

“Part of the Authority Structure”: An Organizational History of Mennonite Indian Residential Schools in Ontario

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From 1960 to 1991 two Mennonite mission agencies ran three Indian residential schools in northwestern Ontario. In 2015 these schools were included in a report issued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada with the startling allegation that they participated in a national campaign to eradicate Indigenous peoples as distinct entities. The term the commission used to describe the goal of this historic network of assimilationist policies was “cultural genocide.” In providing a more detailed narrative of these Mennonite institutions than has been previously available, this article argues that, though the schools and their staff are clearly complicit in this dark chapter of Canadian history, they do not fit neatly into a starkly differentiated narrative of good and bad actors.

On June 11, 2008, the Right Honourable Stephen Harper, who was then the country’s prime minister, delivered an apology in the House of Commons of Canada to former students of institutions known as “Indian residential schools.” He began with these words: “I stand before you today to offer an apology to former students of Indian residential schools. The treatment of children in Indian residential schools is a sad chapter in our history.”¹ Until quite recently it was not widely known that two independent Mennonite mission organizations—one of which remains in existence in 2018—founded, administered, and staffed three such schools. The mission organizations were not official arms of any Mennonite denomination; but they did identify themselves as “Mennonite” and their financial, material, and staff support came almost exclusively from Mennonite churches. The schools they ran, the first of which began informally in 1960 and the last of which was closed in 1991, were located in a remote corner of northwestern Ontario. Because the schools received funding through a contractual agreement with the federal government of Canada, they were officially designated as “Indian residential schools.”

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1. The full text of the apology can be found on Canada’s Indigenous and Northern Affairs website, accessed Sept. 18, 2018, www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca. Note that the version published here differs slightly from the speech as it was delivered.

This essay, which narrates the story of these institutions, seeks both to further understanding of Mennonite humanitarian and mission work in the last century and, more importantly, to respond to requests from First Nations that churches clearly acknowledge their role in these schools. One challenge in relating this history is that it must counter a tendency in the popular press and in some advocacy circles to feature starkly differentiated moral characters. Mennonite missionaries were indeed directly involved in this “sad chapter” of Canadian history; yet their involvement, fraught as it may have been, was invited from its beginning and consultative to its end. Though the individuals and institutions in this story cannot be labeled as heroes of mission and humanitarian service, neither can they be rightly described as malicious actors in the residential school narrative.

BECOMING PART OF A NATIONAL STORY

For most of the two decades since their closure these residential schools were relatively unknown beyond the circles of former students and staff. This changed in 2015 when the schools were included in the official report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC).² According to that report these Mennonite institutions, along with other such schools, participated in a national program of “cultural genocide.” The TRC report sets the landscape this way:

For over a century, the central goals of Canada’s Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as “cultural genocide.”³

During the early centuries of contact between European settlers and First Nations in the lands that would become Canada the relationship was

2. For an overview of the residential school reconciliation process see J. R. Miller, *Residential Schools and Reconciliation: Canada Confronts Its History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017). For a more focused description of the TRC process and its relationship to other such commissions around the world see Ronald Niezen, *Truth and Indignation: Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013). For instance, Niezen points out that the Canadian commission was the only one to come about as the result of civil litigation (3-5).

3. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation* (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), 5.

dominated by trade and military alliances. As the ambitions of European powers turned toward the establishment of an expansive agrarian society, things changed. The traditional life-ways of Indigenous peoples—including their military proficiency, their knowledge of the land, their ability to hunt and trap—ceased to be useful to the ambitious Europeans. Subsequently, the strategy of European settlers turned toward assimilating Indigenous peoples into the nascent Euro-Canadian society. With respect to residential schools, a key aspect of this developing relationship was the fact that the government was obliged to provide schooling for Indigenous children. This obligation stemmed from various treaties signed between the British Crown and First Nations and more directly through the British North America Act of 1867 and the Indian Act of 1876.

While many First Nations, especially those on the plains, sought these educational provisions as a way of adapting to a new reality, the government saw them as an avenue for assimilation. In 1883 Sir John A. MacDonald, Canada's first prime minister, told the House of Commons that when schools were run on reservations children remained "surrounded by savages." Though they might learn to read and write in such a setting, he believed they would continue to think in traditional ways. Such children remained, in MacDonald's estimation, nothing more than "savage[s] who can read and write." He argued that what was needed was to remove children from parental influence. The only way to do that was to put them in what MacDonald called "central training industrial schools." There the children would "acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men."⁴ This assimilationist logic spanned the turn of the century. In 1920, in words that have now become infamous, Duncan Campbell Scott, deputy minister of Indian Affairs, said the government's goal was to "get rid of the Indian problem" and to "continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic."⁵ Part of the government's strategy was to use its educational obligation as an avenue for assimilating the First Nations into Euro-Canadian society, thereby freeing the government from future obligations and freeing additional land for commercial exploitation. One facet of this became loosely known as the Canadian Indian Residential School System.

4. As cited in Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*.

Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), 2.

5. As cited in TRC, *Honouring the Truth*, 3.

At the core of the arrangement that sustained the system was a partnership between the Canadian government and a number of churches. Several Canadian churches, most notably Anglicans and Roman Catholics, had experience running educational institutions that the federal government lacked. The churches also had access to potential staff, in the form of monastics and missionaries, who were willing to work for little or no remuneration. Their thrift would allow the government and its supporting citizenry to fulfill its treaty obligations and to pursue its assimilationist agenda with frugality.⁶ The federal government, in turn, offered the churches an opportunity to exercise their sense of mission toward the First Nations with the benefit of government funding. If this arrangement was a boon for churches and for the government, it was distinctly not that for those forced to attend the schools spawned by this union of church and state.

The Residential School System existed for more than a century. At its peak, in the early decades of the twentieth century, it included some eighty institutions. In total, roughly 150,000 First Nation, Inuit, and Métis children attended. This represented at any particular time roughly one-fifth to one-third of the school-age Indigenous population.⁷ More than 3,000 children died at these schools, many the result of disease to which overcrowding and malnutrition made them particularly susceptible. Many of the children's families never received notice or explanation. In the summative analysis of the TRC,

Canada's residential school system for Aboriginal children was an education system in name only for much of its existence. These residential schools were created for the purpose of separating Aboriginal children from their families, in order to minimize and weaken family ties and cultural linkages, and to indoctrinate children into a new culture. . . . The schools were in existence for well over 100 years, and many successive generations of children from the same communities and families endured the experience of them. That experience was hidden for most of Canada's history, until Survivors of the system were finally able to find the strength, courage, and support to bring their experiences to light in several thousand court

6. In his landmark book on residential schools J. R. Miller shows time and again how the government's thrift worsened the conditions at these schools.—*Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

7. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision*, 141-142, 411.

cases that ultimately led to the largest class-action lawsuit in Canada's history.⁸

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada came into existence as a result of the 2007 class-action lawsuit settlement.⁹ Initially, the Residential Schools Settlement Agreement included only one Mennonite residential school, which was named in that document simply as "Poplar Hill."¹⁰ That school ran as part of the residential school system from 1962 to 1989, a period during which it was known alternately as Poplar Hill Residential School and Poplar Hill Development School.¹¹ The change in name may well reflect a growing awareness on the part of school leaders, as early as the late 1960s, that the overall legacy of residential schools was far from positive. In 2011 an Ontario Superior Court added two more Mennonite schools to the list: Stirland Lake High School and Cristal Lake High School. Stirland Lake began in 1971 as a school for boys under the name Wahbon Bay Academy; Cristal Lake in 1976 as a school for girls. The two were amalgamated in 1986 as Cristal Lake High School and ran until 1991.¹² Though neither school included the term "residential school" in its name, it was shown in court, partly through the efforts of one of the schools' founders, that they were part of the residential school system.

The inclusion of the three Mennonite schools meant that former students had access to financial compensation in the form of a Common Experience Payment (CEP) and an additional Individual Assessment Process (IAP). Near the end of 2013 some 133 payments in this latter

8. TRC, *Honouring the Truth*, V.

9. Ronald Niezen claims the TRC created a new kind of person, "the Indian residential school survivor." — *Truth and Indignation*, 18. In this essay I will use both residential school "survivor" and "former student." I intend no judgment in my shifting use of these terms. In the interviews I conducted with former staff the term "former student" was received more readily. I use both terms here to reflect the contested nature of the memory of these institutions.

10. Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, Schedule E.—available through the Residential School Settlement website, accessed Aug. 8, 2018, www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/english_index.html.

11. In a 1969 self-study entitled "Report on the Present Status of Students who have Attended Poplar Hill Residential School in Previous Years (1962-1969)" the word "residential" is put in brackets (by hand) and the word "development" written in its place. The change is made in the pages of the report as well.—Report in NLGM Archive, Poplar Hill Development School (1964-1982). The change is significant in that it likely indicates an attempt to distance the school from the "residential" legacy.

