not make me a racist.
So look for the beam in your own eye
Because: I will not say sorry anymore (x2)

28 Krog, “Research into Reconciliation and Forgiveness,” 212.

29 Krog, 212.

30 Krog (212) explains: “The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in isiXhosa is *Ikomishoni yeNyani noXolelwaniso*. *Noxelelwaniso* is the isiXhosa for ‘and reconciliation.’ The *no-* consists of the connective *na-* (and, plus the prefix *u-* of *uxolelwaniso* [reconciliation]). *Uxolelwaniso* and the noun *uxolo* (peace) comes from the verb *ukuxola* (to become satisfied), which are being used most often as *ukuxolela* (to forgive). The verb *ukuxolelwanisa* (to see to it that forgiveness happens) is, in its turn, the origin for the noun *uxolelwaniso* (reconciliation). Thus, the word for reconciliation and forgiveness are versions of the *same* root in isiXhosa.”

31 Krog, 212. Here Krog makes a very interesting and important observation. She notes that because of the interdependency between the concepts of reconciliation and forgiveness, black South African victims are now becoming increasingly angry at the lack of change and *wiedergutmachen* (literally, “To make good again” or “to restore”) (Krog, 217). “Thus, and perhaps most importantly, only by identifying interconnectedness-towards-wholeness as the foundation of the TRC process is one able to understand that TRC resentment has more to do with thwarted beliefs now, because things were not made ‘good,’ than with the abuse of Christianity to suppress anger” (Krog, 217).

32 This paragraph is largely taken from a review that I wrote on Shore’s book. See Andrew Suderman, “Megan Shore, Religion and Conflict Resolution: Christianity and South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission—Book Review,” *Political Theology* 13, no. 2 (2012): 260.

I will stand in the back of the line
 Carry our rainbow on my sleeves
 But I will NOT say sorry anymore (x2)
 Stop wasting money on name changes.
 There are people without houses,
 Children without food
 Who is now the guilty one?
 I will no longer say sorry anymore (x5).³³

The strong emotion of the song is evoked not only through the lyrics but also through repetition of the line “I will not say sorry anymore.” The assumption of this song is that recognition for wrongdoing has been made, apologies have been given, and it’s now time to move on. Little, if any, emphasis is placed on exploring ways in which restoration and restitution can be made so that the people of South Africa as a whole can live rightly with one another.

Cobus van Wyngaard, a young Afrikaans Dutch Reformed theologian, notes that although “white identity” as such is not mentioned in the song, the lyrics demonstrate that people in the mainline Afrikaans churches are at best unable to reimagine their identity apart from their “whiteness” and at worst contribute to the continued indebtedness to this racialized identity.³⁴ This mentality fails to understand or deal with the implications of apartheid at not only the emotional level but also the social, political, and economic levels along with the racial constructs that have been so closely tied to these realities in the South African context. It continues, in other words, to operate on a superficial understanding of “reconciliation.”

Although the TRC lifted some of the oppressive clouds of the apartheid legacy, the problem remains that the reality experienced by most South Africans has not been foundationally altered. White privilege and racial inequality continue to dominate. In fact, the gap between rich and poor has become worse. Tutu and many others officially involved in the TRC process tried to inform the nation that the TRC should be seen as the beginning of a much longer walk toward (true) reconciliation. However, the intentionality required for true reconciliation has largely been put on the back burner, if it remains on the stove at all. Tutu notes much “unfinished business” in reweaving the fabric of South Africa’s society:

33 Klopjag, “Nie Langer,” from Album 3, as translated in Jonathan D. Jansen, *Knowledge in the Blood: Confronting Race and the Apartheid Past* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 40.

34 Cobus van Wyngaard, “Post-Apartheid Whiteness and the Challenge of Youth Ministry in the Dutch Reformed Church” in *Journal of Youth and Theology* 10, no. ½ (2011): 26–27.

By “unfinished business” I refer specifically to the fact that the level of reparation recommended by the commission was not enacted; the proposal on a once-off wealth tax as a mechanism to effect the transfer of resources was ignored, and those who were declined amnesty were not prosecuted. . . .

