

**Show notes:**

**National Indian Residential School Crisis Line: 1-866-925-4419.**

Kid's Help Phone line 24/7: 1-800-668-6868

<https://kidshelpphone.ca/>

**Merle Nisly's reaction to the uncovering of 215 Indigenous children in Kamloops.**

<https://mnisly.com/the-impact-of-215/>

**"Every child matters" - Indigenous History Month:**

<https://mcco.ca/remembering>

**TRC 94 Calls to Action:**

[http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf)

**Justice Sinclair: "TRC One Year Later"**

[https://youtu.be/\\_MhqF4yeSXo?t=241](https://youtu.be/_MhqF4yeSXo?t=241)

"Change may not look like what you thought it would"

**CBC - news: "Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report"**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKKLgwlosaw>

**Some history of Northern Light Gospel Missions and Poplar Hill**

<https://ontariomennonitehistory.org/2015/06/08/ontario-mennonites-and-the-poplar-hill-development-school/>

**Canadian Mennonite series:**

<https://canadianmennonite.org/articles/how-complicit-are-mennonites-residential-school-abuse>

**"A first step towards healing" - Personal reflection on the first TRC event (June 2010)**

<https://canadianmennonite.org/articles/first-step-towards-healing>

**"MC Canada shares the pain of Indian Residential School legacy" - A report on discussions at MC Canada Assembly 2010**

<https://canadianmennonite.org/articles/mc-canada-shares-pain-indian-residential-school-legacy>

---

**Ken:** *This episode originally went live during Indigenous History Month, June 2021 after the uncovering of the 215 graves at Kamloops Residential School. Since then, thousands more have been found. Accountability by the government and churches who helped run the schools, continues to be urgently called for.*

*In this episode we talk about the Mennonite church's participation in the residential school system. We hear from Merle, a former residential school worker who has spent the majority of his adult life working to be accountable for that legacy, and encouraging fellow Christians and settlers to hold themselves accountable, too. Our interview took place in the fall of 2020. This story, or elements of it, may be uncomfortable for some. If you are triggered by what you hear in this story, you can call the National Indian Residential School Crisis Line at **1-866-925-4419***

*Here is the episode, and again, this was finished before the news of the 215 children in Kamloops.*

**Merle:** I started into this thing with almost no awareness of my own world view, just like most people, at a young age just aware of what we think, but not aware of why we think it and what values we actually have.

**Ken:** *You are now listening to UNDERCURRENTS. My name is Ken Ogasawara and I'm part of the Community Engagement team at Mennonite Central Committee in Ontario. This podcast is an ongoing experiment to find a new way to tell the stories coming from our community of partners, program participants, donors, and others.*

**Ken:** *Undercurrents is brought to you by Kindred Credit Union. Kindred's purpose is cooperative banking that connects values and faith with finances.... inspiring peaceful, just, and prosperous communities. As they seek to live out their purpose, Kindred is learning how they can address the historic and ongoing structural violence towards Indigenous peoples who have called this land home since time immemorial, to work towards reconciliation. This episode is about Merle.*

**Merle: (Merle introduces himself in Ojibway)** Hello, my name is Merle Nisly. This is a story, this is my story. It is a story of how I began to live among the Anishinabe of this area. It is a story of the things I have learned, the things that they have taught me. It is a story of my being with people who I love to this day and it is a part of my story.

**Ken:** *This is Merle Nisly. He was born and raised on the family farm in rural Ohio, within a tight-knit Mennonite community. He went to school with Mennonite kids, he went to church with Mennonite families, he played with Mennonite friends.*

**Merle:** I'm number 14 out of 15 kids, my family didn't value higher education. My parents trade, farmer oriented mindset. And they thought it was quite a stretch to even finish high school.

**Ken:** *But Merle did finish high school and several terms at a Bible college, Merle got a job working construction.*

**Merle:** So on my construction job, as we talked about our interests, day after day about things that I began to hear about a place called Red Lake, Ontario. As he described the wilderness of Ontario and the lakes and the adventures, I was very keen on that kind of thing. Because fishing and hunting and, and the outdoors was my primary passion.