12. Residential School Settlement Agreement, accessed Aug. 8, 2018, http://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/english_index.html. The 2011 court case that added the two additional schools, *Fontaine v. Canada*, can be found on the Canadian Legal Information Institute website, accessed Aug. 8, 2018, www.canlii.org/en/on/onsc/doc/2011/2011onsc4938/2011onsc4938.html#showHeadnotes.

category had been awarded to former students of the three Mennonite schools.¹³ Though the majority of claims across the country were submitted by the end of 2012, some still remained in process as of the spring of 2018.¹⁴

While the TRC process has had overwhelmingly popular support in Canada, it has not been without critics. In the spring of 2017 Canadian Senator Lynn Beyak argued publically against the sweeping generalizations of the narrative popularized by the TRC. In a speech to the Senate she noted that some former staff of residential schools were good people and that not all former students spoke negatively of their experience. Beyak said, "I speak partly for the record but mostly in memory of the kindly and well-intentioned men and women and their descendants . . . whose remarkable works, good deeds and historical tales in the residential schools go unacknowledged for the most part and are overshadowed by negative reports."¹⁵ Bayak's statement met with immediate and vociferous calls for her resignation and censure.¹⁶ Senator Beyak is from the small town of Dryden, Ontario. That town, which straddles the Trans-Canada Highway in a sparsely populated part of the province, is the location of one of the mission agencies that ran two of the schools in question.¹⁷

ON THE PRODUCTION OF INSTITUTIONS

This essay will explore the organizational history of the schools and the two mission agencies that ran them from a perspective influenced by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, a book which has given shape to much of the postcolonial theory now ascendant in academic circles. One of Said's key insights is that "Orientalism" has more to do with the cultures in which it arose than with the "Orient" itself. He argues that a certain view of the Orient, which took its shape through literature, scholarship, and various elements of material culture, gave Europe a strength and identity that it would not have had otherwise. This is an acknowledgement that politics

13. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Canada's Residential Schools Vol. 1: The History Part 2, 1939 to 2000* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 409.

14. 2018 statistics available on the website of the Indian Residential Schools Adjudication Secretariat, accessed June 5, 2018, <http://www.iap-pei.ca/home-eng.php>.

15. Lynn Beyak, Remarks in Senate Chamber, March 7, 2017, <http://lynnbeyak.sencanada.ca/p107691/>.

16. See, for example, Rachel Giese, "Why does Lynn Beyak Still Have a Job?" *Macleans*, Sept. 21, 2017.

17. When I visited Dryden in the summer of 2017, staff members relayed to me their hunch that when Beyak addressed the Senate of Canada, she was thinking of their organization and the schools the Mennonites had run.

and power impress themselves upon culture; yet, for Said, this is not the same as saying that culture is a secondary entity. Rather, Said says, “my whole point is to say that we can better understand the persistence and durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers and thinkers were *productive*, not unilaterally inhibiting.”¹⁸ Said’s theory prompts a question related to Mennonite residential schools: What were the key factors, both within Mennonite circles and within Euro-Canadian society at large, that precipitated the formation and maintenance of these cultural creations—these Mennonite-run schools?

Certain elements of the narrative are known already. However, few scholars have delved into the details. To date, the most incisive historical work on these schools can be found scattered throughout the volumes of the final TRC report. The information presented there is well-grounded: it is drawn from the testimony of former students, government archives, articles in popular-level Mennonite periodicals, and several newspapers from the period. This present survey, by contrast, draws directly on institutional documents and a series of interviews conducted with former staff from late 2016 to early 2018. The majority of the documents referenced here are held in informal, private files and, therefore, have not been seriously considered until now.¹⁹

Even engaging these extensive new sources, however, does not allow me to tell “the” story of the Mennonite residential schools. Much of that story, especially the experience of students, is not mine to tell.²⁰ As one would expect, residential schools varied according to the time of their existence, their staff, and their institutional policies. Few former staff of the Mennonite schools would recognize the government’s assimilationist agenda or the charge of cultural genocide in their volunteer work. Even

18. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th anniversary edition (Vintage Books: New York, 1979), 14. The emphasis is Said’s.

19. Due to ongoing concerns related to litigation and public shaming, I have agreed to maintain the anonymity of my interviewees. I will, however, refer to institutional leaders by name. Some former Mennonite school staff have been mentioned in IAP applications and some investigated by the police or other authorities. To the best of my knowledge, at no point in my research did I come across information related to heretofore unreported allegations of abuse.

20. A careful search of the TRC report provides a good introduction to the student experience. The multiple volumes of the report can be accessed in pdf format through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s website, accessed June 9, 2018, <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890>, as well as through National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation website cited below. Video of survivor testimony is available from the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation website, accessed June 9, 2018, <https://nctr.ca/map.php>.

so, an observer at a 2012 TRC event in Thunder Bay, an event held specifically for survivors of Mennonite schools, reported that many of the stories shared there were similar to those from other residential schools. Even though the student experience was not all of a piece, those who attended the Mennonite schools did experience profound cultural dislocation and loneliness, loss of identity, and, in some cases, harsh corporal punishment.²¹ We cannot help but ask how in a particular time and place the “internal constraints” of a “saturating hegemonic system” enabled a pacifist people to produce and maintain institutions that would later be implicated in a charge of cultural genocide.

Edward Said says that he wrote his book in part because of his “own experience of these matters.”²² There are matters discussed here of which I have experience. I spent the early years of my childhood at two of these schools as the son of residential school staff. I can, if only vaguely, remember some of the people and places mentioned below.²³ There are multiple ways, helpful and hindering, that my personal investment in this story might color my account. At the very least, it means that I do not have, and do not want, the luxury of detachment, which many non-Indigenous commentators on this story claim. It also means that I am cognizant of the fact that Canadians *en masse* allowed, assented to, and supported the residential school system.²⁴

ORIGINS OF MENNONITE MISSION IN NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO

Mennonite mission work in northwestern Ontario, an area whose current political realities were shaped by Treaties 5 and 9, began with the missionary work of a Pennsylvanian named Irwin Schantz.²⁵ Schantz started his work in that general part of the continent in 1938 in northern Minnesota. In the years that followed he found his way into Ontario, Canada, by moving north up the immense and fractured body of water

21. Interview with person present at TRC event, April 29, 2017. I have found no indication that widespread sexual abuse occurred at the Mennonite schools.

22. Said, *Orientalism*, 27.

23. A picture of my 2-year-old self appears on page 15 of the 1981 edition of the Wahbon Bay Academy yearbook.

24. For an argument that all Canadians bear some element of responsibility see Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).

25. The Numbered Treaties are a series of eleven post-Confederation agreements made between the Canadian government and Indigenous peoples between the years 1871 and 1921. These treaties cover a vast swath of what is now central Canada.

known as Lake of the Woods. His outreach was largely funded by American Mennonites whom he kept informed through a series of letters. In one such letter to supporters, dated April 1, 1944, Schantz writes, "We are under the watchful eyes of God and the F.B.I., who are concerned about the young men to see if they are draft dodgers."²⁶ Young Mennonite men, from this period through the 1960s, participated in work in "the north" in lieu of military service.²⁷ This is one of the reasons that many of those exposed to Schantz's work in the following decades were Americans. By the early 1950s the organization Schantz founded had become known as Northern Light Gospel Mission (NLGM) and was making forays into Indigenous communities in Ontario. In 1953 they received permission to build a mission station near Pikangikum, one of the reserves nearest to the mining town of Red Lake. Red Lake was, for all practical purposes, the farthest north one could drive. Mary Horst wrote a short in-house history of NLGM in 1977. She described the first mission station this way:

The four men and two women, preparing to live on an island there for a time, set up a tent and then the men began to make a clearing in the dense bush. All this activity didn't go unnoticed by the Indian people in the nearby reservation and they silently paddled out to the island to watch. . . . Meeting the Indians was exactly what the missionary group wanted and they were prepared by having, as one of their number, an Indian Christian girl, Elizabeth Peake. Elizabeth was able to communicate with the Ojibway-speaking people and she used the opportunity to tell them about the love of Jesus and His offer of abundant life.²⁸

Horst went on to explain that shortly thereafter members of the Poplar Hill community, some twenty-five miles north of Pikangikum, learned of the arrival of these Mennonite missionaries and wanted to hear from them as well. Traveling from one community to another was particularly difficult at that time. It was traditionally done by canoe in the summer and dogsled or snowshoes in the winter. The early Mennonite presence in this part of Ontario, however, coincided with the mechanization of northern travel. Thus, though Schantz had learned to travel Lake of the Woods by boat, he also pursued a pilot's license to explore Ontario by airplane. Other

26. Irwin Schantz to supporters, April 1, 1944, NLGM files.

27. In a subsequent article I intend to outline more clearly how this arrangement worked. The phrase "the north" is commonly used by former staff as a geographic designation for their work.