. . . Healing is a process. How we deal with the truth after its telling defines the success of the process. And this is where we have fallen tragically short. By choosing not to follow through on the commission’s recommendations, government not only compromised the commission’s contribution to the process, but the very process itself.³⁵

The work needed for true reconciliation has not been done. Confused understandings of reconciliation have made it difficult to pursue.

Who Will Ultimately Bring About Reconciliation?

The second significant challenge in South Africa’s desire for reconciliation pertains to the question of responsibility: Whose responsibility is it to bring about reconciliation?

On October 28, 1998, Desmond Tutu presented the TRC’s final five-volume report to South Africa’s first elected president, Nelson Mandela. What was perhaps unexpected in Tutu’s handing over of this report to Mandela were the people’s and the church’s assumptions and expectations that were also symbolically passed along with it—that the “ministry of reconciliation” became the responsibility of the state, not the church.

In October 2014, a reenactment of the TRC Faith Communities Hearing invited churches to share what they have been doing toward reconciliation since the original Faith Communities Hearing in 1997. In that initial hearing, almost all of South Africa’s faith communities committed to dismantling apartheid and pursuing reconciliation, both in society and in their own denominations. During the 2014 reenactment, however, each church admitted it had “dropped the ball” in this effort, and each denominational body represented and articulated their substantial shortcomings in meeting their commitments. Several Christian denominations, for example, continue to be racially segregated.

Although this was a sad confession and realization, it also, ironically, proved to be quite hopeful as, at least officially, the church in South Africa began to remember and recommit itself to the pursuit of reconciliation. Many churches

³⁵ Staff Reporter, “Tutu: ‘Unfinished Business’ of the TRC’s Healing.” The Khulumani Support Group, an organization established to support the victims of apartheid that were named during the TRC process, noted, for example, that “the process of providing measures for amnesty and other benefits for perpetrators has not been balanced by an equal focus on the provision of redress for victims” (Phillip de Wet, *Mail & Guardian*, November 16, 2012, accessed February 21, 2015, <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-11-16-00-reparations-still-on-the-back-foot>).

asked why they had assumed the state would be the agent of reconciliation. Since the original TRC in South Africa has ended, appalling violence has continued; inequality is increasing; the rich have not only maintained but also increased their wealth while the poor continue to live on scraps; the education system is failing; striking miners are gunned down by police; obscene spending is justified on the president's private property; and corruption runs rampant.³⁶ Why, these churches now asked, had they assumed that a neoliberal government would be the agent of reconciliation? A government, nonetheless, operating on assumptions of individual competition, on freedom *from* the other rather than communal belonging to each other, and on the myth that government is somehow neutral in ordering and structuring society.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that true peace and reconciliation do not come from those who rule but from those who seek to be part of God's new creation and humanity in the world (Eph 2:11–22; 2 Cor 5:17–21). He even suggests that it is the responsibility of the church to reveal this reality of God's new creation and humanity (Eph 3:10). One can hope that the church in South Africa may be reawakening to its biblical calling of being agents of true reconciliation. There are some hopeful sparks indicating that the church's amnesia is ending and that it may rekindle its mission of actively pursuing that which will allow people to live rightly with one another. But, as it is elsewhere, the journey toward living in right relationships will be a long and difficult one in the South African context.

Reflections and Questions as Canada Enters Its Post-TRC Era

Just as South Africa's TRC process has been an inspiration for Canada and others, it may also be worthwhile for Canada and others to learn from South Africa's *post*-TRC era. What will "reconciliation" mean in Canada between Indigenous³⁷ and Settler communities? What actions should we stop now to prevent further harm to relationships? How can Settlers meaningfully apologize for the way in which we have dehumanized our Indigenous brothers and sisters? How will Settlers pursue the restoration and restitution that true reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples will require? Will we also be tempted to think that responsibility for reparation is the government's alone? How will we be a community—a people, a church—that will tirelessly seek to demonstrate God's new creation and be a witness to God's new humanity? How will this change the way we relate to and include Indigenous sisters and brothers? How can we embody a way of being that demonstrates our common humanity and belonging?

