



## A Perspective of Indigenous Concerns and Issues

--Al MacLeod

April 2022



### Blanket Exercise, Orange Shirt, Bentwood Box

<https://www.orangeshirtday.org/phyllis-story.html>

<https://foundrybc.ca/stories/orange-shirt-day-history-of-residential-schools/>

<https://www.kairoscanada.org/>

What are the traditions and histories of the Bentwood Box, the KAIROS Blanket Exercise and the Orange Shirt? How did they evolve? The fact is that the Orange Shirt Tradition only dates back to 1973; the Blanket Exercise was started in 1996. The Bentwood Box is an older tradition particularly to the Haida and other First Nations of the Pacific Northwest Coast. All 3 traditions are an active part of St. Mary's acknowledgment of the respect and dignity due all Indigenous groups.

The orange shirt is one of the most identifiable items related to residential schools and indigenous children. Residential schools aimed to eliminate First Nations, Metis, and Inuit culture and disrupted and separated families for generations. In 1973, at the age of 6, Phyllis (Jack) Webstad was sent to St. Joseph's Mission Residential School. Her grandmother managed to scrape up enough money for a new school outfit. Part of that outfit included a shiny, bright and exciting orange shirt.

In her own words: "When I got to the Mission, they stripped me, and took away my clothes, including the orange shirt! I never wore it again. I didn't understand why they wouldn't give it back to me, it was mine! The color orange has always reminded me of that and how my feelings didn't matter, how no one cared and how I felt like I was worth nothing. All of us little children were crying and no one cared."

**ORANGE SHIRT DAY**—September 30—is also the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation (a Statutory holiday effective 2021). It is a time to reflect and bring forth discussion about Indigenous issues including the Indian Residential School system. The idea for Orange Shirt Day was started in 2013 following a Truth & Reconciliation Commission event. The image of the circle of hands and slogan 'Every Child Matters' were added in 2015. According to one Elder: September is considered 'crying month'. Many parishioners wear orange to acknowledge this commemoration.

**KAIROS BLANKET EXERCISE (KBE):** KAIROS Canada is a global ecumenical movement of 10 churches and religious organizations for ecological justice and human rights. "In 1996, the Aboriginal Rights Coalition worked with Indigenous elders and teachers to develop...an interactive and experiential teaching tool that explores the historic and contemporary relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the land we now know as Canada."

The goal of the KBE is to build understanding about our shared history as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples by actively involving participants and engaging them on an emotional and intellectual level via exercises emphasizing pre-contact, treaty-making, colonization & resistance.

St. Mary's is planning to sponsor both a virtual and in-person Blanket Exercise in May 2022.



**BENTWOOD BOX:** The First Nations of the BC Northwest use bentwood boxes to store goods such as: food, water, 'household' items, medicine & ceremonial regalia, burials, canoe & tackle supplies, drums & musical instruments, and sacred treasures. Usually made of red cedar, the box is made from a single piece of wood and can be elaborately decorated or plain. The Truth and Reconciliation



Commission used a large bentwood box to hold articles that had special meaning to those who testified. St. Mary's Bentwood Box, designed by James Michels, a

Cree/Metis Artist from Burnaby B.C is called the 'Infinity Box'. It is situated in the gathering area (foyer) and will be used to collect prayers from the parish and schools.