28. Mary Horst, *A Brief History of Northern Light Gospel Mission* (Red Lake, Ont.: Northern Light Gospel Mission, 1977), 5.

key figures in the expansion of the mission were those who learned to fly small airplanes, taking off and landing, not on runways, but on lakes. Several decades later the *Winnipeg Free Press* would refer to these pilots as the "Mennonite Air Force."²⁹

Most of the Indigenous communities reached by Mennonite missionaries already had a Christian presence of one type or another. In the village of Poplar Hill this put the newly-arrived Mennonites in contention with a Catholic priest, who would make periodic visits to the community. In 1953 Schantz told supporters how their arrival had motivated the priest to promise the community both a church and a school. Schantz reported that the Poplar Hill residents responded to the priest by saying that they had a new minister.³⁰ These cool ecclesial relations would not immediately warm up, and they were mirrored by the national Department of Indian Affairs' own coolness to the Mennonite's work. Where Schantz found success was in working with "the local Indian government," which he told supporters, "have seemed reasonably favorable" toward the mission's initiatives.³¹ In the following years NLGM missionaries undertook a variety of projects, including an attempt at helping Indigenous commercial fisherman better preserve their catch for shipment to market.

The organizational communication from this period demonstrates a mixed attitude of goodwill and paternalism. This corresponds to memories of former staff. One former staff member, who went north a decade later in lieu of military service, described the goal as bringing a "better way of life." When we spoke, in 2017, he appeared fully conscious of the fact that the resonance of such a statement had changed in the intervening decades.³² In a letter from December of 1954 Schantz attempted to share his observations about the Indigenous way of life. He described their traditional ceremonies and lack of Western furniture and cooking utensils. He then asked his readers if they could see "why life is so meaningless to these people?"³³ Many early missionaries did make an effort to learn Ojibway or Oji-Cree, yet the assumptions and cultural disconnect exemplified by Schantz's statement remained. Though unable to avoid the endemic paternalism that colored most relationships between whites and Indigenous peoples, early Mennonite missionaries recognized

29. John Lyons, "Missionaries Take to Skies," *Winnipeg Free Press*, April 4, 1989.

30. Irwin Schantz to supporters, Nov. 1953, NLGM files.

31. Irwin Schantz to Boyd Nelson, Dec. 2, 1953, Red Lake Ontario Northern Light Gospel Mission, 1953-1968, Mennonite Central Committee Archives, electronic file.

32. Interview with former school staff member, Feb. 13, 2017.

33. Irwin Schantz to supporters, May and Dec. 1954, NLGM files.

the deleterious effects of the encroaching Euro-Canadian culture. In the 1950s and early 1960s the northern economy was becoming increasingly cash-based, as gas-powered equipment became more widely available and white agents representing commercial interests were present with growing frequency. The traditional lifeways practiced by Indigenous communities were being left aside and many of the people representing outside commercial interests were primed to take advantage of the ensuing instability. An individual who worked as a storekeeper in this part of Ontario described this period as the time when “the north fell apart.”³⁴

FOUNDING AND GROWTH OF POPLAR HILL RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT SCHOOL

A second important character in this story was Clair Schnupp, another Mennonite from Pennsylvania. Schnupp was one of the early NLGM missionaries at the village of Poplar Hill, and he became the first principal of the residential school. Schnupp met Clara, the woman who would become his wife, when she was recruited from southern Ontario to supervise the educational program. Unlike Clair, Clara was a provincially certified educator.³⁵

The venture that would evolve into the Poplar Hill Residential/Development School began in the mid-1950s when NLGM workers started offering supplementary educational programs at the village of Poplar Hill.³⁶ In July of 1959 Schnupp wrote to NLGM’s supporters:

34. Interview with early missionary, Aug. 3, 2017; interview with storekeeper from the period, Jan. 13, 2017.

35. Conversation with Clair and Clara Schnupp, Aug. 18, 2018. Although several women like Clara had formal training as educators, positions of school leadership at these schools were held by men. These gendered dynamics were consistent across the two mission agencies.

36. NLGM to supporters, July 13, 1959. A point of some confusion exists here in that there was another school in this part of Ontario also run by Mennonites. The Red Lake Indian School existed near Red Lake, Ont., from 1955 to 1963 and was run by Amish-Mennonites. Specifically, the school was under the auspices of the Mission Interests Committee of the Amish Mennonite Church in Partridge, Kan. It was primarily a day school for Indigenous students in grades 1-8 and understood to be an alternative to the McIntosh Indian Residential School (1925-1969) and Pelican Lake Indian Residential School (1926-1969). Further information is available through the Red Lake Regional Heritage Centre’s “Virtual Museum” and a 2004 interview with Ezra Peachy.—www.virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/histoires_de_chez_nous_community_memories/pm_v2.php?id=record_detail&fl=0&lg=English&ex=353&hs=0&rd=86676 (accessed Dec. 11, 2017). The Red Lake Indian School was closed as the local public argued that its students should be a part of the public system. The school then served as a Bible School for Indigenous Christians. Like Poplar Hill, the Red Lake

I'm slowly readjusting to life in the North country and also finding it a real challenge to conduct another summer of school for these dear, intelligent, but often unwanted, under privileged Indian children. . . This is the fourth summer for a seasonal school here at Poplar Hill. Both the Indians and the government officials want us to start a regular winter school. We feel the children would be ready for it, but there are many problems involved from all sides.³⁷

One of the "problems" was the tension between the Mennonites and Catholics. The priest who visited the village viewed the Mennonite presence as competition. For their part, the Mennonites viewed whatever Catholic commitments the local people had as insufficiently Christian. Nevertheless, the idea of starting a school gained momentum. Writing in August of 1959, Mary Ann Yoder put it this way:

There are many children in this northland who cannot attend school because their parents move out to trapping camps for the winter. We are planning a winter boarding school for the Christian children. . . . Pray that God will bless so this school will be possible and these children will be fed both spiritually and physically.³⁸

Mennonites overcame the problems and the school began in 1960. As Yoder anticipated, it did include a residence. There were seven boarding students and eight local students from the community of Poplar Hill. A report from the federal Department of Indian Affairs in March of 1960 says that five of the boarding students were from the community of McDowell Lake. Since there was no room for these students at any of the existing schools, the government gave one dollar per day toward their room and board at Poplar Hill.³⁹ The Mennonite school was becoming part of the residential school system.

Indian School was an approved 1-W service option under the umbrella of MCC. In a 1958 letter of application to the director of Selective Service, the MCC Executive Secretary of the Peace Section described the endeavor in Red Lake as an elementary school serving "approximately 40 Indian children" who have no previous school experience. He went on to say: "The parents make little effort to adjust to white man's culture and standard of living. The children are often ill-clad, undernourished and unable to speak English." He described plans to expand the school and to include a dormitory. See correspondence between Mahlon Wagler, Ezra Peachey, and administrative personal from both MCC's Peace Section and Selective Service between 1958 and 1967.—MCC Archives, Red Lake Indian School, 1958-1967. Since the Red Lake Indian School was not a part of the national residential school system, it will not be studied further here.

29. Clair Schnupp to supporters, July 1959, NLGM files.

38. NLGM to supporters, Aug. 17, 1959, NLGM files.

39. As described in TRC, *Canada's Residential Schools: The History 1:2*, 46.

NLGM was a conservative Mennonite mission in that staff wore plain clothes and regularly grappled with “standards,” or markers of cultural distinction. However, much of its agenda aligned with the larger Mennonite activism and humanitarian work popular at the time. In 1965 the mission was featured in a popular Mennonite publication under the title “Fools for Christ.” The article noted how Indigenous communities in northern Ontario had been exploited by whites for commercial purposes, an observation surely echoed by the memory of this period as the time when “the north fell apart.” The author Richard Benner contrasted this exploitation with a heroic description of the mission work. He noted the commitment of the workers and Shantz’s reluctance to overtly solicit funds. Benner reported that Schantz saw himself following the example of the British missionary George Müller. Müller, one of the founders of the Plymouth Brethren, started over 100 schools and cared for thousands of orphans. He did this while famously refusing to make overt requests for financial support. Instead of fundraising, Müller prayed. Former NLGM staff describe the commitment to “faith ministry” as one the most prominent features of the school and the mission organization more broadly. They would pray and God would provide. For some, the philosophy of “living by faith” was a recipe for anxiety. The fact that the necessities were eventually covered, however, served as confirmation that they were on the right path.⁴⁰ Across the page from Benner’s article, the magazine ran a piece profiling a young woman who was serving as the inspector of schools in what was then known as Tanganyika. The tone of both articles was progressive and optimistic.⁴¹ Two years later a short piece featuring the work of NLGM, similar in tone to Benner’s, appeared in the *New York Times*.⁴²

When Catholic opposition to the school grew stronger in 1962 the mission contemplated moving the school to the town of Red Lake. However, government officials, who were willing to provide increased funding, opposed the move and encouraged the school to accept students from farther afield.⁴³ An arrangement was made whereby the school would accept thirty additional boarding students, half of whom, for one

40. Interview with former Poplar Hill teacher, Nov. 16, 2016; interview with former dormitory supervisor, March 3, 2017. Similar sentiment regarding various memories of provision was evident in a 2017 address by Clair Schnupp.—Celebration of NYP’s 50th anniversary, Lancaster, Pa., Aug. 18, 2017.

