

# 'Every step ... uncovers something else to do'

## Five years after the TRC report, reflections on reconciliation

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Five years after Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) released its final report and 94 Calls to Action as a response to the legacy of Canada's Residential School system, the Anglican Church of Canada's national Indigenous archbishop and reconciliation animator say progress on reconciliation has been mixed.

"I think that there are some things that have gone much better than I would have imagined," says National Indigenous Anglican Archbishop Mark MacDonald. "There are other things that I thought would change more rapidly that haven't changed at all."

MacDonald says that over the past five years he has seen a "substantial change in the way in which, overall, people perceive Canada and the way that the church in particular sees its work."

"There's been a massive kind of deconstruction of the way in which the church has seen its relationship to Indigenous peoples, and that has been very, very significant," he adds. Thanks to the TRC, elements of Canada's past and treatment of Indigenous peoples which had previously been "well hidden" are now "general knowledge."



▲ ▶ Anglicans take part in the 2015 Walk for Reconciliation.

PHOTOS: ANDRÉ FORGET



For Melanie Delva, the Anglican Church of Canada's reconciliation animator, the 94 Calls to Action included in the TRC report have been a valuable tool for education as well as action.

"If it had just been a report, let's face it: a lot of Canadians—a lot of Anglicans—would not have read the report.... Even

the executive summary is 600 pages. But the 94 calls are more accessible, and I think that the calls ... end up teaching history as well." When Delva teaches the calls in workshops, she says, it often leads to questions about the history of Canada's and the church's relationships with First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

There have been many positive changes in the past five years, Delva says. "We do territorial acknowledgments, there is UNDRIP [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples] legislation in British Columbia now, there are First Nations who have their own child welfare systems within their nations," she notes. Yet the work is about more than checking off which calls to action have been fulfilled.

"The success or failure, for me, is more relational, is more the 'hearts and minds.' And I need to acknowledge that that is not how I started this work—that's been taught to me by Indigenous folks." When she began her role as reconciliation animator, Delva says, "the first thing I was encouraged to do was to make a list of the calls to action and check off the ones that we had completed. So that was kind of my first job. It's written into my job description that I am supposed to track progress on the calls to action. So in my own mind, the success or failure has been, at times—and on my bad days still is—how many of these can I check off as 'completed'?"

That checklist mentality is common in Canadian society at large, she says. But

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# Reconciliation ‘was never about a checklist’

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she has tried to transition her work to be more interpersonal, relational, and tied to spiritual care.

“For me, it’s always been a spiritual journey.... This was never about a checklist from a report. This has always been about us as a church entering into reconciliation because Jesus calls us to it.... The challenge for me is reminding people that we do this because it’s what Jesus called us to—otherwise, we’re another social service organization. For me, I think the challenge is reminding the church to dream dreams, to be open to visions, and to not be afraid when things we weren’t dreaming and visioning happen anyway.”

MacDonald says “blocks” remain in people’s minds and hearts. “There are blocks in the way that people are built, in habits of mind and heart and culture—not just in the minds and hearts of Western or white institutions, but also in Indigenous institutions and minds and hearts—that keep things the way they are.... So although I’m very happy with what has been accomplished, and on some levels, grateful and astonished, at other levels, I look and say, ‘Boy, we have a lot to do.’ Because every step forward uncovers something else to do,” he says.

In the past five years, MacDonald says, the Anglican Church of Canada has undergone some unimaginable changes. Many of these took place at General Synod in 2019: MacDonald points to the creation of the self-determining Indigenous church, and the designation of National Indigenous Anglican Bishop as an archiepiscopal position.

“What it said was, that freedom that we give to the Indigenous people has the same authority as anything else in the Anglican Church of Canada.... That’s an amazing thing.” Even a few months before it happened, MacDonald says, he “wouldn’t have imagined it possible.”

“The House of Bishops—they can’t even agree on when to have lunch ... and they voted unanimously for this!” he says with a laugh. “I think that’s an extraordinary measure of progress.”

“I think this could not have happened but for all kinds of grassroots work of compassionate caring and sharing and trust-building and all sorts of other things. So the work of, you know, really, hundreds and hundreds of people, and also, I’ve been saying, the movement of the spirit.... The church has a very extraordinary consensus in support of Indigenous rights, in support of the calls to action.”

