

Remembering the Past: Window to the Future

Above the west entrance to Centre Block of Canada's Parliament Buildings in Ottawa is a commemorative stained glass window.

Designed by Métis artist Christi Belcourt and translated into glass by Vision Art Stained Glass Studio, the window commemorates the legacy of Indian Residential Schools and the Prime Minister of Canada's historic Apology to former students of those schools and their families. The artist's design for the window was chosen unanimously by a selection committee comprised of leading Aboriginal art experts and former Indian Residential School students.

While the stained glass window is a visible reminder of truth and healing, it is also a window to a future founded on reconciliation and respect.

Indian Residential Schools

Over the course of a century, more than 150,000 Aboriginal children were separated from their families and communities as part of a government policy to assimilate them into the dominant culture.

While most Indian Residential Schools ceased to operate by the mid-1970s, the last federally run school closed in the late 1990s. The Government of Canada operated nearly every school jointly with a number of religious organizations including the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and United churches.

"Many generations of Inuit, Métis and First Nation children spent the greater part of their childhood in residential schools. The abuse and neglect they suffered while there left its mark on their adult lives, as well as the lives of their descendants..." - "Where are the Children?" exhibit Legacy of Hope Foundation

In 2006, an historic Settlement Agreement was reached between former students, the Churches, Aboriginal organizations and the Government of Canada to address the legacy of Indian Residential Schools.

Canada's Apology

"The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for falling them so profoundly. Nous le regrettons. We are sorry. Nimitaynan Nimitaynan Nimitaynan Mamiatugut" - The Right Hon. Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada

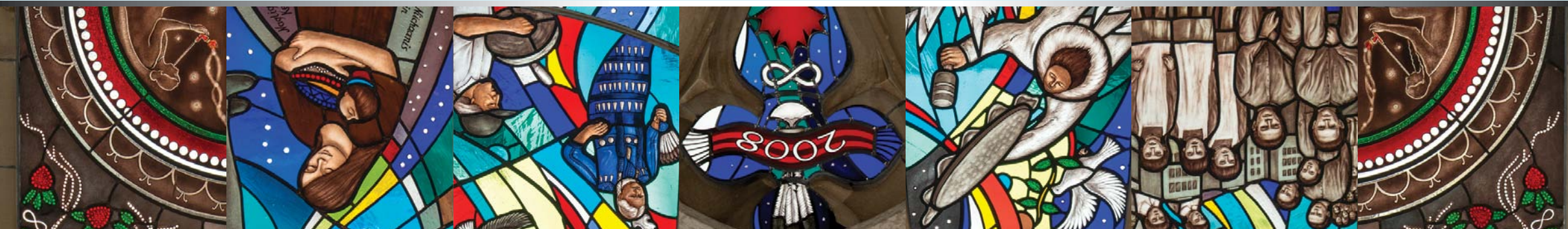
On June 11, 2008, on behalf of the Government of Canada and all Canadians, Prime Minister Stephen Harper stood in the House of Commons to offer an Apology that acknowledged the inter-generational damage caused by this policy to former students of Indian Residential Schools, their families and communities. On that day, Aboriginal people gathered in their homes and community centres across the country to watch the Apology. They watched as their own leaders, who for the first time in history were seated on the floor of the House of Commons, responded directly to Parliamentarians and indeed, all Canadians. The Apology underlined Canadians' resolve to learn from these tragic events to ensure they will never be repeated.

Healing, Reconciliation and Renewal

Today, across the country, First Nations, Inuit and Métis, alongside other Canadians, are participating in truth telling, healing and reconciliation activities. Cultural practices and languages are being revitalized, and a sense of optimism and hope for the future is building.

"I am filled with optimism... a new day has dawned, a new day heralded by a commitment to reconciliation and building a new relationship with Inuit, Métis, and First Nations." - Mary Simon, former President, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, June 11, 2008

All Canadians have a role to play in reconciliation and renewal. Knowledge of our shared past, mutual respect and the desire to move forward together will contribute to a stronger Canada for all of us. "The reconciliation process is not an Aboriginal process, I would argue, but rather time for reconciliation for all Canadians and a step forward toward improved relationships and increased opportunities between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals." - The Hon. Senator Vernon White, National Aboriginal Day, June 21, 2012



Stained Glass Window in Parliament Commemorating the Legacy of Indian Residential Schools

Design Within the Design: Mother Earth

Mother Earth is the foundation of the stained glass design, represented by the shape of a woman. Many Aboriginal traditions, culture, ceremonies and even way of life are based on connection with the land and interconnection with the spirit of the Earth.



About the Artist

Christi Belcourt (b. 1966) is a Métis visual artist with a deep respect for the traditions and knowledge of her people. Like generations of Aboriginal artists before her, she celebrates the beauty of the natural world while exploring nature's symbolic properties. Following the tradition of Métis floral beadwork, Belcourt paints in dots and uses the subject matter as metaphors for human existence to relay a variety of meanings that include concerns for the environment, biodiversity, spirituality and awareness of Indigenous cultures. For more information on the artist please visit www.christibelcourt.com.

For more information, visit www.aandc.gc.ca/window or scan the QR code with your smart phone.



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The window tells a story. It begins in the bottom left corner of the glass, moving upwards to the top panel and flowing down through the right panel. The title, "Giniigaaniimenaaning," includes the idea that we are all looking ahead for the ones unborn.

This section commemorates the June 11, 2008, Apology offered by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, in the House of Commons, on behalf of the Government of Canada and all Canadians.

The shattered glass represents the breaking of the silence in the 1980s as survivors from all over Canada began to speak openly about what happened to them at the schools. The broken glass also represents the shattered lives, families and communities that resulted from the government policy of forced assimilation. The Inuit drum dancer sounds the beginning of healing. The dove with the olive branch brings an offering of hope for the beginning of reconciliation and the renewal of the relationship between Aboriginal people and other Canadians.

The middle section of the window depicting the children represents the "sad chapter" of the residential school era, where more than 150,000 children were forcibly removed from their homes and often subjected to physical and sexual abuses.

The bottom section represents the time before residential schools existed. An ancestor smokes in the sacred lodge. From the west (represented by the button blanket motif) to the east (represented by the sky dome motif), Aboriginal ceremonies, languages and traditional knowledge were intact. Important ceremonies marking the transition from childhood to adulthood, such as the strawberry fast, were taught and practiced. Harvesting blueberries, learning about medicines and knowledge of plants and animals were passed from one generation to the next.

In this panel, symbols representing Inuit (the ulu), First Nations (the eagle feathers) and the Métis Nation (the infinity symbol) are featured alongside the iconic maple leaf.

The story continues in the top panel. In this panel, the jingle dress dancer is an Elder who is a former student of an Indian Residential School. She is dancing for the healing of all the people and for future generations.

In the middle panel, which represents present day, the young mother embraces her baby in a traditional moss bag. The child is back with her mother, representing children being raised by their parents and the breaking of the cycle of abuse. Within this panel are the words "I love you" and "I love you my child" written in Cree, Inuktitut, Anishnaabemowin and Mi'kmaq. The child's grandfather sings a traditional song signifying the restoration of songs, dance, ceremonies and languages.

Returning to the bottom, the circle is complete. The grandmother sits in the lodge smoking her pipe for her grandchildren. Ceremonies are being practiced and traditional knowledge about medicines is being taught. There is hope and a new respect for Aboriginal cultures within Canada as Aboriginal people are witness to their own strength and resilience.



Giniigaaniimenaaning (Looking Ahead)