**Ken:** *This was in the early 1970s, and young men like Merle were being drafted to fight in the Vietnam War (or, as Vietnam rightly calls it, “the American War”). As a pacifist and conscientious objector, Merle had the option to do alternate service. And one of these options was to do some voluntary service in Northern Ontario for an organization called Northern Light Gospel Missions, an organization started by Mennonite missionaries from Pennsylvania.*

**Merle:** *I sort of threw myself in to be at their disposal. I heard that I was going to be assigned to Poplar Hill Development School. That didn't mean a thing to me. Well, to my sort of embarrassment now, I didn't even ask. This is an adventure. I'm off for a couple years to go do something.*

**Ken:** *Merle's adventure was taking him to a residential school.*

### **History of Residential Schools**

**Ken:** *The first church-run residential school was established in 1831 - the Mohawk Indian Residential School in Brantford Ontario. You can learn more about that school in particular and hear from Karen Hill, a survivor of that school, in Ep 6 of Season 1 of Undercurrents, called “Save The Evidence.” Over the next century and a half, over 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation children were forcibly taken from their families and sent to residential schools. An estimated 4,100 children died of disease and malnutrition but the real number is likely much higher as record keeping at the time was poor.*

*Churches played a key role in the administration of these schools, providing both moral justification and the labour to run them. And though the Mennonite church as a denomination did not officially enter into a formal partnership with the federal government, individual Mennonite churches and volunteers across Turtle Island did participate in the running of both residential and day schools.*

*Of the fifteen residential schools in Ontario, three of these schools were run by Mennonites: Wabon Bay Academy, which included Stirland Lake and Crystal Lake schools, and Poplar Hill Development school. All three were in Northwestern Ontario. They operated between 1962 and 1989, affecting the lives of over six hundred children and their families.*

*While broadly speaking, the church justified its participation as quote “mission work”, the federal government was much more explicit in its motive: Duncan Campbell Scott, who was the federal Minister of Indian Affairs, and mastermind of the residential school program, infamously said: “I want to get rid of the Indian problem. I do not think as a matter of fact, that the country ought to continuously protect a class of people who are able to stand alone. . . .”. Merle, however, didn't know any of that. He didn't even really know what was being asked of him.*

**Merle:** *So, I was flown into a remote village. It's about a 100-kilometer flight from Red Lake to Poplar Hill, and I was dropped off there in October of 1971, right after freeze up, and found*

myself in the middle of a little Mennonite culture with roughly 50 indigenous students on a campus there.

**Merle:** So, I was assigned, first of all, to do maintenance work. I went out every day and day I did my job cutting firewood. I quickly sort of migrated into some mechanical repairs and things like that, with few questions asked. The first thing on the agenda is to get a haircut and I was taken to a place where they cut my hair. They didn't even want the students to see me with my hair the way they were until I sort of fit the mold. I didn't register anything other than my survival in that culture, my job, the expectations on me and I was surprised at how regimented a day's schedule was.

I had little contact with students except at meal times, recreation times. I just had no regular interaction before in my life with someone whose culture and language and skin color was that different from mine. I started to really want to know what their lives were like. But I really, really was fascinated with their language. I was really fascinated with their stories, with their background, but I had little opportunity. By the second school year, I felt more at home there, and I felt a little more confidence to pursue some of my interest in their lives. One of the ways I did that is that there were two young men, indigenous young men who had been students at that school before, and came back as staff members.

So, I had the freedom to talk to them as adults. So, especially on the days off that those young men had, I would learn vocabulary from them. I wanted to learn bits of their language. I didn't imagine I would become fluent, but I wanted to learn. I kept asking them things about... I wanted to learn outdoors things. I wanted to learn what they know.

**Ken:** *Even as Merle became more comfortable with his place and role at the school, there was a growing awareness of what was going on around him including the jarring transformation of the children from their summer with family, to their first day back at school.*

**Merle:** Some of the adjustments I observed, the way their clothing that the, the guy's haircuts, how everything changed from the time that they stepped off the airplanes.

