



Guiding Protocols



Survivors' Working Circle

The Bikiwewinig Nindawaasihshiiminaanak team would like to acknowledge the work of each Survivor from the Survivors' Working Circle who have contributed their time and energy to develop these protocols.

April Tuesday

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Forward

The Canadian government established the Indian Residential School (IRS) system as part of its assimilationist colonial strategy to isolate Indigenous children from the influence of their cultures and traditional land-based practices. This was done to assimilate Indigenous peoples into settler, Canadian culture and bring an end to the so-called “Indian problem.” Indian residential schools, like Pelican Lake Residential School, were intentionally located far from Indigenous communities to minimize contact between families and their children. Parental visits were further restricted using an *Indian Act* sanctified pass system designed to confine Indigenous peoples to reserves. This system harmed Indigenous children by removing them from their families, depriving them of their ancestral cultures and languages, and exposing many of them to physical, mental, and sexual abuse. Disconnected from their families and cultures, and forced to speak English, students who attended the schools often left the system unable to fit into their communities while remaining subject to racist attitudes in mainstream Canadian society. *They were caught between two worlds.* The system ultimately disrupted the transmission of Indigenous practices and beliefs across generations, and because of this, *the IRS system is widely recognized as contributing to the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada.*

In May 2021, Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation announced that ground penetrating radar detected the remains of 215 children at a former Kamloops Indian Residential School site. In response, First Nations across the country began their own Initiatives to search for their missing children lost to the residential school system. Shortly after, Bikiwewinig Nindawaashishiiminaanak was established, tasked with “Bringing our Children Home” from Pelican Lake Residential School, located near Sioux Lookout in Treaty 3 territory.

Bringing our Children Home and the Child Within

For the Survivors guiding Bikiwewinig Nindawaashishiiminaanak, Bringing Our Children Home has two meanings: First, is locating unmarked burial locations of students who died at, or as a result of their time at the school. This includes protecting the sites, memorializing, and honouring these children. Secondly, it means bringing home the **Child Within** — it is about Survivors reclaiming who they were and who they were supposed to become prior to the violence of the IRS.

Throughout our gatherings, the Survivors put a great deal of thought into what it means to Bring Our Children Home, as well as the **Child Within**. Specifically, what does it mean to **bring home the Child Within**? The Residential School took our languages, our families, and our place in the world from us. There is an urgent need for us to understand that this is all about more than searching for those we lost — Survivors all lost part of themselves too. Even when we returned, our communities had lost a part of us too. It is important that our work lays the foundation for survivors to heal and reclaim their place in the world.

Protocol Development

To guide the Bikiiwewinig Nindawaashishiiminaanak Initiative (its objectives, and processes), Residential School Survivors within the Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority (SLFNHA) catchment area were invited to participate in a Survivors' Working Circle (SWC). Thirty (30) individuals responded to this invitation and participated in three (3) Survivors' Working Circle Gatherings which occurred from June-July 2022.

The Survivors' Working Circle and its style of work were inspired by the Lakota principles which state that:

In the circle, we are all equal.

When in a circle no one's in front of you and there's nobody behind you.

No one is above you, no one is below you.

The circle is sacred because it's designed to create unity.

Between July 26th and July 28th 2022, the Survivors' Working Circle gathered in Thunder Bay, Ontario for the third time. At this gathering, Survivors shared with each other their experiences at residential school and how these experiences impacted them and their families. They discussed how they hope to continue to share, uncover, and preserve the truth about what occurred at residential school, as well as how they plan to bring home the Missing Children (including their own Inner Child). They further discussed how they envisioned reclaiming what was destroyed through colonialism, how to move forward through reconciliation, and how to heal from these experiences, and their lasting legacy.

Though all discussions are ultimately interconnected, we have organized Survivors' contributions into five (5) Protocols: Truth, Searches, Reclamation, Reconciliation, and Healing. In the spirit of the Working Circle Principles, there is no protocol in front or behind. No order of importance. The protocols will be continually refined over time by Survivors and will be the guiding principles for the Bikiiwewinig Nindawaashishiiminaanak Initiative as we work to Bring Our Children Home.

— James Cutfeet, Chief of Operations
Bikiiwewinig Nindawaashishiiminaanak Initiative

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GUIDING PROTOCOLS

Truth Protocol



1 Truth Protocol

The purpose of this protocol is to identify our needs and create a path forward as we work to uncover, acknowledge, and share our truth regarding our experiences at residential school. This protocol is needed because we, as Survivors, experience significant challenges in sharing our truth and require thoughtful accommodation and planning.

