News and Resources: June 2025
Joint Truth and Reconciliation Working Group

Highlights from the 2025 JTRAG Survey

Thank you to the people who participated in our survey in May. Each member congregation promoted the survey through their regular channels and provided time in one (or two) of their services in May to respond to the survey. 202 people participated: 51 (25%) completed online surveys. 151 (75%) completed paper surveys. Responses pointed to a few small design flaws in the survey structure. These likely had minimal negative impact on the survey results. Here are some key results:

- 56% have Indigenous relatives or friends
- 65% have visited a reserve other than to buy cigarettes or fuel
- 91% would be comfortable attending a Pow-Wow
- 74% consider themselves moderately well-informed on issues related to Indigenous people in Canada
- 58% acknowledge the suffering of Indigenous peoples / feel the issues are very complex
- 52% are members of congregations that are acting on the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission
- 94% are comfortable learning more about the issues in church
- 46% are engaged in reconciliation work at a personal level
- 64% are aware of JTRAG's work
- Respondents name self-education and supporting worship as the top priorities for JTRAG
- Age profile of respondents: Under 40: 4.92%; 40-60: 9.29%; 60+: 81.42%; n/a: 4.37%

Some observations from JTRAG members:

- Good to see the overall positive response.
- Quite a few people have Indigenous friends and have visited reserves socially. And there are some Indigenous members in our congregations.
- Many respondents don't know what JTRAG is – an opportunity to build awareness.
- 48% don't know enough about JTRAG to offer an opinion on our priorities.
- Great to see the number of respondents to the survey and the seriousness that it appears they gave to the survey. This suggests a surprising reach of the newsletter and its audience as well as the interest and commitment of congregational members in JTRAG-associated churches.
- There also appears to be a few contradictions in the responses, not surprising but they suggest the strong and continuing need for guided education in the area. For example, 74 percent of respondents reported that they were moderately informed on the issues while only 35 percent have attended a pow-wow, 90 percent would be comfortable doing so (a difference of 55 percent on the latter). The data suggests opportunity and interest, at least from time to time, on related interest among a large group of respondents.
- There is general support/affirmation for JTRAG and its activities, which are closely aligned to its mandate.

- Many respondents interested in issues of right relations, reconciliation and justice are looking for direct engagement with Indigenous peoples, i..e. inviting them as speakers. We need to be sensitive to placing the burden of our education on others.
- Excellent response; it seems that a large majority of surveys were completed during a worship service, hence the value of that method of collection
- Encouraging that a majority of non-Indigenous respondents have Indigenous friends or relatives (56%) and about 3/4 have visited a reserve, 2/3 other than to buy gasoline or cigarettes! It would be interesting to know how much interaction people have with their non-Indigenous friends and what they do together.
- 33% have attended a Pow-wow; 90% would be comfortable doing so—a sign of openness.
- 1/3 feel issues regarding Indigenous rights are pretty straightforward. 58% feel the issues are very complex. We should seek to know more of the basis for thinking the matter is straightforward.
- JTRAG's work needs to continue, with more emphasis on effective change
- Recruit those who are acting (46%) to encourage/engage those who aren't.

Possible actions

1. Combine food, education and some worship aspects...but maybe not on Sunday morning.
2. Open our self-education online discussions to others.
3. Gather and share information on events hosted by Indigenous groups within a day's travel that are open to all and provide opportunities to connect with others and learn directly about Indigenous cultural practices.
4. Organize group visits to cultural events, such as art exhibits, etc.
5. Work with *All Our Relations Land Trust* to investigate opportunities to promote seasonal visits to the land for teaching and learning.
6. Offer the blanket exercise again. It has changed significantly since SSU and Chalmers hosted this event, nearly a decade ago.
7. Host an online book discussion group that gives voice to Indigenous peoples – without placing an undue burden on Indigenous leaders – to advance our self-education.
8. Host an online or in-person teaching session on land acknowledgements that speaks to their historic and contemporary significance in indigenous culture/communities and invites participants to write their own land acknowledgement and share it with others.
9. Host an event with guest speakers, focused on allyship, for settler descendants who have engaged in self-education and are committed to responsible, active ally ship and advocacy.
10. Hire a student to do regression analysis and present it to JTRAG.
11. Seek an opportunity to present the results to the Board of each congregation.
12. Seek an opportunity to present results within a service at each congregation.