41. Richard Benner, “Fools for Christ,” *Christian Living* (Feb. 1965), 3-6.

42. “Air Missionaries Active in Ontario,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 19, 1967 (private collection).

43. NLGM to supporters, October 1962, NLGM files.

reason or another, were not performing at grade level. At Poplar Hill these students took a special program, consisting of half-time academic “upgrading” and half-time vocational training.⁴⁴ At this point Poplar Hill offered programming for primary and intermediate grades. Two years later in 1964 the Poplar Hill school had more applications than it could handle and volunteers from the south, mostly from the U.S., were recruited to build a larger dorm.⁴⁵ In 1967 education officials in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, asked the school to take ten more students. Schantz agreed.⁴⁶

Such growth would have been well-received by any organization, but this was particularly true for one as evangelistic as NLGM. However, while there is little doubt that Canadian residential schools in general were run for the purpose of assimilation, it is worth noting that the Poplar Hill school was intended, at least at some level, for Christian children. Tallies from the mid-1960s list the majority of students as Mennonite, and others as being Anglican, United Church of Canada, Canadian Evangelical, or Catholic. In addition to suggesting the tone of the school, these lists also reflect the growing impact of Mennonite church planters in Indigenous communities. At one point the mission organization tried to acknowledge parental priority in spiritual matters by requiring them to sign a form giving permission for their children to attend religious services. One such form was invoked against a Catholic priest, a Father Benoit. Benoit had made it known to school officials that certain parents wanted their children to attend Mass. The principal produced the paperwork to show otherwise. While it is difficult to discern precisely in what sense students or their families belonged to any particular denomination, it is true, at least in many cases, that families whose children attended Poplar Hill sent them there deliberately. That being the case, it is important to note that families were under various forms of outside pressure to send their children *somewhere*. Thus the institution’s informal archives contain requests for admission.⁴⁷ For example, a letter from June 26, 1974, reads:

Mr. Miller, Principal, Poplar Hill Development School

44. TRC, *Canada’s Residential Schools, vol. 1, The History Part 2*, 46.

45. NLGM to supporters, Aug. 1964, NLGM files.

46. Irwin Schantz to Douglas Scott, May 25, 1967, NLGM files.

47. Letters of application are present in NLGM files. Some are from parents while other requests come through the NNEC or Indian Affairs and Northern Development. The letters often cited the children’s Christian religion.

Dear Sir, We would like to have our son Timothy (born [x]) to attend your school this coming term. We find it difficult here to have him to attend school regularly. We are from Pikangikum. We would like very much to have him go to school at Poplar Hill.

Yours truly, [x], Pikangikum Band no.[x]⁴⁸

Some admission requests were relatively informal like the one above. Some were hand-written. Others came as formal documents. Reasons given for requesting admission vary from desiring a Christian education, to wanting consistent access to classes, and complications stemming from a family being “migratory.” While many of these forms include parental signatures, or reference a signed original, some do not.⁴⁹ It appears that some applicants approached the school directly, and others were recommended by district education counselors in Sioux Lookout. The critical question here is whether or not children attended these schools voluntarily. There is no need to deny that most students experienced being sent or forced into these schools. However, the institutional backdrop to this experience is much less clear.

The progressive mission narrative was sustainable in northwestern Ontario through the early 1970s. In 1971 Poplar Hill expanded to include grade nine. This development was prompted by a request from the chief of Sandy Lake, Jacob Fiddler, who wanted an alternative to the city high school for their young people. Chief Fiddler wrote, “I think they could get along better in a school in the bush than in a city, away from their parents.”⁵⁰ The growth of Poplar Hill occurred amid a general instability in the regional educational landscape. In a March 13, 1974, letter, I. L. Hawes, the district superintendent for education, wrote to express deep concern over the high rate of withdrawal from school throughout the region. He insisted that

parents should appreciate very clearly that a decision once made for a student to attend high school implies that for the full academic year

48. Student Applications, NLGM collection. In this section of the file there is also a note informing the principal that a student who would like to attend would not because his parents refused.

49. A consistent feature of the current narrative regarding Indian residential schools in Canada is the coerced nature of attendance. Survivors often liken them to prisons, sometimes even concentration camps.—e.g. Theodore Fontaine, *Broken Circle: The Dark Legacy of Residential Schools* (Victoria, B.C.: Heritage Publishing, 2010), 170-171. While the existence of letters of application must alter that narrative somewhat, it does not affect the underlying reality that Indigenous children were compelled to attend school of some sort, even when none existed in their home communities.

50. Jacob Fiddler to Paul Miller, March 18, 1971, NLGM files.

education would supersede or over-rule the traditional way of life, and that it is impossible for the two electives to co-exist.⁵¹

What Hawes meant was that students should not go home midway through the year to help on the trap line.

By 1975 Poplar Hill had roughly fifty-five students in its residence. Mary Horst's pamphlet history, written two years later, reveals some of the understanding the organization had of the changing context in which the school was being run. Horst included the following lines in the closing paragraph:

Technical progress and modern civilization have made definite inroads into the northern communities and this has meant improved living conditions for the Indian people. At the same time it has had an upsetting influence to their way of life, affecting particularly the young people as they try to find their place in a white man's world.⁵²

The school's growth continued. By 1980 the total population at the school was around 100. Writing in that year, the school's principal, Kenneth Miller, reflected on the expansion of the previous years, saying that it was carried out to "provide an alternative to city schools for beginning high school students." In the same letter, however, he expressed uncertainty about how long the arrangement would last, saying, "We pledge ourselves to meeting these needs as we sense them and we want to avoid the mistake of operating a program on the basis of needs which existed, perhaps, ten years ago."⁵³ Miller was rightly sensing that changes lay ahead.

CONTROVERSY AND CLOSURE

Principal Miller's premonition may well have been sparked by the formation in 1978-1979 of the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC). The NNEC was formed to represent the educational interests of Indigenous communities in northwestern Ontario. It was evidence of both a growing political confidence on the part of First Nation leaders and an increasing capacity for advocacy. The advent of the NNEC would radically alter the distribution of power with respect to the education of Indigenous children in this part of the country.

In June of 1980 the Poplar Hill leadership received a letter from the district superintendent of education informing them that the NNEC had

51. I. L. Hawes, March 13, 1974, NLGM files.

52. Horst, *A Brief History*, 15.

53. Kenneth Miller in NLGM Newsletter, June 1980, NLGM files.

“assumed the administration of Education Programs as they relate to students attending provincial elementary and secondary schools and institutions providing special education services.”⁵⁴ While the federal government would remain the source of funds and the province would continue to regulate the curriculum, the NNEC would become party to the contracts schools signed with the federal government. The NNEC would eventually become responsible for dispensing the relevant funds.

A typical contract from 1986 was between NLGM, NNEC, and Her Majesty the Queen. Reflecting the Indian Act of 1952, the contract named the minister of Indian and Northern Affairs as the Queen’s representative. The agreement stipulates that the NNEC represented the students’ home communities and that students would be enrolled by NLGM in consultation with the NNEC. It specified that students should be given an education in keeping with provincial standards and that the school would be inspected by an education official. NLGM would retain control over the operation of the school, disciplinary matters, and the curriculum.⁵⁵ In their representative role NNEC officials did periodically visit the Mennonite schools. Minutes from a Poplar Hill staff meeting in the 1986-1987 school year record a comment from NNEC representatives to the effect that students leaving the school after grade nine were “showing good grades and study habits.” Though that evaluation may have been positive, minutes from another staff meeting in the same year mention the ominous “Stirland incident.”⁵⁶

The relationship between Poplar Hill leadership and the NNEC became strained, yet it held until 1989 when the NNEC refused to continue funding the school. The decision was made in response to reports about harsh corporal punishment used at Poplar Hill. This was not the first time the practice of corporal punishment had created problems. In the mid-1970s the school’s principal reported to Irwin Schantz that a particular dorm supervisor should not be given greater responsibility. The reason was that the man felt the need to give “quite a few spankings” at a time when other dorm supervisors gave none.⁵⁷ A few years later, in 1978, a provincial police officer, Larry Moore, visited the school to look into allegations that staff disciplined children with a “big stick,” censored mail, and monitored their calls with family. The visit was prompted by a request from the Pikangikum chief. The officer did not criticize the use of