1.1 Barriers to Uncovering the Truth

The following barriers have so far prevented Survivors from sharing their truth of their residential school experiences:

- a. The overriding trauma, shame, fear, and pain of their experiences. These strong feelings can resurface and manifest themselves. It is difficult to discuss an experience if the act of remembering can bring more pain.
- b. A lack of trust in people as well as lack of safe spaces have also been identified as barriers. A negative reaction from others after sharing about a traumatic experience can make the re-traumatization of remembering compound with the pain of rejection.
- c. Denialism, from any source, can be enough to prevent someone from sharing. It is traumatizing to not be believed. It can lead to painful doubts about the reality of what one has gone through — even if they know with certainty what they experienced.
- d. The prevalence of patriarchal attitudes, which dictate that men are not to share their emotions or express pain because it shows weakness, has prevented the men among Survivors particularly from speaking their truths.
- e. Processing trauma can itself be traumatic. A lack of support for Survivors as they go through the emotionally hard work of coming to terms with and speaking their truths has been a barrier. Handling trauma without support can be akin to attempting to skydive without a parachute.

1.2 Overcoming Barriers and Recommendations

- a. Through the residential school system, Survivors — and to an extent our communities — have been indoctrinated with the colonial worldview. The truths of the colonizer may not be compatible with our truths. We must work to overcome this and center our truth and our ways of seeing.
- b. Safe spaces need to be created where Survivors can share their truth. Safe spaces can include sharing circles and support groups. We need to make it *safe* to engage in this difficult work. We need to ensure that all Survivors feel affirmed in their experiences, and that they do not need to worry about others contesting their trauma and what they do with it.

- c. Churches need to support the uncovering of the truth and help facilitate these initiatives. We should push for the disclosure of all records pertaining to the schools including staff.
- d. Recognizing that patriarchy poses specific barriers for men who are Survivors, support and resources need to be established specifically for men to help them share the truth. Support can be in the form of a men’s sharing circle aimed at helping them access and express emotions in a productive way that will better prepare them to share their truth.
- e. The truth is too heavy for any one person to lift. Support is needed at the community level to allow Survivors to share the burden of the truth with others. Support can include:
 - a. Organizing sharing circles
 - b. Supporting and visiting friendship centres
 - c. Visiting residential schools as a group to assist in processing emotions, with the goal of letting the truth surface from within
 - d. Access to books and resources about Indigenous knowledge to educate youth
 - e. Film nights showing documentaries about the truth of Residential Schools
 - f. Memorials at the community level for children that did not come home
 - g. Museums or cultural centres in communities
 - h. Establishing a teaching lodge and develop a curriculum to share the truth
 - i. Healing supports are required to uncover and share the truth as well as for those processing the truth. Such supports should include:
 - i. All hours support and / or accessible support on-site at the community.
 - ii. Consistency with the counselors providing the service, so that trust and a relationship can be established with a specific counselor. This will also allow for a safe space to be maintained and more progress to be made, as there will be less time spent getting to know new counselors.
 - iii. Family counseling is needed to support Survivors and their families as they navigate their trauma together.

1.3 Why Truth?

“Truth gives way to life.” Uncovering and acknowledging the events that unfolded in residential schools will help us, as Survivors, heal and move forward in life. Uncovering the truth is also important as it may lead to justice for the crimes that were perpetrated against us and contribute to a more accurate telling of these histories.



GUIDING PROTOCOLS

Searches Protocol



2 Search Protocol

The purpose of this protocol is to assist and guide the search for unmarked burials associated with Pelican Lake Residential School. It outlines the principles, traditions, and procedures that must be followed before, during, and after the search has been conducted. This is to ensure searches are conducted in a good way while providing the necessary support to Survivors and their families.

2.1 Before the Search

The following protocols will be observed before the ground penetrating radar (GPR) search for unmarked burials begins:

- a. Elders and community leaders from each community will be consulted by the Initiative on which ceremonial procedures will be required for the search to take place
- b. The following details will be confirmed:
 - a. Who will be present during the search
 - b. How exactly the searches will be conducted
 - c. What spiritual and mental health support will be available during and after the search.

