kahkiyaw niwahkomakanak—All my relations

A sermon

Denise Climenhage

This sermon was preached at Ottawa Mennonite Church in Ottawa, Ontario, on September 21, 2025. It emerges from and speaks into a particular local context. You are invited to reflect on and explore related opportunities in your local community.

> *[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)*
>
> *Learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:17)*
>
> *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34–35)*

tanisi, Denise Climenhage nitsikason. Fort Erie, Ontario ochi niya, maka migwich Ottawa niwikan. Hello, my name is Denise Climenhage. I'm from Fort Erie, Ontario, but now I live in Ottawa.

Some of you have read in the most recent issue of the *Forum*, our church newsletter, about my Indigenous language learning experience—specifically my study of Plains Cree. I began this in earnest during the COVID pandemic.

A few weeks ago, Andy, one of our ministers, asked me about sharing how this experience related to my faith and my identity, and if I would share my thoughts on what Ottawa Mennonite Church (OMC) may be called on to do in terms of Truth and Reconciliation with our Indigenous sisters and brothers. Andy was very flexible, offering several possibilities for delivering my message this morning. Given the breadth of the topic, and the fact that I owe the OMC community a detailed treatment of my experience, considering I've worshipped at OMC since 1985, I've opted to use the sermon time, rather than to roll out a highly condensed version as the Children's Story.

My Cree family

So why study Cree? I love history, particularly Canadian history, and the Cree Nation, which is both populous and spread throughout Canada, has great significance in many ways to the development of our country. But the greatest attraction for me to learn the language is a familial connection.

Despite my Germanic family name and deep Anabaptist (specifically Brethren in Christ) roots on my paternal side, my mother's heritage is Cree. Mom came to Ontario from northern Saskatchewan in 1948, at age fifteen, to attend the Niagara Christian College, the Brethren in Christ boarding school in Fort Erie near Niagara Falls. At the time, Mom's family lived on a rural homestead thirty miles north of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, where high school attendance could not be arranged locally. My grandmother and her children attended the Brethren in Christ North Star Mission church, an outreach established by congregations in southern Saskatchewan in Kindersley and Delisle.

Mom's grandmother, Bella Halkett, was one of the first residents in the La Ronge residential school when it was built in 1907. We know this from a 1981 transcript of an interview in Cree from the Saskatchewan Archives Board in which Bella's cousin Sarah Ballantyne recounts how she and Bella were brought to the school as seven-year-olds from the Little Hills Reserve, six or eight miles away, via dogsled by the school's principal and Anglican clergyman Robert Brown. La Ronge today is a two-hour drive north of Prince Albert and a four-hour drive north of Saskatoon.

My great-grandmother Bella died a single mother in her late twenties in about 1930 in Prince Albert, and left behind a daughter, my grandmother, Frances, then twelve years old, and two very young sons, Percy and Alan. None of these children attended residential school. My grandmother went into foster care in Prince Albert, and Percy and Alan were adopted by Bella's cousin Sarah Ballantyne and taken north to live on the trapline near La Ronge. My grandmother Frances married a homesteader of British heritage, while her brothers married Cree women and raised their families in and around La Ronge.

We're not sure how much contact my grandmother had with her Cree relations in La Ronge over the years. Sarah Ballantyne would show up from time to time during our visits from Ontario, but Grandma never really explained the connection. In the mid-1970s, my grandmother began volunteering in the kitchen and dormitory of the Timber Bay Children's Home at Montreal Lake, midway between her home and La Ronge, which the Brethren in Christ had begun operating a few years earlier. During this time, she connected and established close relationships with her seven nieces, her brother Percy's daughters (Doreen, Annie, Jemima, Adele, Rose, Alice, and Nancy), who were residents there. Although these nieces are my mother's first cousins, they are around my age. Her nieces would spend weekends

at my grandmother's home, and the eldest, the late Doreen, lived with my grandmother while completing high school in a nearby town.

In the early 1990s I drove my grandmother to La Ronge to visit her nieces and their families and to obtain information from them in order to apply for my grandmother's Band membership and Indian status, for which she became eligible when the Indian Act was amended in 1985. This was the first time I met my La Ronge cousins.

These cousins are fluent Cree speakers, and they have since told me that my grandmother was a "silent speaker" of Cree—one who understands, but does not speak, the language. This may or may not be true.

Cree language and culture

After meeting my La Ronge relatives, I sought opportunities to study Cree in Ottawa without success. However, during the COVID pandemic, and with increased resources for Indigenous language revitalization from the Commission on Indigenous Languages, many opportunities to learn Cree (and other Indigenous languages) remotely, including from instructors in Western Canada, suddenly became available.

I should explain that my relatives in La Ronge, and Cree-speaking residents in the communities north of La Ronge such as Stanley Mission and Southend, speak Woodland Cree, whereas the dialect I study is Plains Cree. The latter is widely spoken throughout Saskatchewan and Alberta and the dialect of instruction by universities in those provinces, even though many instructors' first dialect is Woodland Cree. The two dialects are mutually understood, the primary difference being that the "y" sound in Plains Cree is replaced by the "th" sound in Woodland Cree.

