



THE LIVING CHURCH  
SERVING THE ONE BODY OF CHRIST

[\\_ \(https://livingchurch.org\)](https://livingchurch.org)



[Home \(https://livingchurch.org\)](https://livingchurch.org) > [News \(https://livingchurch.org/category/news/\)](https://livingchurch.org/category/news/)



Denise Lajimodiere's father learned carpentry in boarding school and told of frequent beatings.

## A Shocking History

February 28, 2018 [News \(https://livingchurch.org/category/news/\)](https://livingchurch.org/category/news/)

By G. Jeffrey MacDonald

One of the darkest chapters in American history remains largely unknown as records from federally funded, church-run boarding schools for Native Americans collect dust in obscure vaults at local historical societies and universities.

But now a new push aims to bring national attention to what happened when more than 250,000 children were removed, often forcibly, from their families and taught to despise everything Indian in themselves.

Close and accept

“The churches were not just complicit. They were participatory,” said Christine McCleave, executive officer of the Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS), a nonprofit agency building a database of survivor accounts. “They received federal funding and helped carry out the policy.”

NABS hopes that locating records and sharing stories on a prominent stage might spur a reckoning akin to Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which found in 2015 that 6,000 aboriginal children had died in that country’s residential schools, where poor nutrition and abuse were rife.

In the United States, however, the key to confronting this painful history will be voluntary church participation, according to NABS. The group is calling on U.S. denominations, including the Episcopal Church, which ran at least 18 Native American boarding schools, to lead the way among U.S. denominations by mapping its boarding school records and helping bring hard realities to light.

“We need the churches,” said Denise Lajimodiere, a NABS board member and North Dakota State University professor with a forthcoming book of boarding-school survivors’ stories. “We need your church, the Episcopal Church, to research your schools: where they were, when they were established, how many students were there. It would be recognition of what was done to us.”

Church initiatives will be crucial because suing the federal government to compile records and be held to account (as happened in Canada) is not feasible in the United States. A federal statute of limitations shields the U.S. government from liability in cases dating to the mid-20th century and earlier. That means a lawsuit will not compel the creation of a TRC like Canada’s. And because state statutes also make lawsuits in old cases difficult to bring, the process will most likely be driven by moral, rather than legal, imperative.

“Only the churches can make this happen,” said David Wallace Adams, professor emeritus of history at Cleveland State University and author of *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928*. “It’s not going to come from the federal government. It’s got to come from the churches.”

At issue is the challenge of coming to grips with how whites sought to assimilate American Indians in the 19th and 20th centuries. Church-run schools played a prominent role, especially from 1871 to 1890, under a new federal policy to treat Indians not as separate nations but as people in urgent need of assimilation. The federal government contracted with Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Quakers, and other Christians to run schools and teach Indians to think and act like European-Americans.

Away at boarding schools, Indian children learned English and trades while also being taught to abandon traditional dress, languages, and customs. “Kill the Indian in him and save the man” said Capt. Richard Pratt, whose philosophy permeated the program.

Church schools operated as agents of assimilation into the 1970s, although many closed or lost federal funding after 1890, Adams said.

What happened at the schools, which number at least 351 according to a NABS database, was often tragic, according to those who have interviewed survivors. One woman, now 72, told Lajimodiere that she was molested by adults at Chamberlain Indian School in South Dakota from age four to 10, resulting in hospitalization for psychiatric treatment.

Lajimodiere’s late father learned carpentry in boarding school and told of frequent beatings. One classmate died from damaged kidneys after lashings from a studded belt. Every boarding school had a cemetery, she said. She counted 220 gravesites on grounds at Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon.

Close and accept

“I wonder to this day whether my father had to build a casket for that little boy,” Lajimodiere said.

While often horrific, the history was not entirely grim. Learning trades sometimes led students to gainful livelihoods after graduation. Church schools were more tolerant of Native languages than government-run schools, Adams said. Some former students are grateful for the Christian faith they learned at boarding school, said Paula Palmer, a Quaker sociologist who has researched Quaker-run boarding schools for Native Americans.

Still, after complying with the NABS request to locate and analyze Quaker records, Palmer believes all denominations with boarding school ties should confront the ugly side of this past, repent for harm the schools did, and work toward reconciliation.

“People are surprised, if not shocked, to learn about this history. It’s something we just don’t know about,” Palmer said. “You have to give people a measure of time for it to sink in and for a measure of grieving to happen.”

The checkered nature of the boarding-school legacy hits close to home for Bradley Hauff, the Episcopal Church’s missionary for indigenous ministries. Both his parents had good boarding-school experiences overall in the 1930s and ‘40s, he said via email. His mother attended St. Mary’s School for Indian Girls, an Episcopal school in Springfield, South Dakota. But he said that other elders experienced nightmarish cruelty at boarding schools, and the system was deeply flawed.