2.2 During the Search

The following protocols will be observed during the search and discovery:

- a. Elders representing Christian belief and traditional practice respectively will be present to offer prayers accompanied with drumming and singing
- b. Transportation and care for the elderly will be provided before, during, and after the search
- c. If a community is unable to participate in the search process in person, then they should be given the opportunity to see footage of the search grounds, prayers and ceremony through aerial photography or video transmission.
- d. A fasting period should be observed to show respect for the deceased
- e. A sacred fire will be lit and communities should gather for drumming and singing

2.3 After the Search

If remains are discovered, the following protocols will be observed after the search is complete:

- a. Prayers accompanied with drumming and singing should be held after the search is completed.
- b. Remains will not be disturbed in any way and will be marked with plaques at the locations of the burial sites.
- c. A memorial should be built for any discovered unmarked graves. The marking of burial sites will be accompanied with prayers and a ceremony.
- d. A Traditional Talking Circle should be organized after the search for everyone to come together, talk, and share a meal, while a traditional fire is lit to mark the occasion.
- e. The youth should be present at the Traditional Talking Circle to pay their respects and learn from the Elders.
- f. Further protocols should be developed for how to manage families with young children visiting the burial sites to pay their respects.



GUIDING PROTOCOLS

Reclamation Protocol



3 Reclamation Protocol

Reclamation, in this context, refers to the *taking back of, or reasserting of*, that which has been lost or destroyed as a result of the Indian residential school system.

It is important to be clear that reclamation is not simply about rejecting western culture or religion, it is about harmonizing and embracing both cultures.

Though reclamation is, indeed, the work of Survivors, it is not solely the work of Indigenous peoples. The government and the church are also responsible for what they destroyed and took away from our people and the damages they have caused. Apologies without actions are not enough. Churches and the government need to support Indigenous reclamation both financially and politically.

3.1 What has Been Taken

- a. In response to the legacy of the residential school system, we must reclaim our:
- b. Wellbeing which has physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual components. We need to restore our confidence, self esteem, dignity, and pride in oneself that was taken away by the residential school system. In re-claiming our well-being, we need support for struggles with addiction and mental health issues. We must also break the unhealthy cycles that have been passed down through the generations.
- c. Identity by rejecting colonial labels and stereotypes and becoming more grounded in our history and culture. We need to know our history, gather our history, and share our successes and challenges.
- d. Joy which was taken away from us. We need to find our “deep belly” laughs again. Rediscover and create beauty all around us by making our communities nice and comfortable places to live.
- e. Spirituality. Spirituality and religion are two different things. Spirituality is our inner being and religion is an exterior force which can feed our spirituality.
- f. Culture – our protocols, ceremonies, gatherings, language, roles and responsibilities, parenting, child welfare, and respect for all things.
- g. Sense of community by fostering cooperation, kindness, forgiveness, gratitude, and appreciation. By keeping track of young people as they move through life, getting closer to our community members and understanding our community. Inclusion: We often think about elders and youth, but let’s not forget about the people in between.
- h. Education. We need to support our children’s education, teach them how to succeed in cities as well as in our communities. We also need to reclaim on reserve training for students (mechanic, plumbing, construction etc.) so they do not have to leave their communities and support systems to acquire education.

- i. Government and justice systems. We must revisit our traditional systems related to government and justice and determine how these systems which were successful can be implemented today.
- j. Territories, land, and resources. This also includes ensuring that treaties and inherent Indigenous rights are recognized and upheld.

3.2 Reclamation in Practice

To make sure that our work aids our people in reclaiming what we have lost through the process of colonization:

- a. We will revisit, collect, record, and preserve our traditional knowledge that has been lost. As a Survivor said, right now, “we are still looking for the missing parts.” For example, we must record our:
 - a. Histories
 - b. Cultural Practices
 - c. Languages
 - d. Protocols
 - e. Systems of Government
 - f. Healing Practices
- b. We will work to create physical spaces where the work of reclamation can be done, for example:
 - a. Local training, educational centres, and schools
 - b. Drop in and community centres
 - c. Ceremonial spaces
- c. We will create materials, spaces, and ways of sharing our traditional knowledge, for example:
 - a. Educational materials
 - b. Podcasts
 - c. Historical archives



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Reconciliation Protocol



4 Reconciliation Protocol

Despite its prominence in recent years, in official Canadian government documents, news media, and everyday conversation, it is necessary to put forward our own understanding of reconciliation.