54. Mac Hall to NLGM, April 8, 1980, NLGM files.

55. Contract between NLGM, NNEC, and Her Majesty the Queen, Jan. 1, 1986, NLGM files.

56. PHDS Staff Meeting Minutes, 1986/87, NLGM files.

57. Names withheld, memorandum, May 22, 1974, NLGM files.

corporal punishment, but questioned the propriety of opening sealed mail. The principal wrote, "It seems more and more we are being held accountable to the people we are serving and I believe that is right. It seems more important than ever to try to keep a strong relationship with the Indian people." He then mentioned that a fellow staff member had suggested not using corporal punishment at all.⁵⁸

The issue remained on the principal's mind however. Less than two weeks later he wrote to another leader at the mission, asking about the "ultimate punishment." The principal was unsure what he should do if students did not respond to other forms of discipline. He also asked another Mennonite residential school leader about it. That principal said it was his practice to ask for parental permission. The Poplar Hill principal followed this advice. He then went to the other Mennonite school to get better "strap material." His confidence raised, he then wrote, "I feel I have latched onto some good techniques to avoid a physical confrontation and I say that gratefully, not boastingly." He then wrote that he "dealt with both boys." He described the transformation in their "attitude and behavior" as "nothing short of miraculous."⁵⁹

In the following decades some of the early leaders at Poplar Hill were accused of physically abusing students and even taking them to the school against their will. At least one former principal acknowledged and apologized for a specific instance of angry and forceful behavior. For the most part, however, school leaders rejected the accusations. They saw corporal punishment as something used sparingly for the good of the student. They also argued that they did not force students to attend against the wishes of their parents. They pointed out the application process and denied picking up students when their parents were not present.⁶⁰ However, the memory of Mennonite pilots coercing children into aircrafts persists. In 2012, a survivor spoke of seeing an aircraft come to her community, a young girl clinging to her mother, and then being forcibly taken away to school.⁶¹

Through the 1980s the practice of corporal punishment became an increasingly divisive matter between NLGM staff and Indigenous leaders. In 1971 the school board of Toronto had become the first in Canada to prohibit the use of corporal punishment. The practice had largely fallen out of use in schools across the country during that decade, but wasn't

58. Names withheld, memorandum, Jan. 17, 1978, NLGM files.

59. Names withheld, memorandum, Jan. 27, 1978, NLGM files.

60. Names and dates withheld, NLGM files.

61. Interview with person present at TRC event, April 29, 2017.

officially banned at the national level until 2004. At various points, the NNEC and several chiefs wrote letters questioning the need for “strapping.” Their letters were generally restrained and constructive, often suggesting alternative forms of discipline. In February of 1988 a mission leader wrote to the Poplar Hill principal, saying, “if it weren’t for the area of spanking, we had and have a lot of support from the NNEC organization.”⁶² However, the school’s advisory board, which included both NLGM staff and Indigenous representatives, refused to discontinue the practice.⁶³ A key exchange took place in the summer of 1989. In June of that year Don Showalter, NLGM’s education director, and Cello Meekis, the board chair, wrote to James Cutfeet, education director of the NNEC. They agreed that NLGM would meet several of the NNEC’s demands, which included increasing communication between the two organizations, facilitating more visits, hiring more Indigenous staff, and making greater use of Indigenous languages. They would not, however, refrain from using corporeal punishment. The NLGM leaders cited the biblical book of Proverbs in their rationale. Cutfeet responded in August, restating the NNEC’s opposition to the practice and providing alternative suggestions. The two sides, struggling for control of the school, could not reach an agreement. Poplar Hill did not open that fall. In October, Showalter and Meekis informed Cutfeet that the school would close.⁶⁴

The issue came to broader attention a month later when the *Winnipeg Free Press* carried a front-page article saying that parents were boycotting Poplar Hill because of the school’s use of corporal punishment. The article put forward the shocking claim that when children were strapped they were bent over a table and held down with such force that their arms were bruised. The article quoted a NLGM leader, Merle Schantz, saying that the “only reason” corporal punishment was used was because it was “a biblical form of punishment.” In the same article Schantz also cited the NNEC’s insistence on having representatives on the school board as a reason for the impasse. He believed that such an arrangement would compromise the Christian character of the private school.⁶⁵ NLGM

62. Names withheld, memorandum, February 1988, NLGM files.

63. NLGM Newsletter, January-February 1990, NLGM files.

64. Various letters between Don Showalter, Cello Meekis, and James Cutfeet, 1989, NLGM files.

65. Ruth Teichreb, “Natives Boycott Mission School over Strappings,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, Nov. 6, 1989. A Mennonite periodical the *Mennonite Reporter* ran a related story later in November quoting Cello Meekis, chair of the school board, as saying, “Rather than giving up biblical principles, we decided to stay with our guidelines.” At the end of the same piece Rodney Howe is quoted as saying that despite the controversy he still upholds his

retained a lawyer and requested the newspaper retract the story, which they believed was inaccurate. However, the mission made it clear that because of their theological convictions, they would not file a lawsuit.⁶⁶ The story was also picked up by a regional newspaper, *Wawatay News*, as well as CBC radio and other news outlets across the country.

In December of the same year, the *Wawatay News* published a letter from Rodney Howe, who was a key source for the *Winnipeg Free Press* story. Howe was a former student who was adopted by a Mennonite staff member at Poplar Hill. Howe had also briefly been on staff at the school. In his letter to the editor Howe explained that, while he believed corporal punishment was permissible in principle, the method used at Poplar Hill was too harsh. The students were “strapped” in a way leaders would never discipline their own children. Howe wrote, “I remember as a student we would ask those who were strapped if it hurt, how it was administered, how many hits they received and are your legs and buttocks black and blue?” He said that students were fearful and shy for several days after a strapping. Howe expressed thanks for all he learned at Poplar Hill; yet, he was convinced that he was far from alone in his negative assessment of the school’s use of disciplinary practices. On the same page as Howe’s letter the *Wawatay News* printed another letter, this one from an anonymous survivor who said the “strappings” were good for him and that going to Poplar Hill kept him from becoming the town drunk. He said he wasn’t aware of anyone having bruised arms from being held down.⁶⁷ In March of the following year the *Mennonite Reporter* ran a piece in which a Mennonite Central Committee worker, James Kroeker, relayed the story of a junior high girl who was “beaten.” “Let’s not call them spankings,” Kroeker said, regarding practice of corporal punishment. He was told that the “beatings” took place late at night. He also spoke about an additional form of discipline where a student was locked in a “punishment room.” The language here is quite charged: other sources refer to this space as a “counseling room.”⁶⁸ In the next month the *Mennonite Reporter* published letters from former staff and others defending the school and suggesting

“Mennonite faith.”—Margaret Loewen Reimer, “Native Mission School Shut Down over Discipline Controversy,” *Mennonite Reporter*, Nov. 13, 1989.

66. Various letters in NLGM files.

67. Rodney Howe, Letter to the Editor, *Wawatay News*, Dec. 14, 1989.

68. Margaret Loewen Reimer, “Mennonite Workers Protest Mission’s Role in Native School Controversy,” *Mennonite Reporter*, March 5, 1990. Those familiar with Mennonite studies will notice the curious fact that throughout the ensuing dialogue in the *Mennonite Reporter* most of the names of the Mennonite defenders of the Poplar Hill school are Swiss in origin and those opposed are Russian.

that Kroeker's information was nothing more than hearsay.⁶⁹ The controversy divided Mennonite communities as well as Indigenous ones.

The provincial police investigated the allegations. They reportedly contacted every former student who had received corporal punishment and asked if they wanted to file assault charges. None of the survivors, many of whom were adults at the time of the investigation, wanted to pursue the matter. The officer reported that the school kept records of who, when, and how each student was punished and added that parents were aware that corporal punishment was used. Furthermore, the use of reasonable force by both teachers and parents was protected by law.⁷⁰ Though former staff continue to reference the vindication of this investigation, the reputation of NLGM suffered. In the subsequent decades the organization would undergo a name change and then formally close. The churches it planted in Indigenous communities were more durable. In 1990 these congregations formed the Native Mennonite Conference; in 1996 the group changed its name to the Christian Anishinabec Fellowship. The network appears to have reached a highpoint in 2009 with eight congregations and a little more than 100 members scattered across northwestern Ontario.⁷¹

WAHBON BAY ACADEMY AND CRISTAL LAKE HIGH SCHOOL

The closing of Poplar Hill was followed shortly by the closing of the other remaining Mennonite Indian residential school, known as Stirland Lake High School. Stirland Lake came into being through an amalgamation of two preceding residential schools—Wahbon Bay Academy and Cristal Lake High School. The founding vision for these schools came from former Poplar Hill principal, Clair Schnupp. Clair and Clara Schnupp left Poplar Hill in 1967 due to friction between Clair and other mission leaders. Though the Schnupps parted with NLGM, they left neither the work to which they were drawn nor the network they had established in that part of the province. For a time, Clair continued to serve as a key link between students' families, the school, and the relevant federal and provincial agencies. In the fall of 1968, for example, he flew

69. *Mennonite Reporter*, April 16, 1990, and April 30, 1990. Also see Margaret Loewen Reimer, "Northern Light and MCC Draft Joint Statement on Native School," *Mennonite Reporter*, May 14, 1990.

