

Brief history of the SSA involvement with the Indian Residential Schools

In Canada, the Indian residential school system was a network of mandatory boarding schools for Indigenous peoples. The network was funded by the Canadian government's Department of Indian Affairs and administered by Christian churches. The school system was created to remove Indigenous children from the influence of their own culture and assimilate them into the dominant Canadian culture.

Some 150,000 Indigenous children were removed and separated from their families and communities to attend residential schools. While most of the more than 130 Indian Residential Schools ceased to operate by the mid-1970s, the last federally run school closed in the late 1990s.

In British Columbia, the Sisters are known as “Sisters of Saint Ann.”

Questions and Answers

Who are the Sisters of Saint Ann?

The Sisters of Saint Ann are members of a Roman Catholic religious community of women, founded by Blessed Marie-Anne Blondin in Vaudreuil, Quebec in 1850. The first four sisters in British Columbia arrived in Victoria in 1858. Today, there are two “provinces” of Sisters of Saint Ann in Canada, one in the United States and one in Haiti.

Were the Sisters of Saint Ann involved in Indian Residential Schools in Canada?

Yes. Years after their arrival in British Columbia, sisters began accepting teaching positions in schools for Indigenous children, some of which became residential schools. Sisters of Saint Ann taught in Kamloops Indian Residential School from 1890 to 1970. We were also involved in three other Indian Residential Schools.

What have the Sisters of Saint Ann said about their participation in the Indian Residential School system in Canada?

As linked to above, the Sisters of Saint Ann in British Columbia expressed their sorrow and regret in a statement in 2009, a statement that was re-issued at a Truth and Reconciliation national event in Vancouver in 2013.

It reads in part: “We now know that the residential school system itself, initiated by the Federal Government and in which we participated, was racist and discriminatory. It brought about a form of cultural oppression and personal shame that has had a lasting effect not only on those who attended the schools but also on subsequent generations. We carry immense sorrow for having contributed to this tragedy, a sorrow that stays within our hearts.”

215 graves were discovered in Kamloops, but documents submitted to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission indicate 51 deaths occurring at the Kamloops Indian Residential School. Can you explain this discrepancy?

No, we cannot. This discrepancy must be resolved.

Will the Sisters of Saint Ann release more of their records to help identify the remains found?

We are working with the Royal BC Museum and its partners to help ensure that Indigenous communities have priority access to Indian Residential School and associated records. We also want to ensure that our records, and the processes regarding access to our records, are fully transparent.

The Sisters of Saint Ann provided all our records related to Indian Residential Schools to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2012 and most of these records were transferred to the National Center for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR). We are now working to resolve any outstanding issues related to those documents and we are also working to make our records more accessible directly from our Archives, instead of only through the NCTR.

We are committed to full cooperation as Indigenous communities and others seek information about Kamloops Indian Residential School, so that questions regarding these graves can be resolved to the satisfaction and the benefit of everyone concerned; but most importantly, for the families who grieve their loved ones.

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