

While Christianity's formative contributions to Canadian society have been recognized (Ontario Human Rights Council, 2013), there is a dark side of this story. One salient example is the propagation of corporal punishment of children by some Christian theologies. Hitting and beating of children has been justified for centuries on the basis of Old Testament scripture: "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes" (Proverbs 13:24) (Capps, 1995; Ellison, & Bartowski, 1997; Proctor, 2016; Stiller, 2003). For decades, this scripture underpinned the justification of corporal punishment in homes, schools (Axelrod, 2010) and mainstream churches (Stiller, 2003). Over the past decade, we have learned the depth of its impact within the walls of the Indian Residential Schools (TRC, 2012a).

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has provided irrefutable evidence of the profound damage and ongoing intergenerational trauma that arose from concerted efforts to "Christianize and civilize" (TRC, 2015) the Indigenous peoples of Canada (Ingram, 2006; TRC, 2012a). The Indian Residential Schools were a key element of this strategy. Funded by the government and operated by the churches (Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Mennonite, Methodist, Presbyterian, or United), the education they provided was "directed towards the destruction of Aboriginal spirituality" (TRC, 2015). Corporal punishment was a primary tool used to enforce children's compliance in these schools. It was common for children to be beaten, denied food and water, shackled, whipped and strapped (TRC, 2015).

Four churches have apologized for their role in the abuses inflicted on children in the Residential Schools (United Church of Canada, 1986; Anglican Church of Canada, 1986; Catholic Church of Canada, 1991; and Presbyterian Church of Canada, 1994). But these apologies are only a small step toward reconciliation (TRC, 2012). These Canadian churches must confront the theological interpretations of scripture that drove the punitive actions of so many priests, nuns and teachers in the past – and that continue to justify and encourage punitive violence against children today (Hoffman, Ellison, & Bartowski, 2017; Ingram, n.d.; Larzelere, 1993, 1998).

In 2015, the TRC issued 94 Calls to Action (TRC, 2012b), providing a roadmap for reconciliation. The sixth of these calls upon the Government of Canada to remove the law that allows corporal punishment of children. A private member's bill to implement Call to Action #6 was recently introduced by Senator Murray Sinclair, the former Chair of the TRC. If passed, this bill would enhance protection for all children in Canada. One of the primary barriers to its passage is the theology that has for so long been an obstacle to effective child protection. Now is the time to address this issue from a theological standpoint, engage debate, and progress toward reconciliation between the churches and Indigenous peoples.