Full results are on the JTRAG website: https://sydenhamstreet.ca/ssuc1/community-outreach/jtrag/
We invite you to take time to review them and send us your observations and recommendations.

A Peace and Friendship Gathering will be held July 17th to 20th at the Tatamagouche Centre. This event brings Indigenous and settlers together to share on the land. Ceremonies, teachings, Sacred fire, building a sweat lodge and learning what it means to live in Treaty relationship. All welcome. For more info email Eryka at peaceandfriendship@tatacentre.ca

What About the New Indigenous Church Structure in the United Church?

In the June issue of Broadview magazine, Teresa Burnett-Cole writes about the new Indigenous Church structure. She observes that the centennial of The United Church of Canada is something to celebrate. Yet, most United Church members know little about the Indigenous Christians who share the name United. The article offers a brief retelling of the journey from government wards to partners in mission. "Scripture tells us to care for our neighbour as self, but how can we do such caring if we don't know our neighbour's joy and pain?". The article discusses the history of Indigenous ministries in the United Church and points out that it is fraught with challenges and steeped in colonialism. The relationship could be described as two steps forward, one step back, she says. The past 100 years have seen the closure of residential schools, the rise of Indigenous spiritual leadership, two apologies from the national church and an ongoing commitment to healing and reconciliation. Alongside that, Indigenous Christians have faced lingering racism, bureaucratic barriers and a resistance to true autonomy that continues to this day. If contemporary Christians are to be in right relations with Indigenous people, then this full story of our relationship must be shared. You can find the full article at https://www.broadview.org/category/magazine/

On the meaning and use of land acknowledgements

As land acknowledgements become more common, we want to know more about how to use them in the most appropriate way. Janice Hill, past Associate Vice-Principal (Indigenous Initiatives and Reconciliation) at Queens University writes: "To be meaningful and respectful, a territorial acknowledgement needs to be intentional. This is a time to give thanks, consider our individual and collective role in the stewardship of Mother Earth and in building relationships between Indigenous people and communities and the rest of the country." See the full article at https://www.queensu.ca/indigenous/ways-knowing/land-acknowledgement

Standing Bear Network is an all volunteer, community media initiative, elevating indigenous voices and providing educational tools designed to empower the efforts of grassroots and traditional communities, in the modern and ever-changing struggles of colonial assimilation, resource extraction and extinguishment. Learn more at this podcast: https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/podcast46833/episodes/2022-11-23T14_19_45-08_00

Rematriation of Tatamagouche Centre: By the end of June a Memorandum of Understanding should be signed by the United Church, Tatamagouche Centre and Women of First Light. This MOU commits to returning the Centre to the Mi'kmaq grandmothers through Women of First Light. The transition will not happen immediately as WoFL needs to build its capacity to operate the Centre. Nex step is to start fundraising for the Longhouse and other needed work. Read more here: https://www.tatacentre.ca/land-rematriation

Native American Book Club

This month, we're diving into *Bad Cree* by Jessica Johns. It's a gripping and eerie novel that blends dreams, memory, and Cree tradition into a haunting story of grief and survival. If you love stories that keep you thinking long after you've turned the last page, this one's for you. Come join us in the Native American Book Club Facebook Group—we're sharing thoughts, asking questions, and building a space to explore these stories together.

June is National Indigenous History Month

On June 21st, we're honouring National Indigenous Peoples Day. It's a time to celebrate the rich histories, cultures and enduring contributions of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis peoples across Canada. Here are some ways in which you can engage:

***Listen and Learn*:** Explore podcasts and community events that amplify Indigenous voices.

***Support Indigenous-led Work*:** Donate, volunteer, or shop from Indigenous-owned businesses and organizations making change.

***Take Action*:** Reflect on how your work or community can align with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

***Celebrate Indigenous Creators*:** Share the work of Indigenous artists, storytellers, and knowledge keepers on your platforms. We'll be sharing our favourites on social media in June - check it out!

