

Reflection for September 28, 2025 – Come As a Child Inspired by Matthew 18: 1-11

The TRC of Canada began its work June 1, 2008. Its “mandate was to inform all Canadians about what happened in residential schools. The TRC documented the truth of Survivors, their families, communities and anyone personally affected by the residential school experience. This included First Nations, Inuit and Métis, former residential school students, their families, communities, the churches, former school employees, government officials and other Canadians.”¹ The commission concluded its work in 2015 with a lengthy comprehensive report and 94 “Calls to Action.”

Ten years have passed and we might wonder what has been accomplished across this country. When we light our Indigenous Candle each Sunday morning and do our land acknowledgement, what does that mean to you personally?

This United Church of ours has been very active in supporting indigenous reconciliation efforts in what I would call outreach ministries – monetary support for land claims and in recent years support for identification of unmarked graves, from children buried at residential schools. Continued support is offered for healing initiatives for survivors of the residential school system, and its **intergenerational** impacts through the Mission and Service Healing Fund. And some of you will know we have a very active UC Native Ministry, which at present is developing their own unique Indigenous Church. We are grateful for the relationships we continue to foster and enhance with our First Peoples.

Of course, there is a long way to go as we have been told by wise indigenous leaders. Reconciliation is a process not a singular event, is a journey. The impact of our imperialist history runs deep, and it will take generations to undo past harms and misunderstandings.

There are many systems we have created that today just do not serve indigenous people well. Despite indigenous children making up only 7.7% of the overall child population, 53.8% of the children in foster care are indigenous.² In 2020/2021, Indigenous people in Canada were incarcerated at a much higher rate than non-Indigenous people. On an average day that year there were 42.6 Indigenous people in provincial custody per 10,000 population, compared to 4.0 non-Indigenous people.³

Many of us struggle with the question, what can I do individually in justice seeking healing and reconciliation with our indigenous brothers and sisters?

Phyllis Webstad was six years old when she went to residential school at St. Joseph's Residential School Mission in Lytton. It was 1973. Phyllis describes her first day,

Like many kids around the world, she was excited to go to school, and her grandmother bought her something new to wear for her first day.

“My grandmother probably couldn't afford it, but she always bought a new set of clothes for all kids going to the Mission, and I was no exception,” Phyllis explains. “It was really exciting. I picked out an orange shirt, and it was really shiny and it just sparkled.”

When she arrived, however, she was stripped of her clothes and her orange shirt was taken away, never to be worn again.

¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada - NCTR](#), accessed September 27, 2025

² [More than half the children in care are Indigenous, census data suggests | CBC News](#), accessed September 27, 2025

³ [Over-representation of Indigenous persons in adult provincial custody, 2019/2020 and 2020/2021](#), accessed September 27, 2025

*Since that day, the colour orange had always symbolized to Phyllis that she didn't matter. "Orange has always been to me... not mattering to anyone," she says. "Nobody cared that we had feelings. So, to me, that's what orange meant."*⁴

After telling her story publicly the first "Orange Shirt Day" was acknowledged on September 30, 2013, across Canada. This was not an event to celebrate and party, it was, and still is, an event reminding us of past wrongdoings and sufferings and, hopefully keeps us mindful of not repeating the same mistakes again. In a way it seems to me somewhat like Remembrance Day, a time to be quiet, pray, perhaps ask for forgiveness and commit to a loving, compassionate and justice seeking relationship with our indigenous friends and neighbours.

We remember all those beautiful and innocent children today. The atrocities committed were unconscionable. How did Christian Churches who believe in the gospels lose their way?

2-5 For an answer Jesus called over a child, whom he stood in the middle of the room, and said, "I'm telling you, once and for all, that unless you return to square one and start over like children, you're not even going to get a look at the kingdom, let alone get in. Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child, will rank high in God's kingdom. What's more, when you receive the childlike on my account, it's the same as receiving me."

Jesus adored children. How is it that those that believe in him could get it so wrong? When we revisit the residential school stories or others that are similar, we are drawn to anger and tears. On the global stage the horror of child labour, child pornography, children as soldiers and children as innocent victims of war, crush our spirits. I have a tendency to become discouraged. I expect you all do. Jesus asked that we look after the little ones, and that has not always happened.

Part way through my preparing for worship today, and to the chagrin of both Valerie and Louise, I changed the scripture reference. Not entirely, but I switched from the NRSV as updated to the Message edition. That was mostly because of the author's use of the word "childlike," and the suggestion that the disciples behave more like children. In fact, the message version concludes with, ***10 "Watch that you don't treat a single one of these childlike believers arrogantly. You realize, don't you, that their personal angels are constantly in touch with my Father in heaven?"***

Don't treat a single one of these childlike believers wrongly. Don't accuse them, don't berate them, don't abuse them, don't take advantage of them.

Children and those that are childlike, have a propensity to look at life through a different lens. Everyone is the same. Children play and "hang out" together. They are natural consolers, wanting to help their friends in trouble. They are justice minded, sharing their recess snacks or lunch at school with someone who doesn't have any. They don't make any judgements about what someone else is wearing or how they look. They don't care about skin colour. A hat and a turban probably look the same. They get mad when someone is bullied or shamed.

We are recognizing Truth and Reconciliation and Orange Shirt Day today (actually it is Sept 30). We are recognizing it primarily because of the harm that Canada's Indigenous People's, especially their children have faced. And in recognizing this day on the calendar, like we would Remembrance Day, we are committing to actively pursuing better understanding of culture, tradition and history, so that we might foster better relationships. This is not a one-day commitment but generational one.

Not to be lost in all this however is the reminder to a more fundamental truth.

If we believe in Jesus, we model childlike behaviour. We come to Jesus as a child; he gathers us in his arms and blesses us. In turn we go out into the world with the kind of unshakable love he

⁴ [Every Child Matters: Phyllis Webstad's Story Behind Orange Shirt Day](#), accessed September 27, 2025

possessed. We love passionately without exception. We don't play favourites, we don't distinguish between coloured, white, Jew, Muslim, Christian, rich or poor. All are the same to us. All are equally children of God the Creator.

If you chose to wear a orange ribbon today, wear it knowing you recognize the wrongs or the residential school system in Canada, and the need for improved relationships with our Indigenous Peoples. But wear it also as a reminder that we are called to be Jesus' childlike disciples, loving, caring, compassionate, and hopeful in a world that needs us. Thanks for listening this morning. Amen