

Respect, Reconciliation and Resilience



Phil Fontaine and Archbishop V. James Weisgerber in Conversation

NATHAN BATTAMS

During the *Families in Canada Conference 2015*, the Vanier Institute of the Family invited former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Phil Fontaine and former President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops Archbishop V. James Weisgerber to discuss their personal journeys toward reconciliation and becoming *family*, and their insights on the realities and experiences of Indigenous families in Canada.

"I knew that - where I was - I was unhealthy," says Fontaine, recollecting his feelings of anger and bitterness during the period when he first spoke publicly in 1990 about his experience as a young person attending residential school. In 2009, he travelled to Rome with a delegation of Indigenous peoples and Weisgerber for a private meeting with Pope Benedict XVI. Fontaine describes this meeting, where His Holiness delivered a statement of regret, as an "absolutely amazing, moving experience." The forgiveness he felt was instrumental in his own reconciliation and healing. "If we can't forgive," he says, "we will never heal. If we can't forgive, there will be no reconciliation."

Upon his return to Manitoba, Weisgerber learned about and connected with First Nations spirituality and culture after befriending Anishinaabe Elder Tobasonakwut Kinew, who had been seeking to reconcile with the church after being "deeply wounded" in the residential school system. In the Anishinaabe language, there is no direct equivalent to the word "reconciliation," but there is a ceremony in which an enemy or estranged person is adopted into the family that has been wronged. Through this ceremony, Kinew invited Weisgerber to become a part of his family - an event that was performed along with Fontaine as a step toward reconciliation. The media was invited to make the experience a public affair. While Weisgerber feels

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mutual embracement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is essential for reconciliation, he recognizes that it may continue to be very challenging.

Turning to the realities and experiences of Indigenous families today, Fontaine says poverty is the biggest challenge: "Poverty results in dysfunction. It results in broken individuals and families; it denies one hope. People can't dream... It paralyzes. It strangles people, families and communities." Added to the difficult socio-economic conditions faced by Indigenous families is racism. Weisgerber notes that it's easy for people to hang on to stereotypes about others when walls exist between people, but these walls erode when people come together and coexist while people maintain their identities and traditions. "It enriches their families," he says, "it also enables people to get to know them... it enriches their neighbours."

Fontaine and Weisgerber are adamant that *all* Canadians have to be directly involved and engaged in the process of reclamation and healing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, families and communities in Canada, a difficult process that has spanned - and will continue to span - generations. "There's no magic," says Fontaine. "It's just going to be a lot of hard work." Respect, reconciliation and resilience will be key factors in this ongoing journey.

The full conversation can be seen on the Vanier Institute's YouTube channel. [♥](#)

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FACTS AND STATS



Access to Medical Doctors in Canada

85% Proportion of Canadians aged 12 and older who reported in 2014 that they have a regular medical doctor^{1,2}

89% & 82% Proportion of women and men in Canada aged 12 and older, respectively, who reported in 2014 that they have a regular medical doctor³

59% & 14% Proportion of Canadians without a regular medical doctor who reported in 2014 that they would use a walk-in clinic and proportion who reported that they would use a hospital emergency room, respectively, when they are sick or in need of health advice⁴

39% & 85% Proportion of Inuit people and the total Canadian population aged 15 and older, respectively, who reported having a regular medical doctor in 2012^{5,6}

10% & 2% Proportion of Canadians who said they have been invited to email their medical doctor with a question, and those who report having done so, respectively⁷

47% Proportion of Canadians who reported having recently used the Emergency Department for a concern that could have been addressed by their regular medical doctor had they been available⁸

67% Proportion of Canadians who said they are usually able to get a same-day answer to a phoned-in question to their medical doctor⁹

62% Proportion of Canadians who reported facing difficulty accessing care outside of regular hours (evenings, weekends, holidays, etc.) without going to a hospital Emergency Department¹⁰

22% & 14% Proportion of Canadians without a regular doctor in 2014 who said they didn't have one because doctors in their area were not taking new patients and proportion who said no doctors were available in their area, respectively¹¹

74% Proportion of Canadians aged 20–34 who reported in 2014 that they have a regular medical doctor (lowest rate among all age groups)¹²

¹ According to Statistics Canada, the term “medical doctor” includes “family or general practitioners as well as specialists such as surgeons, allergists, orthopaedists, gynaecologists or psychiatrists,” although it most commonly refers to family or general practitioners.

² Statistics Canada, *Health Indicator Profile, Annual Estimates, by Age Group and Sex, Canada, Provinces, Territories, Health Regions (2013 Boundaries) and Peer Groups (CANSIM table 105-0501)*, accessed August 27, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1AU6xxC>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Statistics Canada, “Access to a Regular Medical Doctor, 2014,” *Health Fact Sheets*, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 89-625-X (June 2015), accessed July 2, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1GQO32x>.

⁵ According to Statistics Canada, “most Inuit communities are served by a nursing station only and accessing hospital services can require extensive travel.”

⁶ Wallace, Susan, “Inuit Health: Selected Findings from the 2012 Aboriginal Peoples Survey,” *Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2012*, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 89-653-X (August 2014), accessed August 28, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1tGmcyk>.

⁷ Health Council of Canada, “Where You Live Matters: Canadian Views on Health Care Quality,” *2013 Commonwealth Fund International Health Policy Survey of the General Public* (January 2014), accessed July 2, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1gC3qC4>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Statistics Canada, “Access to a Regular Medical Doctor, 2014,” *Health Fact Sheets*, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 89-625-X (June 2015), accessed July 2, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1GQO32x>.

¹² Statistics Canada, *Health Indicator Profile, Annual Estimates, by Age Group and Sex, Canada, Provinces, Territories, Health Regions (2013 Boundaries) and Peer Groups (CANSIM table 105-0501)*, accessed August 27, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1AU6xxC>.