

walking with...

An invitation for churches to walk with families of missing and murdered women

by **MAGGIE McLEOD**

A NUMBER OF WOMEN HOLD A SPECIAL YET PAINFUL PLACE in my heart and memory. Some of these women I grew up with on the Reserve, while others grew up in the city. Some of these women were my childhood friends, neighbours, and cousins. Many of them I didn't know at all; I'd come to know them only through the inside pages of the local newspaper, and other times in daily obituaries. These women have much in common: all died at a very early age, in the prime of their lives; all were First Nations; and all of their deaths were a result of the violent act of another.

Over time, over decades, this space in my heart has never been filled with anything other than questions and a growing unease: "Why? Why had this happened to them?"

I have wondered a lot about who was to blame for these deaths, but I've not been satisfied by any answers. No doubt this is because of my growing awareness of the extent of violence that has been, and continues to be, perpetuated against First Nations' women, as well as a growing recognition of the complexities that underly this issue. One of the issues is a lack of choice:

"The transformation of Aboriginal people from the state of good health that had impressed travellers from Europe to one of ill health, for which Aboriginal people were (and still are) often held responsible, grew worse as sources of food and clothing from the land declined and traditional economies collapsed. It grew worse still as once-mobile peoples were confined to small plots of land where resources and opportunities for natural sanitation were limited. It worsened yet again as long-standing norms, values, social systems, and spiritual practices were undermined or outlawed."

(Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 113)

For many native women, choices are extremely limited. Daily life can consist of a routine of survival that could exhaust and discourage even the most robust. The vulnerable are apt to assume a sense of blame and shame. For this and other reasons I am reticent to tell the story of another. People's stories are sacred and pastoral care is a tender trust.

In the past, I have been part of healing/talking circles, where the one who shares a story of struggle is then pressed to bring a sense of hope. It has been through my experience, sitting for hours with a pastoral ear, that I now unapologetically name the reality: there is despair in our world today, and we do no good to deny it. Today, in our midst, there are many that are heavily burdened with a sense of powerlessness.

However, in the very next breath, I will say that, as the Christian church, we ought not be searching always for a sense of hope outside of ourselves. We must dare to search within ourselves and examine our hearts and our faith. For a moment, let us sit with the uncertainty and heaviness of despair, and trust that from this place we will find the hope and compassion that moves us to walk with our sisters and their families.

An important step is to realize that the families of these missing women are not going to come knocking on our church doors. Historically, the church has done an effective job of alienating the vulnerable through its contribution to the colonization of the people of Turtle Island (North America).

To help us to understand this vulnerability, we must learn to see colonization for what it is: a process whereby, through the invasion of land and the dislocation of social, cultural, and economic structures and through the establishment of political control and low-level services (known on the "Res" as "Band-Aid Programs"), we create the dispossessed. It is from this environment

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that we have young women running to the cities to avoid poverty or abuse at home. Or their migration might simply be out of wanting/needing more than what Reserve life can currently offer. Without proper support systems – by way of jobs, housing, family, community – to greet and empower them as they seek to stand on solid new ground, we create an environment in which pimps, drug traffickers, and violent abusers have *carte blanche*.

“Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.” (Luke 13:10-11)

The story of Jesus’ encounter with a bent-over woman faults her “spirit” as the cause for her affliction. I cannot help but wonder if society still may look upon women’s circumstances in this way. Has mainstream society viewed low self-esteem as “a spirit of weakness”? As a pastor, I wonder if we look at the Bent Over Woman as one who is simply in need of “fixing”, rather than someone in need of attention and companionship.

We, the church, have a place in the story of colonization; therefore, we have a place in the story of missing and murdered women in Canada. We must take our place in the story of the families who walk in despair.

The good news is that, as people of “the way”, we also have a place in the story of the Bent Over Woman. In our search to find ways to be in solidarity and companionship with another, I offer two small scenarios:

1. A mother of a missing woman (who was later found murdered) was described as an angry woman. One said of her that “she died an angry woman”.
2. A group of native women held a Commemorative Walk in honour of the murdered women of the area. They felt a sense of hope in their walk and the strength in the heartbeat of the drum that lead them. Yet, when they sought to give voice to their purpose and concerns, they were met with uncomfortable silence. Where do we begin, they asked? Would the familiar chant: “*give peace a chance*” express what was in their hearts? Other familiar chants and songs gave them no sense of satisfaction that any of these expressed their heart’s concerns, so they walked holding their memory of murdered women in silence.

When I heard about the angry mother, I grieved for her and I was further saddened as I recollected a comment I’ve heard on more occasions than I care to recall: “Hasn’t enough time passed for anger to subside?” It is important to help others understand the sense of

exhaustion felt by families and communities. It has been my experience that, because of this exhaustion and silence, the chance of moving out of a place of anger and despair are marginal. One cannot at times even put words to feelings let alone find voice for a call to action.

Fatigue, frustration, and, no doubt, anger were felt by the woman bent over for 18 years. In turning again to this story, we realize that she did not approach Jesus. Bent over, as she was, she could see only her feet and the feet of others as they moved around the synagogue floor. How could she have known that Jesus was there? How could she have known where to turn?

It was Jesus who spotted her and, recognizing her need, attended to her. In her “*bentoverness*” and silence, Jesus came to her side, despite the laws and customs that would have restricted such solidarity.

It is my hope that the church has a growing recognition of its capacity to provide a mission of solidarity. I hope we have progressed in our understanding of our call as followers of the Spirit of Christ to an attitude not of subjugation of the other, but one of liberation.

In our intention to seek a solidarity that recognizes relationships as just and equal, we would do well to remember our common history. It’s been said that, just as we have been the recipients of the blessings left by the generations before us, so we must also accept their burdens. To move forward, we have no alternative but to look at the aftermath of 500-or-so years of colonization. (I use the word “aftermath” loosely, recognizing that colonization has not ended.) It is through this lens that we can sit in good company with one another, perhaps even recognizing the reality of one another’s pain.

Congregations (and communities) have the power within themselves to reach out. They can help to give a voice to the voiceless. They can help the tired, exhausted, “bent over ones” begin to find words where they are currently unable to. There are walks, prayers, vigils, feasts, all of which promote awareness, and more importantly, offer a sense of hope and healing to families of those missing. Together we carry the responsibility of bringing honour to these missing and murdered women.

It is through a relationship of mutual understanding and non-judgement that we further our dialogue that leads to meaningful ways of walking together.

As much as Luke’s passage is one about healing (fixing), it is also one of recognition and accompaniment. My hope is that in seeking and keeping good company with each other, we will learn to trust that recognition and accompaniment can be more powerful than even the most well-intentioned agendas.

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