

Building Relationships with our Indigenous Brothers and Sisters

by Michelle Sanche with Sr. RéAnne Letourneau

This past August our Archdiocese pioneered a new program for seminarians called "Formation for Indigenous Relations and Ministry." 8 of our seminarians, along with interested priests, sisters, deacons and laypeople, spent 15 days over a 3-week period connecting with and learning from Indigenous Elders and leaders. As Seminarian Chris Lindenbach put it, "It was an opportunity to learn and encounter my First Nations brothers and sisters and learn about their culture and history, and develop friendships with individuals to journey with in search of truth and reconciliation."

Archbishop Don Bolen and Sr. RéAnne Letourneau collaborated with Indigenous leaders including Joanna Landry and Elders Lillian Piapot, May Desnomie and Robert Bellegarde, to plan and organize the program. With the additional involvement of 20+ Indigenous community members as well as Non-Indigenous leaders and friends, the team put together a rich array of learning activities and opportunities for friendship and connection. The feedback received at the end of the program helped clarify what worked well and what could be improved in future.

Learning to understand

Attendees participated in a Treaty workshop presented by Susan Beaudin and Joanna Landry. Sr. Patricia Orban commented: "During the workshop, Susan shared from her own personal life many painful stories that resulted from the way the Canadian government carried out their side of the treaties. In recent years, what helped her through some anguishing times was the unconditional kindness and welcome of Fr. John Weckend at St. Cecilia's Parish."

Ruth and Albert Robillard explained some basic terminology of what it means to be Indigenous. The Blanket Exercise, facilitated by Ruth and her students from the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, was an interactive way of experiencing 500 years of history with Indigenous Peoples of Canada.

Another meaningful learning experience was listening to Dennis Omeasoo and artist/Elder Wayne Goodwill as they



shared about the Winter Count Buffalo Robe Bundle, which is to be gifted to the Pope as a gesture of good faith and reconciliation. This buffalo hide has hand-drawn images by Wayne Goodwill, the only known pictograph artist in southern Saskatchewan. In partnership with the Archdiocese of Regina, the Regina Catholic School Division began this project as a response to the TRC calls

to Action, with the hope of building "mutual relationships of respect and reconciliation between Indigenous Peoples, the Catholic faith community and the Catholic Church."

Native Valley Ministry

Participants visited Lebret and heard Sr. Bernadette Feist and community members share about Native Valley Ministry. As Sr. Patricia put it afterwards, "I felt Sr. Bernadette was in tune with the people and loved them, sharing their joys and suffering. Her deep understanding of their culture and deep faith shone through her stories and relationship with the First Nations people."



A highlight for many participants was their time at Peepeekisis Reserve. There was Mass, and time to meet parish and community leaders. Robert Bellegarde shared about the meaning of the Pipe and led the group in a sacred Pipe Ceremony. He also taught about the meaning of the teepee and what each pole represented, while his son and grandson set up a teepee. The seminarians and deacons then got into teams and had a friendly competition to see who could set up the best teepee and the fastest. Transitional Deacon Anthony Tran Phung appreciated this hands-on

approach to learning, noting that information can be learned by reading, but the experience of doing something can have a deeper impact.

Jason Agecutay gave teachings on the meaning of the drum. He invited whoever wanted to among the seminarians, deacons, and priests to gather around the large drum as he taught them Pow Wow songs. A special moment came when he sang and hand-drummed a song he had created for Pope Francis. Transitional Deacon Parker Love said: "It opened the integration of Catholic spirituality and Indigenous culture to me in a way I had never experienced before."

Participating in the Peepeekisis Pow Wow was also part of the experience. Seminarian Chris Juchacz commented: "Our presence there was vitally important because it shows that the church is not just talking the talk, but rather that it is actually striving to walk the walk. This experience illustrated to me that what we need to do as church is be present; it's not always about doing, instead it's more about being present and loving our First Nations people."

Residential Schools and their Aftermath



At the site of the former Lebret Residential School, participants heard the powerful stories of a former student of that school, Noel Starblanket. They later viewed the film "It Had to be Done" about the Lebret Residential School, created by Tessa Cook. Seminarian Reed Miller said: "We sat with Elders, kokums, and residential school survivors. Each one shared a piece of their own life that revealed pains and struggles as well as joys and hopes." Chris Juchacz added, "I never fully grasped the gravity of the residential school experience until I heard several survivors share their stories. This experience has motivated me to try to be a bridge of healing and reconciliation for my Indigenous brothers and sisters who have been hurt by the church."

The effects of colonization and residential schools are still felt strongly, and have resulted in high numbers of Indigenous children in foster care and Indigenous adults in prisons. After visiting the Justice for our Stolen Children Camp, Deacon Norbert Gaudet said; "The Justice Camp session furthered my understanding of the underlying systemic problem we have with our social and child welfare system involving Indigenous peoples." Sr. RéAnne echoed this: "It is important to face the wounded parts of the church if we are entering into the

wounds of people. We need to acknowledge where and how we have hurt many within our institutions and communities. 'Truth' needs to come before 'Reconciliation', and justice is the crucial piece that can lead us in that direction."