**Ken:** *Merle also began to notice other disturbing practices...*

**Merle:** I remember a time when, when a young male student ran off, I remember that when that young man was brought back, one of the ways in which he was made an example for the others is that his hair was cut very short. I remember being impacted by how he then stood out as an obvious offender. I also became aware of the corporal punishment, I began to hear what a traumatic thing that was. One of the men who also lived in the dormitory was involved sometimes, at least some of the time he was involved. And I remember it being a big deal for him. It was not just somebody administered a spanking. It was a big deal. It required witnesses and it required additional physical strength there to make sure the situation was that the resistance by the student didn't get out of hand. I can't describe what happened. I just knew from the little bits of body language and from talking tell it wasn't like my experiences at all. I

never to this day have never really asked them. I don't know for some reason I really didn't want to know. Those things began to accumulate in my spirit. In my mind, I didn't know exactly what to do with at all.

Other things that were brighter. For example, on Sunday afternoons, being involved with going snowshoeing or doing something fun playing hockey. I kind of look back on most of those relationships with the males as having a fairly fun and relaxed relationship with them.

Northern Light Gospel Missions had people living in all these communities. Some of those people were the role models, they were the ones who opened my mind to all of that. So a way that you could relate. And I started to see that what they're doing is what I want to do. That's how I want to relate to the indigenous community, I want to live there, I want to learn to speak like them, I want to learn how they think, how they live. And that's what started to contrast with the artificial environment that I was in where our people created the environment, and brought people into it. I wanted to reverse that and be a part of the community in their environment.

**Ken:** *Merle finished his service term at Poplar Hill Development School after 2 years. He returned to Ohio with his wife Rita, and after two and a half years away, returned to Poplar Hill, again with Northern Light Gospel Mission, but this time to live within Poplar Hill village, an indigenous community.*

**Merle:** One of the things that really gave me, uh, a level of comfort and welcome, -there was at least a formal, there was a community based welcome. Our organization did not put people in a community without permission without an invitation.

**Ken:** *Merle and Rita lived as part of the community, building relationships, learning Indigenous stories and culture. He studied and eventually became fluent in Ojibway, a language he retains to this day. This new way of being with Indigenous peoples contrasted sharply with his time at the residential school, and as years went on, Merle wrestled with his complicity in the colonial agenda.*

**Merle:** What's hard about it is admitting how naive and unaware we were. And it's hard to believe that there wasn't maliciousness. I have lots of friends whose story is quite similar to mine. Maybe not the ending, but at least the beginning is very similar. When we look at it now, there was sin. And there were threads or instances of malicious intent and evil. Just a complete unawareness that there's a sinister plan in the background somewhere that we're cooperating with, when we actually think in our simplicity, think that we're doing missions.

**Ken:** Yeah, God's work,

**Merle:** God's work.

[CBC News Clip]

**Lyndsay:** The Mennonite Central Committee was privileged to be able to invite survivors to the closing ceremonies as part of the TRC hosted by Canada. The seven survivors who attended brought with them stories, around their own residential school experience.

**Ken:** *This is Lyndsay Mollins Koene, the program coordinator for MCC's Indigenous Neighbours program in Ontario. The TRC is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a groundbreaking investigation into the history of and impact of residential schools. The TRC which lasted from 2008 to 2015, heard testimonies from over 6,500 survivors of the residential schools. Lyndsay followed the TRC closely over the years, participating in events with Indigenous friends and partners, and eventually journeying to Ottawa to attend the TRC closing ceremonies. After days of more story sharing, events, and rallies at which tens of thousands marched the streets of Ottawa, Lyndsay describes the electricity in the air as the Head Commissioner, Justice Murray Sinclair, was about to reveal the final report.*

**Lyndsay:** I can only compare it to being in Union Station in Toronto at rush hour when people are running for their GO train. It felt that way. It was that important that people get to where they needed to be in that moment. I was one of those folk, and it was standing room only. Seats were filled, aisles were packed, and all around me bodies were pressing up against me, and it was the same everywhere. There were dignitaries, politicians in the front rows representing our country, and that was very important. Justice Sinclair then began to speak, and it was unforgettable. He talked about the courts and the system that had examined the stories of the TRC, and he then wrapped up by talking about the findings.

