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FROM: Michael Pahl, Executive Minister

TO: Congregations of Mennonite Church Manitoba

DATE: June 2, 2021

Our hearts were broken this week as we heard news of the discovery of the remains of 215 children at the former site of the Kamloops Indian Residential School on the territory of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation. If we have been listening to Indigenous elders, we were not surprised by this discovery. Elders have been telling us that more children died at residential schools than had been documented. We may not be surprised, then, but we do sorrow and grieve, bearing witness to the deeper sorrow and more bitter grief of Indigenous peoples across Canada.

Although no residential schools were run by precursors to Mennonite Church Manitoba, Mennonites in Manitoba have been complicit in the residential school program. The Conference of Mennonites in Canada's Mennonite Pioneer Mission and Board of Missions recommended teachers to residential schools and ran two private day schools in Manitoba (in Pauingassi and Bloodvein). While these private day schools grew out of requests from the Indigenous communities in which they were formed, and they sought to work within the customs and traditions of these Indigenous communities, they were still often colonizing in orientation, they had federal government oversight, and they were supported by federal government funds within the national residential school program. Eventually, these schools came fully under federal government control. Of course, these direct involvements do not even begin to touch on the many ways Mennonites in Manitoba have benefited indirectly from federal and provincial programs which have oppressed and dispossessed Indigenous peoples.

We have much work to do to address the harms committed against Indigenous peoples in Canada, often in the name of Jesus, including by us as Mennonites. There is practical work that can and must be done to bring about a genuine justice that can form the basis for true reconciliation. There is deep repentance of personal and systemic racism which needs to form the foundation for this pursuit of justice and reconciliation. In this moment, though, we pause to lament, to mourn, to sorrow and grieve the murder of 215 children, each one known and loved by their Creator.

To that end, I commend to you the statement circulated by our Mennonite Church Canada colleagues, including its calls to action, as well as the prayer of lament written by Dorothy Fontaine, MCM Director of Mission, with her husband Vince (Sagkeeng First Nation).

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Michael Pahl".

Michael Pahl  
Executive Minister  
Mennonite Church Manitoba