“The enforced assimilation process of Indian children that was carried out by the federal government in partnership with several Christian denominations was part and parcel of the worst genocide in human history, and it took place right here in the United States,” Hauff said.

Some churches have already repented. On behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada, Primate Michael Peers apologized in 1993, saying that “we tried to remake you in our image, taking from you your language and the signs of your identity.” Last year, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) apologized “to those who were and are part of ‘stolen generations’ during the Indian-assimilation movement, namely former students of Indian boarding schools, their families, and their communities.”

To date, the Episcopal Church has not apologized for operating Native American boarding schools, despite calls from within the church to do so. Last year at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Hauff called on all churches and governments involved in “genocide and assimilation of Indigenous people,” including boarding schools, to apologize and invest to build up a sense of “authentic Native identity” in children and youth.

The church has, however, laid related groundwork by repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery, which was used to invalidate indigenous people’s claims to land.

In 2009, 2012, and 2015, General Convention directed all dioceses to “examine the impact” of the Doctrine of Discovery on indigenous people. In 2012, a General Convention resolution called for equipping dioceses with tools to “document and explain the church’s historical role, negative and positive,” in living by the Discovery Doctrine. Despite these commitments, stories of church-run boarding schools in the United States remain hidden from the broader public.

Native American boarding school history has not been ignored within the Episcopal Church. Hauff is part of an ecumenical group that discusses related issues twice a year. Staffers at the Archives of the Episcopal Church in Austin are just beginning to document boarding-school experiences, including a planned trip to the site of a former boarding school in the 1990s. [More on this story](#)

Privacy & Cookies: This site uses cookies. By continuing to use this website, you agree to their use.

Native American boarding school history has not been ignored within the Episcopal Church. Hauff is part of an ecumenical group that discusses related issues twice a year. Staffers at the Archives of the Episcopal Church in Austin are just beginning to document boarding-school experiences, including a planned trip to the site of a former boarding school in the 1990s. [More on this story](#)

Navajoland Area Mission region to collect oral histories, said director Mark Duffy. But the church needs to do better, in his view.

“The scattered disregard that the church has given to its recorded history in native lands has served to hide a story that should be in front of us and addressed as part of our mission of racial reconciliation goals,” Duffy said via email.

What is missing, Duffy told TLC in a phone interview, is funding. At a cost of about \$350,000, denominations with ties to boarding schools could index their respective records and fulfill the NABS request. The job could perhaps be completed within a few months, he said, if the National Endowment for the Humanities would fund a grant and denominations would share remaining costs.

Canadian Christians are now urging U.S. churches to go beyond indexing written records. They should do as Canada did and convene public forums, as well as one-on-one interview opportunities, in which survivors may tell their stories for the record, said the Rev. Karen Hamilton, who served as General Secretary of the Canadian Council of Churches when the TRC report came out. Bringing this history to the surface will be important, not only to the tribes but also to the churches, she said.

“We have done wrong, and it’s the right thing to do what can be done to make it right,” Hamilton said. “But more important is the theological case: we cannot witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Lord of life, who has created us all in the divine image, without addressing this.”

This sense of imperative is resonating with U.S. Christians who say it is time for churches to walk their talk on justice and Native Americans.

“It’s one thing for the churches to cry out against what the government is doing that’s unjust, but it’s another thing for the churches to say, *Oh yeah, we’ve got our own dirt in this part of history too*,” said Steven Martin of the National Council of Churches. “This is why Jesus said, ‘Don’t point out the speck in somebody else’s eye unless you’re willing to look at the log in your own.’ That’s applicable to the individual and to the institutions, including the church.”

Making boarding-school stories widely known will surely be difficult, observers say, especially when it triggers feelings of disbelief, shame, or anger. But some believe that in the wake of last year’s Standing Rock protests, which brought together church and Native American activists to oppose the Dakota Access pipeline, denominations might finally be ready to take this step.

“I pray for not just lip service, not just fancy words,” said Sarah Eagle Heart, former program officer for Native American/indigenous ministries in the Episcopal Church. “I really pray for action because that’s what our community needs. And I’m hopeful right now because I feel like we are so close. ... Our own communities are beginning to heal. Our grandmas are finally sharing their stories. We’re at that tipping point right now.”

**Get the weekly newsletter from *The Living Church***

Privacy & Cookies: This site uses cookies. By continuing to use this website, you agree to their use.

To find out more, including how to control cookies, see here: [Cookie Policy \(https://automattic.com/cookies/\)](https://automattic.com/cookies/)

Close and accept