My study has been a combination of informal conversational courses and university credit courses. Both formats have incorporated cultural teachings. Significant elements of Cree culture and community are the concepts of being connected, animacy (that is, being alive), and kinship.

You've just heard about "all my relations" or "kakiyaw niwahkomakanak" in the conventional sense of the expression; however, the Cree worldview goes a step further and embraces the concept of "wahkohtowin," which means that all living things are related and connected to one another and to the Creator. "wahkohtowin" implies that all living things have a spirit, and that's how everything is connected.

It follows that the Cree language, which does not distinguish gender as Romance languages do, applies the concept of animacy (whether or not a thing is living) to each noun. Living things are animate and non-living things are inanimate. This attribute is usually pretty easy to determine, but not always, as in the case of bannock (or fried bread), trousers, and mittens—each of which is animate.

Kinship terms, or the words used to describe relationships, are very important and strongly emphasized in studying the Cree language. Cree prayers and public addresses often conclude with the expression "kahkiyaw niwahkomakanak" ("all my relations"), reminding all present that they are included in the prayer and that they are all related to each other. The relationships Cree kinship terms describe reflect the Cree community's structure and in some cases indicate how children whose parents were unavailable would be cared for and how distant relatives must be before it would be acceptable for them to marry one another.

There are no specific words for great aunt or great uncle in Cree—those individuals would instead be called grandmother or grandfather. The Cree word for aunt translates as "little mother." There are no particular words for maternal-to-maternal cousins; they are called siblings. There are no first, second, or third cousins . . . they are all called siblings, cousins, or relatives.

Beyond giving me a broader understanding of Indigenous and specifically the Cree language and culture, my study experience has made me appreciate the strength of kinship within Cree communities. It has provided insight into the familial ties in the Cree community that were weakened or severed by the experience of residential school, the foster care system, and incarceration. It has given me greater appreciation for the humour, compassion, and resilience that has allowed victims of the trauma of these experiences to support those with greater need than their own, to regain and maintain community, and to work to revitalize their language. It has made me realize my own position of privilege in growing up in a stable, supportive, and affirming family, community, and church.

My experience has increased my appreciation for my La Ronge cousins and the companionship and care they gave to my grandmother—especially in early 2011 during her final days, when her children and grandchildren were all in other provinces.

I'll never be fluent enough to conduct conversations with my La Ronge cousins entirely in Cree, but they're thrilled that I'm learning the language, eager to help me figure out idiomatic expressions, and happy to begin and end our chats with Cree greetings and farewells.

Cree culture and Christian faith

From a faith perspective, studying Cree has let me see how others have integrated their Indigenous spirituality and Cree worldview into their Christian faith.

Dorothy Visser was one of my earliest Cree instructors, whose classes out of Surrey, British Columbia, I happened upon by chance in an internet search. I've visited Dorothy in person twice in British Columbia, and I still attend her Monday night Zoom classes.

In addition to teaching Cree, Dorothy—a residential school survivor—is a leader of Hummingbird Ministries, founded by her friend Mary Fontaine.[1] Hummingbird Ministries is a Christian ministry for urban Indigenous youth in Vancouver who have little or no contact with their home communities. Dorothy integrates her strong Christian faith and the Indigenous principles based on the Seven Grandfather Teachings (love, respect, honesty, courage, truth, wisdom, and humility) throughout her instruction. In 2022, when Mary Fontaine was appointed Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, she chose Dorothy to accompany her in the role of Indigenous Spiritual Elder for her installation in Halifax.

Dorothy lives her faith. Like several of her Indigenous students, Dorothy has worked and volunteered to support the largely Indigenous displaced and dispossessed community in Vancouver's Lower East side. Many of these people are part of the large Cree diaspora in the British Columbia Lower Mainland from the Prairie provinces. Dorothy and these students are not wealthy, and they are often grappling with their own families' challenges with housing, mental health, missing relatives, and other social issues. I hear their stories in bits and pieces between instruction on grammar and reviews of sentence structure, and for me they are models for living out today's scriptures in their love for others, especially for those who are oppressed.

Calls to action for our congregation

What is OMC called to do as we approach September 30, the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, which recognizes the horrors of the Canadian Indian residential school system?

Certainly, we need to commit to learning more about past institutional injustices and land loss perpetrated against Canada's Indigenous Peoples. Living in Ottawa, we're fortunate to have opportunities to learn and listen to many Indigenous voices. Two such opportunities are the walking tours in downtown Ottawa and at the Beechwood Cemetery on September 30 that discuss the federal government's role in the Indian residential school system. Ongoing public events at the Wabano Centre in Vanier,[2] by the Indigenous Studies school at Carleton University,[3] and through the Ottawa Writers Festival[4] are also examples of opportunities to listen and learn. Resources on Indigenous issues are available from the OMC library and Mennonite Church Canada's Commonword Resource Centre. The

1 Hummingbird Ministries, https://hummingbirdministries.ca.

2 Wabano Centre—Indigenous Centre for Excellence in Health Care, https://wabano.com/.

3 Indigenous Studies—The Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies, Carleton University, https://carleton.ca/iis/indigenous-studies/.