**[Media clip] Commissioner Murray Sinclair:** ...The period from Confederation until the decision to close residential schools was taken in this country in 1969, Canada clearly participated in a period of cultural genocide.

**Lyndsay:** People hugged - strangers. We were in tears. People felt vindicated. All of the people, survivors, sitting there felt vindicated.

**Merle:** "What's the story? What's going on?" is sort of the question...

**Ken:** *Merle understands the confusion and defensiveness of many of his peers who served in residential schools who now hear their time of service being called cultural genocide.*

**Merle:** What opposition, what enemy force, what evil is changed, rewriting this story and changing it and saying that we were all wrong and and all of that. Looking back at their photo albums and in their journals as time when they gave of themselves to needy people somewhere. The people whose story, whose beginning has been similar to mine, it's been my mission to help them work through that, if they will, so it's been very encouraging that some people, their response is "What can I do?".

**Ken:** For settlers who have accepted the Truth, the question of Reconciliation now comes into focus. Commissioner Murray Sinclair said that Truth is easy. Reconciliation is harder. Lyndsay, who has been at this work for nearly 30 years, cautions us against rushing into action.

### Ethical Spaces

**Lyndsay:** We just need to be careful as settlers, careful in a way that lets us walk forward. I was reading on the weekend, about a document written by Marlene Castellano. She was the Dean of, at the time, Native Studies at Trent University when I was there in the 90s. A brilliant woman, a brilliant Mohawk woman, but she cites another author in her document who talks about ethical space and it is space where there is no owner. There is no one in charge of the space, and this space is shared between settlers and Indigenous folk. Where ideas are put down on the floor, and in a good way.

**Ken:** I asked Lyndsay what creating ethical space might look like, practically? What are the things that settler folks like me can do to practice this different way of relating with Indigenous peoples?

**Lyndsay:** What people can do when they're having a conversation that involves sharing the land, land acknowledgements, programs in their churches or organizations, schools, is they can ask who's speaking into this. They can ask that question of themselves, who's speaking into this? Who's here? Who has part in this moment that we're creating?

**Lyndsay:** Ask yourselves who is involved in the planning of that event, or is there something else going on that's already been planned by indigenous folk or communities, First Nations perhaps, that I'm not aware of. And, that's okay too. It can be anything from reading a book to planning an Elders Conference at Trent University. It could be any one of those moments in between. Who's speaking into those, right? That's another thing we can listen for is invitation. Did we come up with the idea? Is the idea coming from our school or our organization, or is it an invitation from an indigenous community that we want to be listening to?

I think that's how we need to be held accountable is to be willing to walk into a space where we have no control. That's something that we as settler people have trouble with, that control piece, the fix-it piece, the helping piece. We can't be there as all those things as settlers in a new space, if you will, in a new way of thinking. It will take some time. It won't happen tomorrow, it can't be part of a five year strategic plan, it can't be something that we put on paper and document and say, "We did this." It can't be that.

**Ken:** Lyndsay and Merle first met at a small TRC event in Thunder Bay specifically for survivors of the Mennonite-run residential schools. Merle was the only one there representing residential school staff and Lyndsay with other MCC leadership had stepped up to represent the broader body of Mennonites. It was a powerful event for both survivors and Mennonites, and Merle became a friend of MCC's from that point. Several years later, Lyndsay invited Merle to another

*TRC event at Conrad Grebel University College in 2013, called Mending The Sacred Hoop. She recounted this story to both me and Merle on the phone.*

### **Merle Christian Indigenous Apology**

**Lyndsay:** It was when the TRC had begun the truth and reconciliation events had begun. We had, um, a circle of 50 plus people there, some were indigenous, um, most were not most recently folk, Nishnawbe Aski Nation was there. they were there as helpers, emotional helpers, um, along with us because we did have some indigenous folk. We had, we invited Merle to come to the event and, and to talk about whatever he wanted to talk about and, um, to our surprise Merle stood at the podium and, um, read that apology. And it was just still incredibly powerful Merle you'll never know, um, but like how it was received by others. Andrew Wesley, um, the elder who hugged you is a dear friend of ours. He was an attendee of St. Anne's residential school. And so it was he who, hugged you in the center of that circle in front of participants that day. And, um, your apology was, you know, um, so point poignant in end, and to, you know, to the point, um, in a really got down to, we are sorry. And you actually say those words with so many other church groups are afraid to say because of legal ramifications, the I'm sorry, you know, those two words and you say it several times and you say it around grouped around, um, different actions. And, um, so it is a very, very powerful apology.

