

What About the Rest of the Children?

By Todd Warfield, Interim Chair of Northeastern Jurisdiction Native American Ministries Committee

Eleven children that died while attending Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania were recently returned back to their families or tribes (Native News Online, 2024). I celebrate that event, because it provides some closure for those families. I immediately thought “What about the rest of the children? When do they get to go home?”

The Department of Interior delivered two scathing reports on Federal Indian Boarding Schools, outlining in the second report eight recommendations as a way to start the healing process:

1. Acknowledge, Apologize, Repudiate, and Affirm
2. Invest in remedies to the present-day impacts of the federal Indian boarding school system
3. Build a national monument
4. Identify and repatriate children who never returned from Federal Indian boarding schools
5. Return former Federal Indian boarding school sites
6. Tell the story of Federal Indian boarding schools
7. Invest in further research
8. Advance international relationships

(Newland, 2024)

The United Methodist Church also recently released a progress report on the involvement that the Church had in Indian boarding schools. There is considerable research still to do in this area. The report only provides a first glance at a list of schools known to operate, where they were, and when they operated. In some instances, schools were briefly in existence, were poorly funded, and had poor record keeping (Boggan, 2024). There is little detail in the report on the numbers of children that attended the schools, nor how many children died while attending these schools. A third phase of the research is planned.

How do we hold the Church accountable? How do we ensure that those children who died and were interred at the schools or otherwise discarded or buried be returned to their rightful tribal homes? The report suggests being honest about the past and that is a good start. A larger outcome is needed though. Consider the generational trauma that will need to be addressed. Consider the parishioner in the pew who has absolutely no idea that this has gone on. Consider how the doctrine of the Church continues to be thrust upon Indigenous people today. Consider how John Wesley himself preached “do no harm” yet came and converted indigenous people in Georgia. How do we hold church leaders accountable to understand this trauma? A simple apology or act of repentance do not come close to repaying that debt. Perhaps the UMC can

lean into the recommendations by the Department of Interior for their own healing journey. The children that are still unaccounted for deserve to go home. The UMC will need to fund these efforts despite all that is going on within the denomination.

Healing will take time and effort. The road is long, but we must continue to walk toward justice and reconciliation.

References

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