On August 10th, Prison Justice Day, participants met with members of 'Friends on the Outside', a group offering friendship, support, hope and encouragement to inmates and former inmates and their families.

Connection and reconnection

At Holy Child Parish, Archbishop Emeritus Jim Weisgerber shared about his experience of growing in relationship with the Indigenous community, and showed a video of being traditionally adopted into an Indigenous family when he lived in Winnipeg. Later, when Elder Harold Lavallee led the formation group in a sweat lodge ceremony in Piapot Reserve, he was enthused to welcome his old friend 'Fr. Jim' (Weisgerber), whom he hadn't seen for over 30 years. According to Lavallee, "I spent a lot of time talking to Fr Jim many years ago...He was the one that really helped me in my journey of reconciliation."

Food, prayer and celebration

Food was definitely a big part of the experience, including treats such as bannock bison burgers and Indian tacos. Susie Desnomie and team at Peepeekisis and the Presentation Sisters on Pells Drive in Regina helped with meals for the program. The group was especially grateful to Doreen Topp for her delicious fried bannock. Transitional Deacon Ricardo Escalante commented that it brought back good memories of his family eating fried bread back in Trinidad and Tobago. Seminarian Andrew Lindenbach was glad to help: "Simply spending time with the grandmothers and listening to their stories was a wonderful experience. I truly enjoyed making bannock." Doreen herself commented: "Seeing how open they



were to learning about our culture and trying to understand where I was coming from really touched me, and as a Residential School Survivor I experienced a lot of healing; I'm starting to learn how to forgive and for that I want to thank them with all my heart!"



There was food for the spirit during many celebrations of the Eucharist on Pells Drive, and when the kokums (grandmothers) gathered for the Rosary, with May Desnomie teaching the group the Our Father and Hail Mary in Cree.

Attendees were in for a treat after a potluck supper at St. Cecilia Parish as world-champion hoop dancer Terrance Littlelent put on a workshop that included an exhilarating performance. When he invited a couple of audience members to give it a try, Sr. RéAnne and Transitional Deacon Chinh Vu energetically joined in the fun.

There was a return to Peepeekisis on the last day for a closing Pipe Ceremony and Feast led by Robert Bellegarde, to give thanks for all that was experienced. The food prepared by Susie Desnomie and friends was plentiful, symbolizing the Creator's lavish generosity. It was an abundant way to end the journey.

Post-program thoughts

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action #60 encourages churches to educate clergy about Indigenous spirituality, the history and legacy of residential schools, and our shared responsibility to build respectful connections with Indigenous families and communities. Engaging with that Call to Action was the inspiration for the decision to set up this program for those in leadership or en route to a leadership role in the church.

When all was said and done, and participants and helpers had moved back into their studies and work, they were asked what had stayed with them.

Elder May Desnomie shared: "I was impressed that the seminarians were willing to learn about our Indigenous culture and traditions, and I think that this is going to be very beneficial to them in their future ministries. I never thought that at my age, as an Elder I would see something like this, and I felt incredibly honoured to be part of this experience. We need leadership like this in the church to allow for these kinds of things to happen in responding to the TRC Calls to Action".

Deacon Arron Polk commented: "The immersion created lasting personal relationships and friendships where there

were none initially. To see people's hearts transformed nearing the end of the time spent was proof that the Spirit was moving when we were open to listening to the hard truths of another's life experiences. The immersion enabled people to begin to move forward together - out of love for one another."

Agnes Parisloff said: "My experience was profound, humbling, made me angry at times, heartbroken at times, hopeful for the future. I was touched by the stories of the Elders, their courage to tell all no matter how painful. I was touched by their relationship with Mother Earth, with nature, with all that the Creator has given us."

Andrew Lindenbach commented: "The times that I could speak and interact with others or learn from people who are within this ministry and the ways that they implement the faith stood out for me."



Faye Helmersen added: "I feel privileged to have been in a circle in which people felt free and safe to share their stories of life in Residential Schools and how that has contributed to making them and their families who they are today. It is important that as many folks as possible share in these stories."

Reed Miller remarked: "The most important thing I have taken away is how Christ is already at work, performing his healing ministry through dedicated men and women responding to the Lord's call for love and reconciliation, and this is something that we are all called to do."

Chris Lindenbach reflected: "What stays with me is the people: some that, despite having been hurt by the Church in the past, welcomed us seminarians into their communities to share their stories and culture, despite what the broken humanity within the church did in the past to some. It makes me excited to be preparing and discerning for ministry in Regina."

Sr. April Mireau summed up: "When I think of the whole 3 weeks, what wells up within me is HOPE! Hope for these seminarians who will be wonderful priests soon, hope for our Archdiocese, hope for the relationship of the church with Indigenous Peoples, hope for our world in such need of authentic relationships which bind us together in Christ!"