70. *Wawatay News*, Jan. 31, 1991, and *Mennonite Reporter*, Feb. 18, 1991. I have not found the school records referenced here.

71. GAMEO, s.v. "Christian Anishinabec Fellowship," accessed Aug. 8, 2018, https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Christian_Anishinabec_Fellowship; interview with former missionary.

the school's new principal to visit students' parents.⁷² This intermediary role was not sufficient for Clair and he began taking steps to form another independent Mennonite mission agency.

The organization began informally, but by 1970 the *pro tem* organization Northern Youth Programs (NYP) applied for a charter under the same name. The charter outlined the purpose of the organization as assisting "individuals, institutions and organizations committed to the material, physical, social, moral and spiritual welfare of the Indian youth." In addition, it would directly implement programs that met these same ends.⁷³ At that time NYP was governed by a three-member board serving indefinite terms. The organization reported a bank balance of less than \$50 that summer.⁷⁴

Under Clair Schnupp's influence, NYP held to more conservative "standards" on matters of dress and other cultural markers than did the Northern Lights Gospel Mission.⁷⁵ An additional distinction was that NYP did not try to start churches in First Nation communities. The mission resisted even starting a permanent Mennonite congregation at its headquarters in Dryden. It discouraged staff from staying in the area after their term of service was completed. By contrast, in Red Lake, where the headquarters of NLGM was located, a Mennonite church was started and a number of former mission staff made the town their home. Schnupp and NYP, however, were not in northern Ontario to create another Mennonite settlement. This approach shows both an awareness of Mennonite cultural peculiarity, in that they were willing to support Indigenous people without making them Mennonites, but also an aversion to any direct accountability. NYP was independently governed and supported by an ad-hoc group of Mennonite individuals and congregations, mostly from the U.S. The arrangement largely insulated NYP from the theological struggles of the churches in its network and insulated those churches from any liability connected to NYP's work. However, the arrangement failed to provide NYP with much accountability and, oddly enough, meant that with little involvement from ordained leaders the mission was unable to perform some critical ministry functions.

From the beginning, Clair Schnupp dominated NYP's governing board, which meant there was little check on his entrepreneurial spirit and task-

72. Clair Schnupp to supporters, Nov. 29, 1968, NYP files.

73. Northern Youth Programs Charter, 1970; also Minutes Book, Feb. 9, 1970, NYP files.

74. Minutes Book, July 14, 1970, NYP files.

75. Questions related to "standards" regularly show up in the minutes of NYP board meetings.

driven propensity. Later in his life he would confess on a number of occasions that his obsession with work led him to overlook key relationships.⁷⁶ The year that Schnupp departed from Poplar Hill, a colleague wrote that the school's first principal left an "undesirable spirit in his wake." He thought that Schnupp drove his own agenda in a way that wasn't quite Christian.⁷⁷ Former staff still speak of Schnupp with a mixture of awe and reproach. On the one hand, he created a large organization from scratch, one whose geographic reach spanned the breadth of northern Ontario and Quebec, eventually reaching as far west as Alaska and as far east as Greenland. Interviewees shared stories of Schnupp's daring long-distance flights and constant energy. One interviewee, who served in a leadership role with Schnupp, described him as a "fiery horse," but one that had "huge flaws." The man would ride roughshod over others and not know it, yet he could also "fire up people by the busload" and excelled at recruiting volunteers.⁷⁸ Another interviewee, who served at Poplar Hill during the 1964-1965 school year, described Schnupp as a demanding leader, someone who was confrontational and resisted having to listen to others. He wanted things done his way.⁷⁹ In an address given at the celebration of NYP's fiftieth anniversary in the summer of 2018, Schnupp concluded his talk with what he called "A Call to Arms." He told the audience: "We must challenge the young to use their God-given drive for conquest, not for sports endeavours. Young people, do conquests for Jesus!" Then Schnupp referred to Irwin Schantz and another early Mennonite missionary as "great northern missionaries who lived and died among their Native brothers and sisters." These men "did not follow where a path led, but rather blazed trails for others to follow. I am one of those!"⁸⁰

In the latter half of the 1960s Schnupp was just getting started with his path-blazing. Writing in November of 1968, under the heading "Youth of the Northern Lights," Schnupp said that in the next week he and the principal of Poplar Hill would make their annual trip to the home communities of the school's students. He predicted that the trip would take a week to ten days and that he would be well-received by the

76. One example is the speech Schnupp gave at NYP's 50th anniversary celebration (Lancaster, Pa., Aug. 18, 2018).

77. Paul Miller to Irwin Schantz, memorandum, June 1, 1967, NLGM files.

78. Interview with former NYP leader, Jan. 13, 2017.

79. It's worth noting that this assessment came from someone who thought Schnupp has been *too* apologetic for the legacy of Mennonite residential schools.—Interview with former staff member, Dec. 16, 2017.

80. Clair Schnupp, speech given at 50th anniversary celebration (Lancaster, Pa., Aug. 18, 2018).

students' families. Schnupp wrote, "The young folks develop well in the sheltered environment of Poplar Hill School and the parents are pleased with the results." Yet he worried about the future of the students who would be moved by the government into towns and cities to finish their high school education. He wrote, "The present trend is for hundreds of these young folks to leave the seclusion of the family log cabins in the north-woods and end up in the cheap Chinese cafes on the lower side of the towns and cities with the dope, liquor, prostitution, etc." Schnupp had a flair for dramatic communication, but he also saw the shortcomings of the status quo. He went on to tell his supporters that, while the Schnupps' work in the past was mostly limited to the young people who remained in the north, in the fall of 1968 they intended to broaden their ministry. The development was prompted by his disagreement with government's strategy of forced assimilation. Schnupp wrote, "We are not convinced that the government policy of bringing so many young folks south and the policy of forced integration is correct. Neither are the Indian parents." Schnupp had received requests from Indigenous parents for something different. He wanted to provide an alternative and was working on a system where grade nine students in two northern communities could study by correspondence.⁸¹ His faults notwithstanding, Schnupp's sensitivity to the views of Indigenous parents, a sensitivity that could be attributed to his traditional Mennonite background, gave him the ability to name the shortcomings of the educational strategy that was then current.

One of NYP's early board members served as a house parent in Thunder Bay at a place known as the Centennial Residence. The residence boarded high school students from northern First Nations who were sent to Thunder Bay to attend public high school. Similar arrangements existed in other cities in that part of the province.⁸² According to the house parent, the situation in Thunder Bay was a "disaster."⁸³ On the evening of November 28, 1970, Schnupp visited the residence to assess the situation himself. He borrowed a camera to document what he found. Later Schnupp reported his observations to federal officials with the following explanation: "Knowing the parents of these young boys, I felt they must

81. Clair Schnupp to supporters, Nov. 29, 1968, NYP files.

82. It is unclear how much choice parents had in the living situations of their children who attended high school outside their home communities. A letter from chief Saul Keeash from the period says parents "should be allowed to choose the kind of home they prefer for their child," suggesting that this was lacking. —Saul Keeash to Department of Indian Affairs, sometime after April 19, 1969.

83. Interview with former NYP leader, Jan. 13, 2017.

have concrete evidence of the behaviour.” Schnupp reported that he saw blatant abuse of alcohol in the streets surrounding the residence. He observed several fights and even saw a student fall through a porch window. A little more than a week later, on December 8, Schnupp visited Chief Jacob Fiddler at Sandy Lake. He shared some of his pictures with the chief and the students’ parents. “[I]t is my belief,” Schnupp wrote to the officials, “that the parents of these young people have a moral and legal right to know what these young people are doing.”⁸⁴

Later that month leaders at NLGM received a letter from Andrew Rickard, who was the executive director of the Union of Ontario Indians (UOI), expressing concern over Schnupp’s actions. The UOI was a political advocacy organization representing First Nations across the province. Founded in 1949, the organization traced its roots to the pre-contact Council of Three Fires. In the letter to NLGM Rickard alleged that Schnupp showed movie pictures that grossly exaggerated the situation in Thunder Bay. He wrote, “We wish this propaganda to stop immediately!! We have our own interpretation of why this is going on.”⁸⁵ Schnupp’s attempt at advocacy had, apparently, not been well-coordinated. The description of the situation Schnupp painted—students intoxicated and unsupervised, wandering the city’s streets and alleys—did not match the picture the government transmitted to First Nations.

