

# Sacred Wishes

Foster care should be a safe space.  
But is it failing Indigenous children?

BY CAPTAIN CRYSTAL PORTER



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In 2018, Indigenous children and youth represented about eight percent of all young people in Canada, but 52 percent of all youth within the child welfare system. Indigenous advocates rallied together to ask important questions and request inquiries. Their hard work uncovered alarming results: Indigenous youth within the foster care system had higher suicide rates, a greater dependency on alcohol and drugs, and significant mental health issues. A system that was intended to protect children was causing harm.

This shouldn't be surprising. For centuries, Indigenous peoples have been subjected to policies that removed children from their families and communities and attempted to wipe away any cultural identity. The child welfare system continues this legacy.

It's important for Canadians to realize that Indigenous children are heavily represented in the child welfare system due to years of colonization, residential schools and the Sixties Scoop. Assimilationist policies created significant trauma, detrimentally affecting individuals, families and community systems. This trauma will continue into future generations unless people are willing to learn the stories of colonization, which has and continues to threaten Indigenous communities.

In the past five years, I have been on a journey to reclaim my Mi'kmaw identity, and in that process I am trying to learn more of my grandmother's language. Recently, I was introduced to this beautiful phrase: "Kisu 'lkw tlite 'lmisk wskwijiun," which means, "It is the wish of the Creator that you should become a person." This teaching reinforces the importance of life. Each being is wished into existence. Life is a sacred gift.

In *An Aboriginal Missiology of Identity Reclamation*, Wendy Peterson extends this idea of sacred identity to the Christian doctrine of Imago Dei. Peterson explains that although colonization has had a negative effect within Indigenous communities, the church is called to see people created in the image of God. "This, necessarily, is translated into respect for each human and loving one's neighbour as oneself (see Mark 12:31)," she writes.

Each child is sacred, and this sacredness does not expire with the beginning of adulthood. The Indigenous mother whose child was forcibly removed is sacred. The Indigenous father who struggles with addiction is sacred. The Indigenous parent who was belittled because of their race; who wasn't given the opportunity to learn basic parenting skills; who was abused in residential schools; who was trapped in a

hegemonic system—they are all sacred.

There are countless reasons why children are removed from their biological homes and placed in foster care. It's not my intention to speak into the removal process or examine a list of qualifying circumstances, but it is important to acknowledge that the single act of putting a child in foster care doesn't resolve deep-rooted issues. It doesn't break any pre-existing cycles. It doesn't ensure holistic healing. However, it should provide a safe space.

And in this safe space should be the initial steps of healing. Foster parents are entrusted with sacred wishes. They must ensure not only that an Indigenous child's physical needs are fulfilled, but also that their Indigenous identity is not lost in transition. A child's safe space needs to be somewhere they can express their cultural traditions, have access to traditional teachings and maintain connections with their relations. They deserve a place where their whole self—mental, emotional, spiritual and social well-being—is fostered. It is a foster parent's responsibility to gently walk alongside a child as they struggle with countless questions, and to continually remind them that they and their family are Creator's sacred wish. As a foster parent, I am thankful for the incredible families in my circle who are doing amazing, life-giving work. They are creating safe places where kids are encouraged and supported to explore their Indigenous identity.

The over-representation of Indigenous youth in foster care is an important issue, but it's not the whole story. The conversation cannot stop here. Communities must have access to clean water, health care and education. Mental health supports are needed to journey with residential school survivors, abuse victims and substance users. Land protectors need to be a respected partner in conversations about natural resources. Changes need to happen, because healing depends on it. When First Nations must fight for basic human rights, it reinforces the reality that there is no respect for Indigenous peoples and their lives do not matter. The cycle of poverty, trauma and injustice continues.

It is time we start listening to Indigenous voices, and then maybe we will realize that Indigenous children, women and men are sacred wishes of the Creator. ☪

*Captain Crystal Porter is the divisional youth secretary in the Prairie Division.*