The Role of Christian Churches in the Devastating Legacy of Indian Boarding Schools: *An Invitation to Heal a Broken Place in our Shared History*

During the 19th and into the 20th century, Native American children were forced or pressured to attend Christian and government-run boarding schools or day schools. The purpose was to “kill the Indian and save the man.”

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. 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. Many were sent far from their homelands and cut off from their family. Most were taught that their culture and traditions were evil and sinful, and taught that they should be ashamed of being Native American. Countless children were frequently neglected and even 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, which took part in carrying out the Boarding School Policies:

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.



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| 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 North- west (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. |

**The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition**

Native American organizations, individuals, and tribes created this coalition to:

* Promote research and awareness about the history of the Indian boarding schools, the involvement of churches and government agencies, and the resulting trauma and lasting effects on boarding school survivors and their descendants.
* Seek justice by pursuing public apology and official acknowledgement, restitution, reparations, and redress from the responsible government and religious institutions.
* Develop and provide models for community-led, culturally relevant spiritual, emotional, and psychological healing based on scientific research on historical, generational, and complex trauma.

**What Churches Can Do**

* Join the Coalition as an ally at [boardingschoolhealing.org](http://www.boardingschoolhealing.org).
* Conduct and disseminate research on your denomination’s involvement as operators, promoters, managers, teachers, and funders of Indian boarding schools.
* Through processes of reflection and repentance, develop and adopt official statements of acknowledgement and apology.
* In consultation with the Coalition and the affected Native communities, take appropriate actions to make amends.
* Call on Congress and the President to establish a National Commission to learn the truth about the historic and ongoing impacts of the boarding schools on Native families, and recommend actions that support truth, reconciliation, and healing.