Schnupp’s version of things was corroborated by his associate, the Thunder Bay house parent, who also wrote up a report titled, “Indian Young People at School in Thunder Bay, Their Predicament as I See It.” The report was sent to Indian Affairs. Shortly thereafter the author was called in to discuss the matter. He was met by a number of officials who told him that if he disseminated the document further he would be sued.⁸⁶

The nine-page report contained three main elements, all of which argued against the government’s practice of transporting Indigenous students from their home communities to schools in the city. The first part of the report was a direct claim that “far more harm than good” was coming from the placement of northern students in cities. He wrote, “it is my opinion that things could be different, and must be different.” He then

84. A letter was also addressed to Andrew Rickard (executive director, Union of Ontario Indians) but a handwritten note says that it was only sent to Indian Affairs officials. The typed letter is undated, but the cover sheet refers to the Dec. 28, 1970, letter from the Union of Ontario Indians (private collection).

85. Andrew Rickard (executive director of Ontario Indians) sent to Irwin Schantz, Dec. 28, 1970, NLGM files.

86. Interview with former NYP leader, Jan. 13, 2017.

referred to his own prior experience of living in First Nations communities, and said,

these people are not the cause of the degeneration of their young people—and it is these same people that are being asked to trust their children into the hands of people that seemingly feel that no matter what the outcome of life in the city on a young person, it is still better than being at home on the reserve.

The report's author acknowledged that some people rejected his view as anachronistic and regressive. He imagined that his critics would argue that "the North is no longer a stable place." However, he firmly believed that the students would be better off staying at home. The second element of the report was a list of the 104 students the house parent regularly saw near the residence. He described what he saw as a harmful consumption of alcohol by many of these students. The third part of the report was a list of suggestions for improving the situation. The recommendations were wide-ranging, but they included (a) greater transparency with parents, (b) the perspective that not all young people needed to experience urban life, (c) increased educational opportunities on reserves themselves, (d) greater respect for the people and cultures of the North, (e) more concern for maintaining the unity of families, and (f) the inclusion of courses related to Indigenous history and culture in the school curriculum.⁸⁷

It is not clear how widely this report was circulated, but we do know that at least some of these concerns were shared by others. On June 26, 1969, leaders of the Deer Lake Band sent a short letter to provincial officials in Toronto identifying problems with the existing educational options. The leaders wrote,

We feel that if we want to have a good standard of education to develop our individual communities, we feel it important to solve at least part of our problem. We therefore ask that we get High School Facilities in every community or establish a District High School in one of our settlements. We as a member of Canada's Peoples feel it very imperative that we get our education.⁸⁸

Some parents called their children back from the city schools. Some of them, along with some leaders in First Nations communities, also expressed a desire for an alternative schooling arrangement. They wanted

87. The document is undated, but it corresponds with that narrative given by the interviewee (private collection).

88. The letter is not entirely legible, but a handwritten note says the original was signed by the chief and three counselors from the Deer Lake Band, June 27, 1969 (private collection).

their children to be able to learn in a Christian and more northern environment.⁸⁹

NYP ramped up quickly. By the fall of 1971 the mission operated a home for girls in Thunder Bay, ran a program for boys at Beaver Lake Camp near Dryden, and held additional camps near Sioux Lookout and Thunder Bay. That year Schnupp and his associates placed twenty-five students from First Nations communities in southern Ontario homes, where they would attend local high schools.⁹⁰ NYP also began the work of starting a residential school for boys. On July 17, 1971, Schnupp wrote to supporters explaining the idea:

We feel this is a tremendous opportunity for Christians to work with teenage boys from the north and to help them develop. The Chief of Sandy Lake is the one who originally came up with this idea of a school for these boys. . . . Right now, Brother Amos Esh is preparing to move several houses and two classrooms from the old gold mine at Pickle Lake, to the school site, 110 miles north at the end of the road. We hope to have these buildings moved and ready . . . by October 15. Many things are needed, but above all pray for a couple to live with five boys. It would be wonderful if he could teach some mechanics and/or carpentry in the afternoons. Also please pray for several car loads of men in August and September to help set up these buildings.⁹¹

Ronald Niezen, a member of the Faculty of Law at McGill University, sees the origins of NYP's schooling efforts as somewhat distinct from those of other residential schools. Though the educational arrangement was inherently misguided in its assimilationist orientation, Niezen still believes

the mere fact that two schools were established in response to wider social challenges, through a broadly consultative approach with aboriginal leadership, might add a single, small element of nuance and complexity to the history of residential Indian education as a

89. In February of 1971 Schnupp wrote the Superintendent of Indian Education in Sioux Lookout to "emphasize here again that before too much discussion takes place, the Indian parents should be properly consulted."—Clair Schnupp to B. A. Shad, Feb. 10, 1971, private collection.

90. Several interviewees, in addition to serving with one of the two mission agencies also had connections to families who hosted these students. The existence of the program demonstrates the desperate situation of Indigenous families as well as the high level of trust in Schnupp and, perhaps, Mennonites generally.

91. Clair Schnupp to supporters, July 17, 1971, NYP files.

force of assimilation, a point of irregularity on the surface of the [TRC's] narrative of cultural genocide and historical trauma.⁹²

To be sure, the difference seems to have been born out of the mission leader's theological commitments and personal relationships, rather than an intentional desire to distinguish their project from the long history of residential schooling. There is little evidence to suggest that NYP's leaders had a deep understanding of the story in which they were inserting themselves. What they had was an on-the-ground encounter with the shortcomings of the standing educational arrangement and a conviction that the experience of First Nations families mattered.

What mission leaders did not fully appreciate was the fact that in the early 1970s many church and government officials had finally realized that the residential school model was a failure on just about every front, a fact that had long been obvious to the First Nations.⁹³ Schnupp and his colleagues, perhaps because of their aversion to contemporary media and their limited historical awareness, appeared to have been relatively unconcerned with how their school would fit into that narrative. They were, instead, caught up in the pragmatics of getting the institution up and running. They had seen a site they liked from the air. It was next to Stirland Lake and near the route of a new gravel road just then being pushed north. They liked the fact that the topography would allow them to build on a relatively level spot near but above the lake.⁹⁴ The school would be called Wahbon Bay Academy. NYP leaders recruited a principal and an Indigenous couple with strong ties to Mennonite missionaries to serve on staff. The board hoped to find more Indigenous staff members and asked NYP's supporters to pray toward that end.⁹⁵ By the next year NYP had entered into an agreement with the federal government to fund the school.⁹⁶ It, too, had become a part of the residential school system. It, too, was trying to educate Indigenous students in isolation from their families and traditional networks of support. The upside, for Schnupp and other leaders, seems to have been the fact that the setting was both Christian and anything but urban.

92. Niezen, *Truth and Indignation*, 76.

93. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision*, 167-168.

94. Interview with long-term NYP leader, June 27, 2017.

95. Minutes Book, Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, Sept. 13 and 18, 1971, NYP files. Goyce Kakegamic was added to the board in an advisory capacity in 1978.—Meeting Minutes, Sept. 20, 1978.

96. TRC, *Canada's Residential Schools* 1:2, 47.

Though the basic outlines of the school's identity were clear from the beginning, some specifics were matters of long discussion. Was Wahbon Bay to be a "Christian school," where Mennonite lifestyle standards would be strictly enforced? Or was it something more accommodating, open to students who did not come from a Christian family? The flashpoints of the discussion were, not surprisingly, music, clothing, and entertainment. The mission decided that conservative Mennonite standards would not be enforced among the students. The staff believed they were to be a witness and so should maintain their Mennonite standards; nevertheless, they would not make all of their distinctive convictions mandatory for students. It was in the context of this discussion that mission officials came to the realization that, whether they intended it or not, they had become "part of the authority structure."⁹⁷ For members of a pacifist religious minority group with unique standards in clothing and personal appearance, the realization was difficult to accept. And it is not apparent that the observation prompted a thoroughgoing self-critique. When the school began, many of the students who attended had had trouble in prior school settings. Mennonite standards or not, maintaining discipline was a challenge.⁹⁸ The school leaders found themselves in possession of the need and the power to do precisely that.