## Advocating for UNDRIP

On Dec 15, the fifth anniversary of the final report’s release, TRC commissioners Senator Murray Sinclair, Chief Wilton Littlechild and Dr. Marie Wilson released a statement criticizing the federal government’s “slow and uneven” implementation of the 94 Calls to Action and advocating for legislation to implement UNDRIP in Canada.

“Essential foundations for reconciliation have yet to be implemented, despite government commitments,” the commissioners wrote, adding that this five-year mark “is not an anniversary for celebration, but one for national honesty, and urgent and meaningful action.”

MacDonald says he agrees with this assessment. “I think that they’re right ... and I think that’s a shame. Rhetoric is



▲ Participants in traditional dress gather at TRC national events in (top) Winnipeg, 2010; and (bottom) Vancouver, 2013.

PHOTOS: MARITES N. SISON

good, but you can wish for a little bit of action amidst the rhetoric. I would score the government high on rhetoric and low on action.”

Delva, too, says Ottawa’s approach has been marked by a mismatch of rhetoric and action. She believes it actually does more harm. “I would rather a government say, ‘We’re not interested,’ rather than having them say, ‘This is the most important relationship that we have,’ and then do some of the things that they have done. I think it breaks trust. It makes things far worse.”

It’s been “difficult and frustrating,” she says, to try to work in the same space while the government fails on these accounts. “[For] those of us who are trying to do the work in a good way, when the government of Canada takes a word like ‘reconciliation’ and makes it a part of a party platform and then fails on that, those of us who also carry that torch—maybe by a different name—fall with them in some way.... I’ve been told on more than one occasion that reconciliation is a dirty word, so I shouldn’t tell people what my role is. So I don’t. I say, ‘I work cross-culturally building bridges between communities.’ I don’t say I work in reconciliation anymore, because that word has been co-opted and failed.”

In their statement, the TRC commissioners commended the federal government’s commitment to establishing a National Council on Reconciliation and passing legislation to implement UNDRIP. “Yet, even now, nothing is certain,” the statement says. “In fact, six provinces have called for the implementation legislation

to be further delayed, despite the extensive debates around the UN Declaration that have taken place in Canada since its adoption by the United Nations in 2007.”

Asked by the *Anglican Journal* for a response to views expressed by MacDonald, Delva and the TRC commissioners, the office of Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations Carolyn Bennett provided a link to the minister’s own statement on the anniversary of the TRC report.

In her statement, the minister said that 76 of the 94 Calls to Action are the sole or shared responsibility of the federal government, and that “eighty percent of these are completed or well underway.”

“Federal legislation respecting Indigenous languages, investments in education, health, commemoration and efforts to support the safety and security of Indigenous women and girls, LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people are playing an essential role in rebuilding our relationships with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis,” she said.

The statement outlines recent changes such as the introduction of a National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, a change to Canada’s Oath of Citizenship that states commitment to respect the rights and treaties of Indigenous peoples, and the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. The statement also highlights the introduction of Bill C-15, which “will accelerate progress in affirming the rights of Indigenous peoples in Canada’s laws and policies,” the statement reads.

Delva says she hopes to see Anglicans join in advocating for the adoption and implementation of UNDRIP via Bill C-15, which was tabled in December. “We have full support from ACIP [the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples] to have our folks begin to do advocacy on this, to begin calling MPs.... We lost [Bill] C-262”—an earlier attempt at legislating UNDRIP implementation—“and that was a real mark of where our country is really at. Now we have another go at it, and if it passes it will not be because the debate was so wonderful or they finally read a piece of research that changed their minds once and for all. It will be because of public pressure. Anglicans are [part of] the public, and we can be that pressure.”

“People ask me all the time, ‘What can we do?’ and I keep on telling them, ‘Let your MPs know you care,’” says MacDonald.

“If we don’t tell them that this is one of the most important things, if not the most important thing to us, they’re going to keep on giving us platitudes and no action.... The reality is, we have not impressed upon them that this matters. That’s the only [reason] that I can see why pipelines matter to them more than people mired in despair and poverty in their country. It’s astonishing to me that they can tolerate these kinds of conditions in their country! The only thing that tells me the reasons why they can tolerate it is because they don’t think anybody cares! So if Anglicans could be roused to compassion and anger, I think it would make a difference. I really think it would make a difference.”

It’s important for Anglicans to understand this kind of advocacy as part of their spirituality and baptismal covenant, says Delva. “To the people that say we shouldn’t get political, I say, we’re spiritual right now. This is our spiritual battle.” ■

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—National Indigenous Archbishop Mark MacDonald