36 Desmond Tutu made these observations in "Tutu: 'Unfinished business' of the TRC's healing."

37 In this paper, "Indigenous" and "Aboriginal" are used synonymously, although effort has been made to be consistent in using "Indigenous Peoples" throughout when not quoting other sources.

Only time will tell how answers to these questions develop. We can, however, already see and therefore highlight some potential challenges in the Canadian context that will require careful, deliberate, and intentional action.

Potential Challenges for the Canadian Post-TRC Process

1. A Clear Definition of Reconciliation

First, coming to a clear understanding of the meaning of “reconciliation” will be crucial, especially as Canada enters its post-TRC era. This is already one of the significant challenges. As reflected in the Canadian TRC report, “reconciliation” is difficult to explain since it is contextually sensitive. The report’s stated understanding regarding “reconciliation” builds on the way the term has been used in reference to family violence: “[Reconciliation is] about coming to terms with events of the past in a manner that overcomes conflict and establishes a respectful and healthy relationship among people, going forward.”³⁸

The commission’s hope for reconciliation was to establish and maintain mutually respectful relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.³⁹ Such an understanding must not remain at a metaphysical level, separate from physical and practical realities. It must deal with and respond to the injustices and violence of the past so that a new future can become possible. “Without truth, justice, and healing, there can be no genuine reconciliation. Reconciliation is not about ‘closing a sad chapter of Canada’s past’ but about opening new healing pathways of reconciliation that are forged in truth and justice.”⁴⁰

Land, for example, is particularly important and contentious.⁴¹ Today, cities and significant amount of industry has been built on large tracts of Indigenous treaty land. It is difficult to imagine these significant swaths of land returned to their rightful owners, even if that is what *should* be done. And yet to ignore the question of land is to ignore a significant element that has strained relationships

38 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada,” (2015), 6.

39 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 6.

40 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Canada’s Residential Schools,” 7. The ten guiding principles of truth and reconciliation (16) highlight important ways of recognizing the past while walking forward.

41 Thus the reason why “Calls to Action” #45–47 in the Final Report, for example, deal specifically with issues of land and the philosophical and legal tools used to justify the dispossession of Indigenous lands (e.g., the Doctrine of Discovery and treaties once agreed upon). See Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Canada’s Residential Schools,” 230–31.

between Indigenous Peoples and Settlers, especially as the latter continue to enjoy the privilege that land provides.

Richard Twiss notes that “the loss of land, beyond dirt, relates to ‘losing sacred space and place’ and its influence in shaping personhood, being and identity. Land provides a sense of being from and belonging to a place.”⁴² Indeed, the goal of the residential schools, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada highlights, was the assimilation of Indigenous Peoples to that of Settler society in order to obtain the land. “The Canadian government pursued this policy of cultural genocide because it wished to divest itself of its legal and financial obligations to Aboriginal people and gain control over their land and resources. If every Aboriginal person were ‘absorbed into the body politic,’ there would be no reserves, no Treaties, and no Aboriginal rights.”⁴³ Thus, the question of restitution in general, and restitution as it pertains to land in particular, will—must, in fact—be a significant aspect in exploring reconciliation in the Canadian context.⁴⁴

Furthermore, should there be a genuine desire to heal relationships between Indigenous Peoples and Settlers, the underlying racist and paternalistic perceptions and practices perpetuating separation and inequality must be addressed. The temptation in response to the realities of inequality, even among those who wish to heal such relationships, is to build relationships based on charity rather than justice. Such activity, however, portrays the provision of a helping hand while failing to restructure the social order that perpetuates the inequality.

As South African theologian John de Gruchy reminds us, restoring justice is indeed intricately linked to the possibility of reconciliation:

Restorative justice has to do with renewing God’s covenant and therefore the establishing of just power relations without which reconciliation remains elusive. It is not a justice that separates people into the good and the bad, the ritually clean or the ethnically acceptable, but one that seeks to bind them together in mutual care and responsibility for each other and for the larger society.⁴⁵

We need to have a clear understanding about what “reconciliation” means; and it cannot be properly understood without its connection to justice.