***Get Involved*:** Whether you attend a local pow wow, learn whose land you live on, or simply listen to a new story, your engagement matters.

***Support Northern and Remote Indigenous Communities*:** Help deliver urgently needed aid like educational resources, critical baby supplies and more. Learn more about how your donation makes a difference by visiting True North Aid's website at www.truenorthaid.ca.

10 Indigenous Books That Belong on Every Shelf. Pow-Wows.com recommends this list of books from powerful histories to captivating fiction: 10 must-read books—five non-fiction and five fiction—essential for anyone looking to deepen their understanding of Native American culture and experiences.

***Unreserved* is the radio space for Indigenous voices** — our cousins, our aunties, our elders, our heroes. Rosanna Deerchild guides listeners on the path to better understand the stories of Canada's Indigenous peoples. Listen at: https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved

Exploring the Link Between Food Sovereignty, Nutrition Disruptions from Residential Schools, and Health Challenges in Canadian Indigenous Communities *by Kip Ip*

Introduction: Indigenous communities in Canada face serious health problems. These include high rates of diabetes and heart disease. One main cause is the historical loss of food sovereignty. This means the right to choose healthy, cultural, and sustainable foods (La Via Campesina, 1996). Indigenous people ate fish, berries,

and wild game in the past. These foods supported their health and cultural identity. Wild games (i.e., meat from animals hunted in the wild, like in forests or grasslands) were a vital part of their traditional diet. It gave important nutrients and helped maintain cultural traditions. Colonial policies, such as residential schools, took this away. These schools operated from the late 1800s to 1996. They gave poor food and broke cultural ties (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Today, environmental problems make it worse. For example, mercury contamination in Grassy Narrows harms the land and food. This essay explains how food sovereignty, past nutrition problems, and current health issues are linked. It also looks at Canadian policies that try to help.

The Significance of Food Sovereignty: Food sovereignty helps Indigenous communities take back control of their food systems. It allows access to traditional foods that are healthy and important to their culture. These diets include fish, berries, and wild game. Studies show they can lower the risk of diabetes by 30% because they are low in sugar and high in nutrients (Kuhnlein & Receveur, 1996). Colonialism damaged this system. It took away land and used residential schools to change food habits. This led to dependence on costly and processed foods. Some communities are now rebuilding. For example, gardens in Winnipeg grow cultural crops and teach traditional food skills. These initiatives enhance public health, restore cultural pride, and foster resilience following significant setbacks.

Historical Nutrition in Residential Schools: Residential schools tried to make Indigenous children follow non-Indigenous ways. They gave children poor food, such as stale bread and canned meat. This caused malnutrition and raised the risk of diabetes later in life (Mosby & Galloway, 2017). Children were taken from their families and lost knowledge of traditional food. Some were part of harmful vitamin experiments without consent (Mosby, 2013). These actions caused trauma. The effects were passed down through generations, both mentally and physically (Bombay et al., 2014).

Today, problems continue: For example, the fish in Grassy Narrows are still unsafe to eat. In the 1960s, a paper mill dumped mercury into the English-Wabigoon River near Grassy Narrows in Ontario (Porter, 2016). The mercury poisoned the water and the fish. People who ate the fish became sick. They had shaking, hearing loss, and depression. Some children were born with health problems because their mothers ate the fish during pregnancy. The river is still polluted, and the fish are still poisonous.

This pollution destroyed the fishing economy. Many people live in poverty. Traditional fishing, which was part of the culture, has been lost. In 2017, the Ontario government committed $85 million to clean up the river system (Ontario Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change, 2017). The federal government also promised to build a treatment center for mercury survivors (Amnesty International Canada, 2019). As of 2024, the center remains incomplete due to delays and increased expenses (Indigenous Watchdog, 2024). The damage from mercury shows how one industrial action can hurt a whole community for many years.

