



Learning Circle

September 30 in Canada is now known as “Orange Shirt Day” but like so many aspects of the indigenous experience in this county there are probably many people who still do not know how this designation came to be or the story behind it.

“Orange Shirt Day was created as **an opportunity to discuss the effects of residential schools and their legacy**. It honours the experiences of Indigenous Peoples, celebrates resilience and affirms a commitment that every child matters.”
(Wikipedia)

September 30, 2021 was the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. This day coincides with Orange Shirt Day - a day to honour residential school survivors and their families and to remember the children who did not return home again. It is a day to reflect on and highlight our progress on the path to reconciliation between Canadian society and indigenous peoples.

Orange shirts first became associated with this day when in 2013 the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation was coming to Williams Lake BC and Phyllis Webstat first shared the story of her experience attending the St. John’s Mission Residential School at age six. She tells how her grandmother made a special trip with Phyllis to buy a new shirt for this exciting first day – the shirt was orange. When Phyllis arrived, the shirt was taken away and she never saw it again. For many years she avoided orange because the colour was a trigger for painful memories. After hearing her story, people who were involved in organizing the event for the Commission chose to wear orange as a sign of respect and support for residential school survivors and the need for “every child matters”.

Orange Shirt Day began as a grass roots, indigenous initiative. Through social media, the orange shirt story and Orange Shirt Day spread quickly throughout BC and was widely adopted across the country. September was chosen by The Orange Shirt Society because it was the month where children were taken from their homes to attend residential schools. It is not a coincidence that this date was chosen by the federal government to also be the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. Canadians are encouraged to wear an orange shirt that day to honour the thousands of survivors of residential schools.

“Orange Shirt Day is a legacy of the St. Joseph Mission (SJM) Residential School (1891-1981) Commemoration Project and Reunion events that took place in Williams Lake, BC, Canada, in May 2013. ...The events were designed to commemorate the residential school experience, to witness and honour the healing journey of the survivors and their families, and to commit to the ongoing process of reconciliation.” (<https://www.orangeshirtday.org>)

In its Interim Report (2012) the Truth and Reconciliation Commission concluded that “Canadians have been denied a full and proper education as to the nature of Aboriginal societies,

and the history of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.”
(<https://www.angeshirtday.org>) The final report made many recommendations for actions that cannot be covered in one short article, but it is very clear that Canadians should try to educate themselves about these concerns and work on taking action to be in good relationship with our indigenous neighbours.

Most school boards in Canada will be providing curriculum over the coming years so that education in our schools can lead to a society that is active in learning about and repairing our broken relationships with indigenous peoples. Children and staff as well as members of the general public will be found wearing orange shirts on that day and there will be age appropriate discussions in classrooms across the country to explain the purpose of this day. In the lower grades most of these lessons will focus on helping children understand concepts such as “knowing what matters”, sharing and listening to each other, understanding and acknowledging that diversity is a positive thing etc. In the higher grades discussion can include looking at the residential school system, historical attitudes about indigenous peoples and opening the conversation to how reconciliation might look in their communities.



Phyllis Webstat is the Founder and Ambassador of the Orange Shirt Society. She tours the country telling her story and raising awareness about the impacts of the residential school system. She published two books, the *Orange Shirt Story* and *Phyllis's Orange Shirt* for younger children. I strongly encourage you to listen to her tell her story in her own words at <https://www.angeshirtday.org/phyllis-story.html> and read her book to the children in your lives. Start the conversation.

I will be wearing an orange shirt on Sept. 30. I hope you can as well.
Respectfully submitted
Michele Altermann



If anyone is interested in being part of a small social justice group (similar to the Reconciling in Christ team) with a focus on building relationship with our indigenous neighbours, please let Pastor Brian or the church office know of your interest. Thank you.