Throughout the early 1970s the aggressive expansion of NYP meant that the organization's bills often outstripped its bank balance. Even so, in 1976 the mission created Cristal Lake High School, a school for girls located several miles away from Wahbon Bay that paralleled the one started earlier for boys. Staff at Cristal Lake were empowered to use corporal punishment and monitor communication between students and their families at both schools.⁹⁹

As indicated earlier, NYP leaders recognized the value in involving Indigenous people in the leadership of the school. The board brought on an Indigenous man in an advisory capacity in the late 1970s, but resisted requests to add a member appointed by the NNEC. That request, and NYP's rejection of it, revealed a tension similar to that at Poplar Hill. Though little progress was made on that front, the NNEC's power was evident in 1979 when it investigated allegations that Wahbon Bay Academy was too strict and that a staff member had hit one of the students. The NNEC investigator dismissed the allegations and reported that school discipline mostly involved manual labor, fines, or being sent

97. Minutes Book, Business Meeting Minutes, June 24-25, 1972, NYP files.

98. Interview with long-term NYP leader, June 27, 2017.

99. Minutes Book, Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, June 6-7, 1977, NYP files.

home.¹⁰⁰ In an effort to resolve the tension, NYP created a separate board in 1984, which included several men from regional First Nations, that was given the responsibility of dealing with school matters.¹⁰¹ To further manage expectations, the school required a long, formal application. The document, used from 1983 to 1985, was three pages in length.¹⁰²

The capacity of the Mennonite residential schools probably reached its zenith in the 1980s, with the total student population hovering around 100. In 1986 the two schools run by NYP were amalgamated into a coed institution known as Stirland Lake High School. It was not long after that the “Stirland incident” took place. On March 2, 1987, there was a sustained altercation between students and staff. The 2015 TRC report refers to the incident as a “fight.” Some former staff refer to it as a “riot.”¹⁰³ The confrontation started when school staff found male and female students together in a dormitory. They refused to part company and the conflict escalated into violence. Several staff members were hit with hockey sticks and other makeshift weapons. One was eventually treated for a broken bone and six others for cuts and bruises. Police were called in and the students sent home. Sixteen students were initially charged.¹⁰⁴ It was around that time that the NYP board decided it could not sustain taking “long term custodial care” of Indigenous youth.¹⁰⁵ Though the school continued to operate for several more years, the event effectively signaled its demise. The stakes were too high and it had become abundantly clear that, even in this particular incarnation, the residential school model was unworkable. Stirland Lake High School, the last Mennonite Indian residential school, closed in 1991.

APOLOGIES

In its assessment of the legacy of residential schools the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada wrote:

100. Richard Morris to Chiefs of the Petahbun Area, Feb. 9, 1979, NLGM files; also see TRC, *Canada's Residential Schools 1:2*, 395.

101. Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, Oct. 25, 1982, and Board Conference Call, Jan. 5, 1984.

102. Wahbon Bay/Cristal Lake Application, NLGM files.

103. I can recall the sense of fear that surrounded the altercation in the memory of mission staff. Several former staff told me that they or others were afraid of some of the older students. There are doubtlessly a number of precipitating factors; however, such a situation could not have contributed positively to the learning community.

104. TRC, *Canada's Residential Schools 1:2*, 395. That report cites articles: “Student Protesters Wanted Free Time,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, March 13, 1987; “Student, 19 Admits Guilt in School Brawl,” *Toronto Star*, May 29, 1987.

105. Interview with long-term NYP leader, June 27, 2017.

The closing of residential schools did not bring their story to an end. The legacy of the schools continues to this day. It is reflected in the significant educational, income, and health disparities between Aboriginal people and other Canadians—disparities that condemn many Aboriginal people to shorter, poorer, and more troubled lives.¹⁰⁶

Some six years after the closing of Stirland Lake High School, in August of 1997, Clair and Clara Schnupp published a letter in the *Wawatay News*. They were prompted to do so by an announcement they had seen about survivors of the Mennonite residential schools gathering together to seek healing. In their letter the Schnupps explained that when they were drawn to participate in the residential school system they had “never visited a residential school.” They said that they did not realize the extent to which cultures clashed at these institutions. They wrote: “Should these schools have been started in the first place? Today [in 1997] our answer is ‘no.’ If they were to be operated, it should have been by Native people for Native students.” The Schnupps apologized and asked for forgiveness.¹⁰⁷

At the same time, Clair Schnupp wrote to Jimmy Morris, deputy grand chief of the Nishanawbe Aski Nation, a confederation of First Nations in the region. His letter to Morris was similar to the one published in the *Wawatay News*. He began by stating that he and Clara were the only staff left in that part of the province from the early days of the Poplar Hill school. He described how the two of them met at the Poplar Hill in 1959 and how the school was started in response to requests from parents:

These parents had no community schools or they wanted to go out on the trapline. They didn’t want their children to go to the larger centres. We returned and began a small boarding school with cabins. . . . In retrospect, we should have assisted Native people in establishing such a school to avoid the clash of two cultures within the boarding school.

Schnupp described his memories of life at the school and then came around to the pain spoken of by survivors. He wrote,

One area that has been mentioned was my anger during my years at Poplar Hill and how it affected each person by bringing fear and anger in them. For this I am sorry. I have asked forgiveness from those I remembered where I displayed anger and acted in anger.

106. TRC, *Canada’s Residential Schools*, vol. 5: *The Legacy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 3.

107. Letter to the Editor, *Wawatay News*, Aug. 18, 1997.

He also wrote about the loss of language, and expressed sadness at what he called "our naiveté." He wrote, "From our perspective, we wanted the students to take two years in one, so we required English to be spoke in the classroom and dining hall." Then Schnupp discussed the fact that the clothing students brought with them was replaced, giving them the impression that they were not good enough. Some of them were then sent home without the clothing they had initially brought with them. Schnupp labeled this a "grave injustice." He mentioned the loss of privacy caused by "opening mail and parcels." He said, "We thought we had reasons" ¹⁰⁸ As in the *Wawatay* letter, Schnupp wondered whether or not the schools should have been started in the first place. Here again his answer is "no." He continued:

We regret that we were drawn into the White Establishment's residential school system even though it was at the request of the parents. At the age of 25 we were naïve and thought we should respond to what the parents wanted. . . . In spite of all our good intentions we were too insensitive to the Native culture. For this we are very sorry and do apologize. If only we would have had the insight that Native people should have administrated the school[s], but we didn't. We did our best with the knowledge we had in a sincere effort to help parents with their children. But the loneliness, cultural differences and approaches brought far more pain and hurt than we ever realized. . . . Looking back with all we hear of pain, hurt, misunderstanding and bitterness due to the cultural differences, naivety, rules, discipline, and mistakes, we conclude that the pain, hurt, misunderstanding and bitterness outweigh the good accomplished. If only we could do it over again . . . but we can't. We can only apologize and ask forgiveness.

In the same year NLGM leaders issued an apology as well. Theirs was more cursory, defending the view that staff persons "generally acted in good faith," but expressing "regret for any hurtful experiences which members of the First Nations communities may have felt."¹⁰⁹

These apologies were certainly not the first issued in connection with the church's involvement in Canada's project of assimilation. The United Church of Canada had issued a general apology in 1986 (this was followed in 1998 by one directly related to that church's involvement in Indian

108. Clair Schnupp to Jimmy Morris, Aug. 18, 1997, copy in possession of the author.

109. Open letter signed by Merle Schantz, Merle Nisly, and Henry Hostetler, Oct. 1, 1997, copy in possession of the author.

residential schools). However, it would take another decade for the federal government to take the same step when, in the spring of 2008, the prime minister of Canada issued an official apology to the nation's 80,000 surviving former residential school students. It read, in part,

The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian Residential Schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture, heritage and language. While some former students have spoken positively about their experiences at residential schools, these stories are far overshadowed by tragic accounts of the emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect of helpless children, and their separation from powerless families and communities.¹¹⁰

In 2013 Merle Nisly, CEO of a successor organization to NLGM, joined Clair and Clara Schnupp in releasing another apology. They expressed sorrow over times when the schools inflicted physical pain, when they ignored the impact of separation from families, when they failed to recognize that some students suffered at the hands of others, and when school personnel were not properly screened or trained. They also apologized for the way white staff acted as if their culture were superior to that of their students. And they expressed regret for the way the schools "cooperated with the national plan to force [First Nations'] assimilation into Canadian society." For all these things, they said, "we are sorry."¹¹¹

Those who initiated and maintained the three Mennonite Indian residential schools have, at various times, been cast as both heroes and villains. Many of them volunteered at these institutions during a time when they could return to their home congregations as gallant exemplars of the faith. They now live in a cultural moment when many hesitate to admit to the role they played in this "sad chapter" of Canadian history. Just as current political forces, coupled with the actualities of history, have created survivors of residential schools, they have also created villains. To be clear, there are ways in which a starkly dualistic narration of this story may be helpful. For instance, undoubtedly many who attended residential schools, even those run by Mennonites, being able to label their experience as wrong, as not what should have happened, is an important step in a journey of healing. Similarly, from a theological perspective, it is deeply

110. The text of this apology is available on the government of Canada's Indigenous and Northern Affairs website, accessed May 12, 2017, <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1100100015649>.

111. This apology is available online through the website of Living Hope Native Ministries, accessed Aug. 8, 2018, <http://www.lhnm.org/>.

important that people of all sorts find ways to reckon with their place in harmful systems and with the choices they have made, whether fully informed or not. All that is true. It is also true that Mennonites did initiate and run "Indian Residential Schools." They were active agents in this "sad chapter" of history. Nevertheless, what the available sources show is that reducing the lives of all involved to either passive victims or malevolent perpetrators is a political act more than it is a historical reality.