⁴² Richard Twiss, *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 65.

⁴³ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation,” (2015), 6.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Canada’s Residential Schools,” 33–38, including the “call to action” #45.

⁴⁵ John de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Claremont, South Africa: David Philip Publishers, 2002), 204.

2. Societal Awareness of Injustices

Second, unlike in the South African context, those who were (are) victimized in the Canadian context are a minority. Thus, whereas it was (is) not possible to ignore and sweep the ramifications of apartheid under the rug in South Africa—if for no other reason than the majority (over 80 percent) were affected negatively by apartheid—it may be easier to do so in the Canadian context. The fact that many Indigenous People continue to live on reserves means that their realities can potentially be more “hidden.”⁴⁶

The TRC report, for example, notes that “too many Canadians know little or nothing about the deep historical roots of these conflicts. This lack of historical knowledge has serious consequences for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, and for Canada as a whole.”⁴⁷ Because Settlers are not confronted with the realities of inequality, the temptation might be to assume there is no problem, simply because many Settlers are able to remain blissfully ignorant. Thus, awareness regarding the injustices that Indigenous People of Canada have experienced, and continue to experience, will be an ongoing necessity if relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are to be examined and repaired.⁴⁸

3. Overreliance on the Government and Maintaining the Status Quo

Third, as we saw in the South African context, there may be a temptation to portray and rely on the government at all levels as the primary agent responsible for the work toward reconciliation and reparation. The temptation might be to point the finger to the government and its policy as the primary actor in creating the situation Canada now faces. Indeed, many of the “calls to action” in the Canadian TRC report are directed at government—at all levels—to work

46 A news article on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation website, for example, uses an interactive map to highlight where Indian Residential Schools were located. It recognizes that “despite the work of the TRC, which issued its final report and ‘94 Calls to Action’ toward reconciliation in 2015, many Canadians still aren’t aware of the schools that may have existed near them” (“Was There a Residential School Near You? Find Out with Our Interactive Map,” accessed June 11, 2018, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/residential-school-interactive-map-beyond-94-1.4693413>).

47 “Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future,” 8.

48 Thus the reason for the inclusion of “Education for Reconciliation” (Call to Action #62–65), “Youth Programs” (Call to Action #66), and “Museums and Archives (Call to Action #67–70) in the “Calls to Action” in the Final TRC Report. See Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Canada’s Residential Schools,” 235–37.

toward change and reparations.⁴⁹ This may already be a first step on a very slippery slope.⁵⁰

If the government does indeed represent the people of the nation, it should then be invited and expected to pay heed to the damage it has done; we should encourage, even demand, that it take responsibility for that past and seek ways to work toward change, reparation, and restitution. We must encourage the government to change the system it developed as it perpetuated unjust and paternalistic habits. We should remind it to help repair the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. And, ultimately, we need to remind and continue to invite the government to participate in God's original intent for the world—to live rightly and justly with one another. The invitation to participate in repairing the brokenness it has caused must continually be articulated.

The temptation may, however, be for society to point the finger of blame toward the government as the sole perpetrator, assuming that it must therefore be the one to undo what has been done. This may incur at least two, and probably more, dangers. On the one hand, one might adopt the mentality that if the government does not accept or act on the suggested actions required to move toward healthier relationships with Indigenous Peoples,⁵¹ the process toward reconciliation will become stagnant. The danger, in other words, is to lay responsibility for reconciliation on the government alone, which, as we saw in South Africa's case, inevitably becomes problematic; the responsibility can too easily become sidelined.

The second danger, intimately linked to the first, is that by assuming the government ought to take responsibility for the process of reconciliation and the needed actions for reparation, society at large is let off the hook; people do

49 See "Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future," 319–37. This does not suggest that all "Calls to Action" are directed to various levels of government. There are other "calls" that are directed at churches, law societies, journalists and media outlets, businesses, etc. Indeed, the only two "calls to action" with fixed deadlines in "Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future" (#48 and #58) are directed at churches, which highlights the significance of holding the church accountable for its past actions and calling it to work toward restitution. (I am indebted to Steve Heinrichs, Indigenous-Settler Relations Director for Mennonite Church Canada, for pointing this out to me.)