4 Ottawa Writers Festival, www.writersfestival.org.

University of Alberta and Coursera offer an excellent and free Indigenous Canada Course that teaches Indigenous history and contemporary issues online.[5] And the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network,[6] which is provided with every television cable package, offers educational and cultural programming as well as news from an Indigenous perspective.

I know that individuals in the OMC community were inspired to work toward reconciliation during our annual Days of Worship and Reflection in early 2016. This was soon after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released its recommendations for achieving reconciliation.[7] As a community we participated in the KAIROS Blanket Exercise illustrating the historic mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples, led by Algonquin Elder Barbara Dumont-Hill.[8] We listened to Steve Heinrichs, a settler who, at that time, was Director of Indigenous-Settler Relations for Mennonite Church Canada. He has worked for reconciliation and has written well and extensively—and compiled writings of others—on the subject.

Since that time, OMC has developed and makes a land acknowledgement to open each worship service. OMC community members have volunteered at Indigenous organizations such as 510 Rideau,[9] facilitated learning programmes on Indigenous Spirituality at the Ottawa School of Theology and Spirituality,[10] donated a children's Sunday school collection to the Odawa Native Friendship Centre,[11] and walked on a pilgrimage in support of the adoption and implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.[12] I'm sure OMC community members have done more than I'm aware of for the Indigenous community. I know of at least one instance where someone from OMC has fielded difficult questions and hostility for being an ally of Indigenous Peoples.

At OMC's most recent AGM a suggestion was made that we direct a certain percentage of our budget toward Indigenous initiatives. I don't recall whether this proposal was linked directly to either reconciliation

5 Indigenous Canada—University of Alberta, https://www.ualberta.ca/en/admissions-programs/online-courses/indigenous-canada/index.html.

6 APTN, https://www.aptntv.ca/.

7 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Calls to Action* (2015), https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf.

8 KAIROS Blanket Exercise Community, https://kairosblanketexercise.org/.

9 510 Rideau, https://odawa.ca/programs/510-rideau/.

10 Ottawa School of Theology and Spirituality, https://www.osts.ca/.

11 Odawa Native Friendship Centre, https://odawa.ca/.

12 United Nations, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007), https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf.

or reparations for the use of Indigenous land. A little over ten years ago, Adrian Jacobs, Senior Leader for Indigenous Justice and Reconciliation in the Christian Reformed Church, proposed a Spiritual Covenant with Mennonite churches (on the Haldimand Tract) in which they would set aside a portion of their budgets as a token toward reparations for lands promised but never received by the Six Nations Confederacy. Four Mennonite churches have implemented such a measure: one on the Haldimand Tract in Kitchener and three in Winnipeg. Esther Epp-Thiessen is part of the Indigenous-settler relations committee at the Home Street church in Winnipeg that is giving 1% of its budget to Indigenous organizations. Perhaps we could engage Adrian Jacobs and Esther Epp-Thiessen to lay out the considerations leading to such an initiative and the consequences for the church's relationship with the Indigenous community.

Ongoing learning and action in relationship

Our individual efforts for reconciliation are all very important and good. But it's time for the OMC community to come together again to listen to and learn from survivors about what we should be doing as a community toward reconciliation, and to learn together from the Algonquin Nation on whose traditional land we worship about the history, care, and stewardship of their land. Should unceded land be considered and treated differently from land stolen or withheld, treaty notwithstanding? I don't know. We need to learn. Beyond learning, we need to determine our way forward. We should anticipate that difficult conversations will occur as we listen, learn, and, within OMC, determine how to proceed. Our annual Days of Worship and Reflection can have inspirational results, but there's so much listening and learning to do that a series of dedicated learning and listening sessions would seem more accommodating to thoroughly considered outcomes.

In all of this, we need to be guided by Christ's commandment set out in the Gospel of John to love each other, and the Old Testament exhortation in Micah to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly.

We are all related (wahkohtowin), and we need to work together with each other, beyond our important and individual efforts, to understand, reconcile, and live together with our Indigenous sisters and brothers in the way our Creator intended. We are all connected in spirit (wahkohtowin), all of my relations (kakiyaw nowakomakanak).

About the author

Denise Climenhage is member of the Ottawa Mennonite Church and a retired federal public servant, who worked for more than thirty years in the domain of international trade. She and her husband, James Bluhm, divide their time between Ottawa and their rural home in Fort Erie (Niagara). Denise visits her relatives in Saskatchewan whenever she can, and is grateful for social media, which allows her to keep in constant touch with them.