

September 30, 2021

Statement Supporting the Establishment of a Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies

As representatives of religious denominations and congregations that operated many boarding schools for Indigenous children, we welcome the introduction of the “Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act” and urge all members of Congress to support this important legislation.

We acknowledge that from the 1860s through the 1960s U.S. federal boarding school policy sought to assimilate Native children into white American culture. In recognition that this policy was morally wrong and contrary to the teachings of our own faith, we are now beginning the journey of finding and facing our history with respect to the boarding schools.

The research we have seen so far documents an intense focus on cultural assimilation, teaching the children that their traditional ways were inferior. We have learned that:

- children were separated from their families and communities, in many cases against the wishes of their parents, and sent far away from their homes;
- children were punished for speaking their native languages or practicing their traditional spirituality or culture;
- children were physically, sexually, or emotionally abused.

Many children never returned home. We have learned that some of them died, either from disease or from abuse and lack of care, without any communication with their parents or their Tribal community. The fates of some children have yet to be accounted for. As a result, many Native communities today do not know what became of their children who were taken away. The effects of this historical trauma continue to have a serious impact on many Native people, Tribal communities, and Tribal Nations today.

There is so much that we don’t know and so much left to do. Given the scale of the task and the federal government’s own central role, a federal commission is needed.

Canada has a similar history of boarding schools for Native children. Canada’s federal Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008-15) documented the history of these schools, gave survivors an opportunity to share their experiences, greatly raised public awareness about this aspect of the country’s history, and issued Calls to Action to redress the schools’ legacy and take steps towards reconciliation. Many of our congregations and denominations in Canada participated in those processes: uncovering the past, learning more about the effects on boarding school survivors and their descendants, and responding to the Commission’s Calls to Action. Facing the sins of our past, committed in the name of Christianity, has been challenging. But it is also proving to be a tremendous blessing. Confronting the truth is a crucial first step toward laying a new foundation for just relationships moving forward.

We ask you to bring the U.S. government into this process by establishing a Commission to look truthfully and fully at the U.S. boarding school policy. In consultation with Indigenous communities, the Commission should examine the ongoing effects and make recommendations for addressing historic and present-day harms. We look forward to working with the federal government and with Indigenous communities in all of these efforts.

Signed,

The Episcopal Church
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Franciscan Action Network
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Jesuit Conference Office of Justice and Ecology
Office of Race Relations, Christian Reformed Church
of North America
The United Methodist Church – General Board of
Church and Society

