



Learning Circle



May 5 - National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two Spirit People.

May 5th - also known as Red Dress Day.

So, why a red dress?, or, What does this week's church sign mean?

In 2011 Jamie Black, a Métis artist, created an art installation on the campus of the University of Winnipeg. *The REDress Project* was **"an aesthetic response to the more than 1000 missing and murdered aboriginal women in Canada."** The empty red dresses were meant to signify the losses of Indigenous women, girls, and two spirit people to colonial violence.

Black has since encouraged similar public installations of hanging red dresses in different



environments as a way to draw attention to the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and two spirited people (MMIWG2S+) across Canada (and North America). Hundreds of red dresses from across Canada were donated to the original project. ***The dresses are empty, so that they evoke the missing women who should be wearing them. Black has said: "People notice there is a presence in the absence".***

After consultation with an indigenous friend, Black chose the colour red because red is the only colour that spirits can see. This gives the spirits an opportunity to be among us and for us to be the voices that speak to their lives and loss. ***Black has also suggested red "relates to our lifeblood and that connection between all of us", and that it symbolizes both vitality and violence.***

Since 2011, red dresses have been hung in many rural and urban settings, Buffy Ste. Marie now hangs a red dress on the stage at every concert, and *the REDress Project* is on permanent display at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (Winnipeg), as just a few examples of the impact this project has had. Many public and private spaces will commemorate this day with the display of red dresses on and around May 5.

The 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's *Calls to Action* report identified 94 steps to address the legacy of residential schools in Canada. Call to Action #41 states:

We call upon the federal government, in consultation with Aboriginal organizations, to appoint a public inquiry into the causes of, and remedies for, the

disproportionate victimization of Aboriginal women and girls. The inquiry's mandate would include:

- i. Investigation into missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls*
- ii. Links to the intergenerational legacy of residential schools.*

The red dress has become a visual symbol of the bitter truth that violence against marginalized members of our communities is often disproportionately felt by Indigenous and Métis women, girls and two spirit people. Another theme in the Calls to Action is about education. The Red Dress can serve as a starting point for concerned conversations that can open us to new truths and compassion, and perhaps eventually to action.

Respectfully submitted,
Michele Altermann

Sources:

<https://www.alberta.ca/red-dress-day.aspx#:~:text=Red%20Dress%20Day%20honours%20the,by%20loved%20ones%20and%20survivors.>

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/REDress_Project

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