- a. We view reconciliation as making two different views or beliefs compatible. There is the need to reconcile with Canadian society as well as within our communities. Reconciliation can also be the restoration of friendly relations between and among peoples.
- b. Reconciliation within our communities should happen before reconciliation with Canadian society. As one Survivor put it, “I have spent my life learning their ways, it’s time for them to learn mine.” Others asked, “how can we reconcile if we have not reconciled with ourselves?”
- c. Reconciliation can be seen in action when we share our truths and it gives others the strength and courage to share theirs. Connection is what brings us toward healing while disconnection creates chaos and confusion. Our work must help us connect with each other in the spirit of reconciliation.
- d. Colonialism, particularly the Indian residential school system, severed intergenerational ties and the traditional Indigenous family has been damaged as a result. Reconciliation with ourselves must include efforts to restore and stabilize the family, with the traditional roles of elders being recognized, a clear division of labour among family members restored, and traditional lifeways including hunting, foraging, ceremony, and prayer practiced. In our work we aim to overcome colonialism and restore our traditions. This work begins with the family, parenting, and language.
- e. To reconcile with ourselves we need to learn how our nations came to be in their current forms. As such, we aim to promote knowledge of our histories among our communities, particularly to the youth.
- f. Reconciliation requires that we be able to communicate with each other in a good way. Reconciliation must foster good relations between elders and youth. To these ends we aim to promote and teach our people’s languages through our work. We aspire to provide youth with immersion in their languages in the classroom and on the land. We also recognize and affirm the diversity of our people. Although we may speak different dialects, we share one language.
- g. Reconciliation is a spiritual endeavour. Recognizing this, we incorporate prayer and ceremony into our work, seeking guidance and strength from our respective faiths. We work to find a balance and build mutual respect between Christian faith and traditional practice, recognizing that for each community this balance will be different.
- h. Reconciliation requires the closure that will come with Bringing the Children Home. After this has been done, the work of reconciliation can begin and will require the development of programs and services to meet aims set out in these protocols — **we need to bring back the child within.**

4.1 Rebuilding Toward Reconciliation

What follows are eight recommendations for concrete action that can be taken to address the harms of residential school and settler-colonialism. We must not only **Bring the Children Home** — we must also **Bring Home the Child Within**.

- a. Following the closure that may come with Bringing the Children Home, for this work to truly bring us closer to reconciliation, we must begin implementing solutions to the issues identified above.
- b. It is necessary to restore the traditional role of elders within our communities. Elders' gatherings should be held to create space for discussions of what can be taught and what activities can be run for the community. These gatherings will also provide space for elders to communicate with the youth, to give teachings. The youth should know about how their elders were brought up, what games they played, and what legends they can share.
- c. Through our language we connect with each other, our culture, and the land. This connectivity is how we reconcile with ourselves so that we may reconcile with settler society. To this end, we should aim to create opportunities for youth and adults to learn their languages both on the land and through immersion in the classroom. Ideally lessons in each community should reflect the local dialect.
- d. It is important to teach the youth our language and culture. Keeping in mind that one cannot transmit to the youth what he or she does not know, a kind and understanding approach should be taken with adults and youth who have not yet learned these things. Further steps should be taken to teach children from a very young age, so that their mouths do not struggle to make the shapes and sounds of our language.
- e. For reconciliation, our people need access to the land. The land is powerful, from it medicines grow, our language grows. It is healing to sit with creation. As such, we should aim to create programs that provide resources in the form of traditional skills and financial resources so that families may learn and grow together on the land. Families should be supported in spending anywhere between a weekend to a few months on the land. Time on the land should be considered in connection with mental health and wellness.
- f. While on the land, families should practice traditional survival skills and appropriate ceremonies. Traditional family roles can be re-established and strengthened in this way. This time will also be time away from the technologies such as smart phones that have become barriers to communication between elders, parents, and youth. With this in mind, we further see the need for traditional teachings and support that will enable families to spend time on the land.
- g. It is important that traditional parenting skills and tools, such as the tikinagan, which lets the child learn from observing the world, be promoted to young parents. Along with teaching parenting, efforts should be made to support parents in providing healthy traditional foods

and medicines. Ideas such as local workshops, posters, radio shows, and gatherings in which parents can share stories and learn from each other have been proposed as starting points for this.

- h. Discussions on the current school curriculum, particularly in social studies, should be opened with the objective of implementing more Indigenous focused curricula. The children should learn about their own people and their traditions. The youth do not need to learn how to feed camels — they should learn how to feed themselves on the land.



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Healing Protocol



5 Healing Protocol

What exactly is meant by healing, and what is needed to help it take place can vary widely by who is healing from what. We saw the need to develop protocols so that people know what we mean, and what we need in our particular situation.

Healing is an individual process that starts with forgiveness. We were abused in different ways and as such need to heal in different ways. We are all on our own journeys, and while we may share common experiences, we recognize that we are not all in the same place nor do we all share the same destination.