**Merle:** Thank you. Those details bring up a lot of the feelings of that event, so thank you.

### **Merle's Apology**

An apology statement to the former students of Poplar Hill development school from the current representatives of the administration and staff members of the agencies that operated the school.

We have heard the expressions of genuine pain in what you've said about the schools and your experiences there.

We are doing our best to understand you, to empathize with you and your journey to healing and resolution. We sincerely acknowledge and validate your perspective on your school experiences. Our apology includes the following specifics.

For the times when we physically inflicted pain or added to the pain of your soul by our actions, we are sorry.

For the times when we underestimated or ignored the impact on you, of your separation from your family, we are sorry.

For the times when our ignorance or negligence caused you to suffer additional emotional and physical pain at the hands of other students, we are sorry.

For the times when school personnel were not properly screened and when personnel were not adequately trained to relate to you in culturally appropriate ways, we are sorry.

For the times that we acted as though we were culturally superior to you, we are sorry.

For the ways in which we cooperated with the national plan to force your assimilation into Canadian society, we are sorry.

We pledge ourselves to the ongoing healing process by offering ourselves to you for private conversations or with a third party present, as you wish. Please consider our apology and our sincere desire for truth and reconciliation.

**Merle:** It is a conflicting thing in one's heart and mind when you feel you've done something, when you feel you meant well. But it is really important that we who think our stories started out as naïve and well-intentioned, it's really important that that's not how we see ourselves, or that that's now how we either rationalize or justify or explain. The important thing really is owning the effects. We must own the whole story

**Ken:** *Merle has lived and worked for over 40 years in the Red Lake area in Northern Ontario with Indigenous communities and with settlers in a life-long effort to own his whole story. But if we find ourselves saying in our secret heart, "Well, at least I didn't work at a residential school." or "I would've known better." then we are missing the point. If you are a settler, as I am, on this land that we call Canada, then we have our story to own, too. We have our own obligations ... to enter into an ethical space with Indigenous communities and with each other, as Lyndsay told us about. To unlearn our own biases and racism, to relearn by listening to the multitude of stories, the wide spectrum of Indigenous lived experiences. To march in solidarity with Indigenous people, at their invitation with deep humility, courage, and integrity. Because unless we are actively working to dismantle colonialism within ourselves and within our systems, we are complicit, as Merle found himself to be complicit at Poplar Hill.*

*I want to thank Merle for sharing his story so openly and candidly and Lyndsay for modeling deep listening, patience, and centering Indigenous voices in her work and life. And to the survivors of residential schools, to all Indigenous peoples who are surviving colonialism as we speak, and especially to those who did not, I am sorry, and I recognize, like Merle does, that an apology is not enough. Once again, for those who need support after hearing this story, the National Indian Residential School Crisis Line is **1-866-925-4419**.*

*Also in the show notes is more information about the TRC calls to action, which include actions specifically for the church, as well as Merle's reflection after reading about the uncovering of the 215 children in Kamloops, BC.*

*This episode was produced with help from Seun Olowo-Ake, edited by Christen Kong and mixed by Francois Goudreault Jr. Original music by Brian MacMillan, and cover art by Jesse Bergen. Huge thanks again to our sponsor and community partner, Kindred Credit Union. If you have any questions or comments about this episode, please write to us at [podcast@mcco.ca](mailto:podcast@mcco.ca) - I'd love to hear from you. Finally, I would like to thank you for listening to Undercurrents. Please subscribe and like wherever you listen to podcasts. I'm Ken Ogasawara. Have a great rest of your day.*

