

# Office of the Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Calgary

June 7, 2021

The Right Honorable Justin Trudeau, P.C., B. A., B.Ed.  
Prime Minister of Canada  
House of Commons  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Dear Prime Minister

This past week you said in your press conference that you, as a Catholic, were “deeply disappointed” in how the church has responded to the residential schools tragedy. You singled out the Catholic Church for not formally apologizing for its role in running residential schools, and for resisting calls to cooperate with efforts to document and uncover more information about residential schools.

As a Catholic and a Canadian, I am disappointed in how you have chosen to respond to the Kamloops Residential School horrific discovery of children’s remains.

Your comments are not only unhelpful but must be considered posturing for political purposes and yet another blatant attempt at ongoing dissimulation. The apology and regret made by the Bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories in 2014 to our indigenous brothers and sister

In 2014, the Alberta Bishops apologized to our indigenous brothers and sisters which included the following statement: “We also express our apology and regret for Catholic participation in government policies that resulted in children being separated from their families, and often suppressed Aboriginal culture and language at the Residential Schools.”

While acknowledging our own sorrow and guilt, and trying to own our sinfulness in the participation in residential schools, it is important to note the wording in our statement, especially the words, “participation in government policies.” Primary responsibility must be owned by the federal government.

This is underscored in Volume 4, Canada’s Residential Schools: Missing Children and Unmarked Burials - The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

Permit me to refresh your memory by quoting some sections pertaining to the substance of the report.

## **1. Executive Summary**

“The most basic of questions about missing children—Who died? Why did they die? Where are they buried?—have never been addressed or comprehensively documented by the Canadian government.” (P4)

## **2. Statistical Analysis**

“That these rates may not be as high as has been reported elsewhere should not detract from the fact that the federal government failed to take appropriate action address a

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national health-care crisis in the residential schools and in the Aboriginal community in general." (P33)

### **3. Operational Policies and Custodial Care**

"There are four major conclusions ... First, the federal government never established an adequate set of standards and regulations to guarantee the health and safety of residential school students. This failure occurred despite the fact that the government had the authority to establish those standards. Second, the federal government never adequately enforced the minimal standards and regulations that it did establish. Third, the failure to establish and enforce such regulations was largely a function of the government's determination to keep residential school costs to a minimum. Fourth, the failure to establish and enforce adequate standards, coupled with the failure to adequately fund the schools, resulted in unnecessarily high residential school death rates.

Students were housed in poorly built, poorly heated, poorly maintained, crowded, and often unsanitary facilities. Many of the schools lacked isolation rooms or infirmaries. Many lacked access to trained medical staff. It was not until the late 1950s that the federal government attempted to provide sufficient funding to ensure that student diets were nutritionally adequate. Such combination of poor housing, inadequate medical care, and poor diet left the students vulnerable to infections and reduced their ability to overcome them. Indian Affairs' failure to address the tuberculosis crisis in the broader Aboriginal community by improving housing, diets, income, and access to medical treatment, coupled with the failure to screen out infected children prior to admission to residential schools, guaranteed that students would be exposed to infection. It must be stressed again that the tuberculosis death rate in the general Canadian population declined in the early twentieth century, prior to the development of effective drug treatment. This decline is generally attributed to a variety of factors such as improvements in sanitation, housing, and diet, and the isolation of infectious individuals in sanatoria. Policies that would have had these same positive effects were recommended for residential schools—but were not adopted. As a result, tuberculosis remained a persistent residential school problem and death rates remained elevated until the introduction of drug treatment.

Student safety was further compromised by the failure to adopt and enforce fire safety standards in the construction and maintenance of buildings, and to construct and maintain safe, accessible fire escapes.

The failure to establish and enforce system-wide discipline policies left students subject to exceptionally harsh and often abusive punishment. This would have increased stress levels and undermined resistance to disease.

The federal government never adopted a national policy on the reporting of the physical and sexual abuse of students. As a result, parental and student complaints were often

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dismissed without investigation. In other cases, investigations were not carried out in an Impartial manner. A common practice was to dismiss a staff member suspected of abusing students rather than to report the incident to the proper authorities. In cases of actual or suspected abuse, parents were not informed and students were not offered any support. Recommendations to put staff screening procedures in place were not adopted. The failure to adequately address physical and sexual abuse in the school undermined the physical and mental health of countless students.

Harsh discipline and physical and sexual abuse led many students to run away. The failure to establish and enforce national policies and procedures on the measures that principals should take when students ran away from school further contributed to the elevated rates of school deaths." (p122-123)

#### **4. Where Are the Children Buried? Cemeteries and Unmarked Burials .**

"Tuberculosis was the cause of death in 48.7% of the cases for which there is a reported cause of death (on the Named and Unnamed registers combined.) A child's vulnerability to tuberculosis and ability to recover from the infection was in large measure governed by diet, sanitary conditions, ventilation, quality of clothing, and physical strength. Due to limited government funding, students in most schools were malnourished, quartered in crowded and unsanitary facilities, poorly clothed, and overworked. The fact that the government was not able to impose and maintain a screening mechanism that kept infected students out of the schools meant that the schools amplified an existing tuberculosis crisis in the Aboriginal community. Students who died at school were rarely sent home unless their parents could afford to pay for transportation. Unless they lived in close proximity to the school, most parents could not afford such costs. As a result, it is likely that most students who died at residential school were buried in either a nearby mission cemetery or a residential school cemetery. Although some of these cemeteries remain in operation, many more have been abandoned after the closure of either the school or the mission. In recent years, in a number of important instances, Aboriginal communities, churches, and former students have taken steps to rehabilitate cemeteries and commemorate the individuals buried there." (p138 )

To conclude, I would suggest a re-reading of 72, 73,74,75. of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action re Missing Children and Burial Information. We have a right to less pompous posturing and more forthright action on the part of federal government.

Wishing you all the best, I remain,

Sincerely yours

✠ F. B. Henry  
Bishop Emeritus of Calgary.

cc. The Honourable Carolyn Bennett  
The Honourable Marc Miller

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