- a. To reach a place of forgiveness, we need to first account for the past and come to terms with how we were hurt. Healing is a long process and we recognize that it may be hard to grant forgiveness to our abusers. In this, we rely on the strength given us by prayer and ceremony.
- b. Our faiths are what give us the strength to forgive and continue living day by day. In recognition that our people hold different faiths and practices, we acknowledge and affirm that each person's healing journey will look different as a result.
- c. Through healing others, helping them on their journeys, we recognize that we also may heal ourselves. There is power in helping our people.
- d. We recognize that healing is a skill that was taken from us by the harms of the Indian Residential School System. We were never taught to express ourselves with others, to seek help and be vulnerable. In place of that, many of us turned instead to drug and alcohol abuse, taking us further away from healing and towards more pain. We recognize that this has had intergenerational effects, with the youth turning to bad medicine as well.
- e. The land is a source of healing. To sit with creation and acknowledge its beauty, to feel the presence of our Creator all around us, is to heal.
- f. From the land springs our language, our culture. To reclaim these too, is an important aspect of healing. As such, in our work we aim to promote access to the land, cultural teachings, and our respective languages. This work must necessarily aim to restore the traditional social role of elders as healers, knowledge keepers, storytellers, advisors, and in ceremony.
- g. Healing requires that we carry on our work beyond the funding and scope of this initiative. That we take up our roles in our communities and work to ensure that our legacy is still felt in seven generations.

5.1 Recommendations from the Circle

In the spirit of the protocols outlined above, we have prepared some concrete recommendations that will ensure our work, and legacy, continues to have a positive healing impact on our communities after our circle has met for the final time.

We must work so that all churches involved in the Indian Residential School system make public all records pertaining to the schools, including their staff. Apologies are not enough without telling the whole truth and providing us with the means to ensure it is preserved for future generations.

- a. A conference must be held with the non-Indigenous leaders of this country and the churches. They too, must learn the truth, they must see the truth when we speak it to them.
- b. Survivor gatherings should be held beyond this initiative so that we may continue to heal with each other, share stories, and engage in our work as elders. This may be done annually in an area accessible to all who wish to participate. Similarly, steps should be taken to ensure that Survivors can individually, or in groups, visit the site of the residential school. For this, supports and maintenance of the site will likely be needed.
- c. Work should be initiated to ensure that the Canadian government provides funding for healing — that is its role. Our people need access to mental health services that are suited to the geographical and socio-economic conditions of our communities, we need culturally specific treatment without the barriers represented by endlessly filling out complicated forms. We need to be able to build relationships with our mental health professionals, which requires us to move beyond limits on time.
- d. Similarly, healing requires that our people be given support to spend time on the land. Skills workshops, financial support, resources to enable such activities, should all be secured for our communities.
- e. Steps should be taken to promote traditional cultural activities such as spring and fall feasts, naming ceremonies, visiting sacred sites, viewing sacred relics. We must teach children our language, history, and culture. Through teaching, we may heal, and through being taught, our nations may heal too.
- f. We should also explore ways to preserve our stories, so that they may be carried to future generations.
- g. Our spiritual beliefs and religion are what give us the strength to find forgiveness. We must work to heal the division among those who practice traditional beliefs and those who practice Christian beliefs. We need to educate ourselves and our communities to respect those with different beliefs. We all deserve the basic respect to practice our faiths and pray in peace.

6 Glossary

1. **Healing** – Becoming well again culturally, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually
2. **Intergenerational trauma** – Passing down of trauma to younger generations
3. **Mental Health supports** – Assistance for promoting mental, emotional and psychological wellbeing, typically provided by a mental-health professional(s)
4. **Protocol** – A set of guidelines that dictate how different tasks and activities that the Initiative will undertake will be carried out and what requirements for those activities must be met.
5. **Reclamation** – The process of claiming what was lost or taken away
6. **Repatriation** – The return of graves and burial sites back to Individuals, families and communities
7. **Revitalization** – Restoration of traditional practices
8. **Searches / Searching** – Finding out what happened to children who went missing; also the process of identifying unmarked graves.
9. **Survivors Working Circle** – A group made up of residential school Survivors that provides guidance and direction to the *Bringing Our Children Home Initiative*
10. **The Initiative** – Refers to the “*Bringing Our Children Home Initiative*” that is working to support Survivors and communities in the search for missing children who attended area government-led institutions
11. **Trauma** – Emotional, psychological and/or spiritual damage caused by negative experiences in the residential schools
12. **Unmarked graves / burial sites** – Burial sites that do not contain information on who may be buried therein