50 In this way, the book edited by Steve Heinrichs, *Wrongs to Rights: How Churches Can Engage the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (Winnipeg, MB: Mennonite Church Canada, 2016), is a welcomed resource with its primary focus on challenging the church to take action and work toward restoring relationships.

51 We already saw a glimpse of this during the final press conference when Murray Sinclair presented and summarized the TRC report and the representative of the federal government would not clap or join the standing ovation for the proposals the TRC had made.

not need to take responsibility for the way in which Settlers have helped to create and maintain oppressive relations with Indigenous Peoples.

These two dangers end up being two sides of the same coin. They both enable and maintain the status quo, thus preventing the change necessary to create the possibility of right relationships. Segregation and the reserve system, along with the standard of living that has become a reality in the reserves (and elsewhere), continue to go unquestioned; sociopolitical inequality remains; and little effort is made to declare personal and/or corporate guilt, let alone reparation, for the abuses toward Indigenous People.

The TRC report, for example, already notes the way in which the Canadian government has largely ignored recommendations of the 1996 *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* to improve relationships with Aboriginal peoples.⁵² The invitation for government to recognize its role in what has happened should continuously be extended, as highlighted above, encouraging practical ways of working toward repairing the violence it has perpetrated.

On the other hand, the people of Canada should be leery about placing too much hope in the government leading the way in the ongoing process of reconciliation. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, reminds us that “freedom is never given to anybody. For the oppressor has you in domination because he plans to keep you there, and he never voluntarily gives it up. And that is where the strong resistance comes. Privileged classes never give up their privileges without strong resistance.”⁵³ Dr. King’s words remind us that governments often seek to maintain the status quo.⁵⁴ Thus, if the government decides not to make the

52 “Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future,” 7.

53 Martin Luther King Jr., “‘The Birth of a New Nation,’ Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church,” in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr., Vol. 4: Symbol of the Movement, January 1957-December 1958*, eds. Clayborne Carson et al. (Los Angeles: University of California Press at Berkeley, 2000). Once again, I thank Steve Heinrichs for pointing me toward this contribution from King.

54 Or, what Jacques Rancière describes as the order of the police: that which is concerned with maintaining order and the status quo in society. Such a social order assumes certain presumptions regarding how power has been organized, places and roles that are distributed, along with the systems of legitimizing this distribution (Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999], 28). Rancière distinguishes this form of politics from an emancipatory politics that challenges and disrupts the status quo and its established logic. He describes this form of politics as “whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration—that of the part of those who have no part. This break is manifest in a series of actions that reconfigure the space where parties, parts, or lack of parts have been defined” (29–30).

pursuit of reconciliation a priority, as is the case in South Africa, efforts toward reconciliation will stall if the process has relied solely on the government.

Remembering Our Vocation

The words and exhortation of the Apostle Paul should be ringing loudly in our ears: the work toward true reconciliation is not, in fact, the responsibility or ministry of the state but of the church (2 Cor 5:18–19). In Ephesians, Paul makes the audacious claim that the church is tasked with demonstrating an alternative, visible example of how Jew and Gentile—Indigenous Persons and Settlers?—might relate to each other as a new social body in this world, witnessing to the way in which both are fellow citizens, heirs of God’s household (*oikos*), and partakers of God’s promise in Christ (Eph 2:19, 3:6). Paul describes this demonstration—living out and according to this vocation—as God’s manifold wisdom (Eph 3:10). This suggests that it is the church’s task and vocation to embody right and just relationships, both within its body and the way in which it relates to other communities.