Current Health Issues and Their Causes: Indigenous communities in Canada face serious health challenges. For instance, 17.2% of First Nations people living on reserves have diabetes, compared to 5% in the general population. Heart disease affects 7.1% of Indigenous adults, versus 5% of non-Indigenous adults. The stroke death rate is also twice as high among Indigenous peoples (Diabetes Canada, n.d.; Anand et al., 2018; Heart and Stroke Foundation, n.d.). Diabetes is a condition where the body cannot control blood sugar properly. High blood sugar can damage blood vessels and nerves, leading to serious health problems over time. Heart disease includes problems with the heart and blood vessels, often resulting from blocked or narrowed arteries. People with diabetes are more likely to develop heart disease. Both diseases can lead to heart attacks, strokes, and death. They also create significant, long-term healthcare costs. Preventing these diseases can save lives and reduce social and medical costs. These health problems stem from poverty, remote living conditions, and changes in diet after residential schools disrupted traditional food practices. Poverty limits access to nutritious food and healthcare. Remote areas often lack sufficient medical facilities, requiring long travel for care, which delays treatment and increases health risks. Isolation also limits access to healthy food options. Processed foods are more readily available but contribute to health issues. Historical trauma continues to impact mental

health, which can lead to physical health problems. Additionally, climate change affects hunting and fishing, increasing food insecurity in Indigenous communities (National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, 2020).

Reflections from My Role as a Tutor: As a tutor at the Indigenous Students Centre, I have seen how food sovereignty can help healing. One student learned to pick berries. She felt proud and more connected to her community. Her confidence also grew. This story shows that traditional food practices can support emotional and physical healing. They bring hope for people affected by historical trauma.

Recent Canadian Policy Efforts: The Canadian Government has implemented several policies to support Indigenous health:

- Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative (ADI): Launched in 1999, the ADI invests over $50 million annually to support health promotion and diabetes prevention activities in more than 600 First Nations and Inuit communities. Programs include community-based initiatives like walking clubs, fitness classes, community kitchens, aiming to reduce type 2 diabetes among Aboriginal people (Indigenous Services Canada, 2020).
- Framework for Diabetes in Canada: Established to provide a common policy direction to address diabetes, this framework focuses on improving access to prevention and treatment, especially for populations at elevated risk, including Indigenous communities. It emphasizes a person-centered approach, considering physical, social, emotional, mental, spiritual, and cultural well-being (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2022).
- Planting Seeds for Urban Indigenous Food Sovereignty: This initiative, led by Western University and the Southwest Ontario Aboriginal Health Access Centre (SOAHAC), supports urban Indigenous communities through gardening projects that reconnect individuals with traditional food practices (Western News, 2024).
- Land and Food Sovereignty Funding Stream: This program provides funding to Indigenous youth-led projects that promote land-based programming, traditional food knowledge, and community engagement, aiming to increase wellness and resilience (Indigenous Youth Roots, 2024).

Interconnectedness of Diabetes and Heart Diseases: Diabetes affects 17.2% of Indigenous people. Heart disease affects 7.1% (Diabetes Canada, n.d.; Anand et al., 2018). These diseases are connected. Poor diets and lack of exercise increase both. These problems began during the time of residential schools. Food sovereignty helps by bringing back healthy traditional foods. Trauma and food insecurity also increase stress. This affects blood sugar and heart health. A full-body and mind approach is needed.

Broader Health Issues in Indigenous Communities: Indigenous people also face high rates of obesity and depression. These come from food insecurity and trauma. Food sovereignty helps improve nutrition and rebuild cultural ties. Community gardens also reduce stress caused by hunger.

Conclusion and Call to Action: Indigenous health problems come from lost food sovereignty and poor school diets. These harms continue across generations. Policies like ADI and the 2022 Framework try to help. However, more work is needed. Support Indigenous-led projects. Fund community gardens. Clean up polluted places like Grassy Narrows. Learn the history. Indigenous communities are strong. Food sovereignty can lead to a healthier and more cultural future with support. (References available on request)

Let us know what you think

We invite/need your comments and suggestions. We welcome material from our readers and are pleased to include comments and reflection pieces here as catalysts for more reflection and dialogue. The submissions we include do not represent any official position by the JTRAG membership or our readers.