And yet, we must stop and recognize the ways in which the church has failed to embody this vocation, and repent for the harm this has caused. Instead of participating in God’s household and witnessing to another way of living and relating with others—a way of life centered around right and just relationships—the church participated in and provided the foundation for cultural genocide.⁵⁵ The recently approved Mennonite World Conference “Declaration of Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples” notes this well:

We confess that at times the Church has denied the experience and witness to wholeness of our Indigenous sisters and brothers. There have been times when the Church has failed to recognize the dignity and cultural heritage of our Indigenous sisters and brothers. Indeed, there are times when we have forgotten that some of our Indigenous brothers and sisters also form our Church.

We confess that the Church has benefited from the strategies of empires that have included violence, unsustainable extraction of natural resources, stolen land, colonial mission, genocide, environmental and water destruction, segregation, assimilation, imprisonment, and ongoing racial marginalization in health, housing, employment and education.

We confess that some Anabaptists, as global migrants and settlers, have, in some places, gained access to land and benefits that have been withheld from

⁵⁵ See Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*. The way in which the church participated in this violence toward Indigenous Peoples has already been well-documented and communicated. Alongside Tinker’s work, see also Twiss, *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys*.

Indigenous Peoples. And we confess that we still continue to participate in systems and mechanisms that perpetuate current economic inequality and oppression, which has often resulted in the loss and dispossession of land.⁵⁶

The church, given the harms it has participated in and caused—in both South Africa and Canada—cannot abdicate the ways in which it can and must work toward making things right by reconciling relationships and working toward restoration and restitution. This tireless pursuit toward right and just relationships and living rightly with one another is the task of the church as it embodies and witnesses to what Paul describes as the realization of a new humanity (Eph 2:11–22); indeed, the church is called to witness this new humanity even to the principalities and powers (Eph 3:10).

Thus, especially because the church in Canada has participated in the violence toward its Indigenous Peoples, it must carry a responsibility and embody a vision for undoing the damage it has done in order to work toward reconciling the broken relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Lastly, we need to rethink and move beyond the constructed foundations for the ways in which Settlers and Indigenous Peoples have primarily understood themselves in relation to one another. As the Canadian TRC report notes, getting to reconciliation requires that

the paternalistic and racist foundations of the residential school system be rejected as the basis for an ongoing relationship. Reconciliation requires that a new vision, based on a commitment to mutual respect, be developed. It also requires an understanding that the most harmful impacts of residential schools have been the loss of pride and self-respect of Aboriginal people, and the lack of respect that non-Aboriginal people have been raised to have for their Aboriginal neighbours.⁵⁷

This is not to deny differences.⁵⁸ Rather, the focus needs to be on two building blocks that a reconciled relationship requires: 1) finding a common humanity to which we all belong, which then will 2) provide the foundation of dignity we all need. This may be too challenging in the Canadian context given that the church was precisely the one that forgot its calling and perpetuated the violence that sought to rid the humanity and dignity of Indigenous Peoples. But, if rec-

⁵⁶ Mennonite World Conference, “Declaration of Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples,” in *MWC General Council* (Kenya: Mennonite World Conference, 2018).

⁵⁷ “Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future,” vi.

⁵⁸ This is not to follow the United State’s example in its pursuit toward “colorblindness,” which perpetuates systemic and hidden racism. See Michelle Alexander’s persuasive argument in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

conciliation is to become reality, the church will need to work tirelessly toward this end. As the TRC states:

Canadians must do more than just *talk* about reconciliation; we must learn how to *practice* reconciliation in our everyday lives—within ourselves and our families, and in our communities, governments, places of worship, schools, and work-places. To do so constructively, Canadians must remain committed to the ongoing work of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Although the TRC process has come to an end in Canada, one can see from the South African experience that the journey toward reconciliation is far from over; it is an ongoing and lengthy one. As Canada drew on the South African example of the TRC process to work toward healing, in this post-TRC period, it may now want to be aware of and learn from the challenges that have emerged in the South African context since the end of that country's TRC process.

If we truly desire reconciliation, we will need to keep walking intentionally on the path toward it, not allowing the inevitable challenges to deter us from this noble and important quest. After all, God inaugurated the quest toward reconciliation and God has invited us to participate in it.

May God be with us as we continue this journey.

⁵⁹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, "Canada's Residential Schools," 17.