

**Alaska Friends Conference – Accountability Partners’ reflection to
First Alaskans Institute – Truth Providers**

28 March 2023

Written by

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1) Introduction — read by Jan Bronson

Good morning. It is so good to be with you today.

We represent the Alaska Friends Conference, which is part of The Religious Society of Friends. We call ourselves Quakers or Friends. We are one of those denominations which ran Indigenous boarding schools.

We have been asked to reflect to you, the Truth Providers, how your words and stories have affected us. We will tell you some of what we heard from you, felt, learned, and are doing as a result of your words. And we know we are only beginning. This is a long journey, and we are honored to be invited to put our hands beside yours in this work for healing and transformation.

Thank you, quyanaqpuk, quyana, anaá baaseé, mahsi’choo, chin’an, gunalchéesh.

2) Appreciation — read by Scott Bell

The Tribunals welcomed us into sacred space. We witnessed Truth Providers speaking sacred words, Healers tending sacred souls, Story Guardians weaving the spoken testimony into a beautiful narrative of our time together; all under the guidance of First Alaskans Institute facilitators.

We heard your powerful stories and words, witnessed your tears, broken hearts, searching spirits and powerful survival. You have suffered uncountable losses along the way. And you have achieved remarkable successes, often assisted by your ancestors.

You showed us how the devastation of intergenerational trauma persists today.

We deeply respect and honor the Truth Providers who said this was the first time they have ever spoken about their hurt and what happened to them, and we heard the stories of those brave individuals who are, by grace, not among the missing or murdered. And we remember the many people whose stories we did not, or cannot, hear.

We are forced to ask ourselves, “How would I live after having my children taken away from me? After having a relative go missing? After losing my language and my lands?” We are humbled to know these stories.

Our hearts are opened, and we are working to support your healing and transformation, and the healing and transformation of all of our relatives.

3) AFC Process — read by Jan Bronson

Here’s a bit about our process. About a year before the Tribunals started, Ayyu Qassataq challenged/ invited us to learn Friends’ history and legacy for AK Native people, to pull back the veil. So that was our start.

We formed a committee which has met monthly for three and a half years, and Linda will share some of what we’ve learned in terms of our history.

The further into this work we go, the more we uncover our own racist assumptions and behaviors, so we are doing internal work on that. We hope this internal work will improve our outer work.

We are looking to Alaska Native people for guidance, as we seek to be accountable to you. Quaker missionaries made the mistake, that we are trying not to repeat, of thinking they understood what was happening and knew what was best. Instead, we are listening to learn what is needed for AK Native individuals, communities, cultures and creation to thrive, and what our part in that might be. Building and tending relationships is so important. One of the Truth Providers said, “We move at the speed of Trust.” That is our guide.

Finally, part of our committee work is networking with other Friends organizations around the country, and some of those other Friends say we inspire them to want to learn their own history and co-create a different legacy where they are.

4) History — read by Linda Sloan

In researching our Quaker history, we were shocked to learn that Quakers had collaborated closely with President Grant’s administration in 1869 to design a “so called” “Peace Policy” which recommended the establishment of an Indian residential school system. These residential schools, designed to be a tool of assimilation, were run by missionaries, who were given funding and authority by the government. Thirty of these schools in the Lower 48 and 1 in Alaska were Quaker operated.

In Alaska, Quaker missionaries first settled on Sayeik Douglas Island in 1887, and established a residential mission school the following year. Within 5 years it had 26 children. We read documents which described the same pattern of harsh, and at times, brutal, treatment of residential children that we heard about during the Tribunals.

We also learned that Quakers ran the government day school in Kake for a short time, and that Quaker missionaries went to the Kotzebue Sound area in 1897, where under the Department of Education, they ran at least 9 day schools (with schools in Kotzebue, Noatak, Kivalina, Deering, Buckland, Selawik, Noorvik, Kobuk, and Shungnak).

From you we have learned about the impacts of boarding schools and of the entire educational system which was designed to “assimilate” students into the dominant culture. Especially with the boarding schools which were set up to take you out of the community, you or your ancestors were often robbed of your own cultural teachings which were necessary to survive in a healthy way, living in harmony with your community and with the land. We heard about loss of language, traditional dance, song, story-telling, and so much which was your identity.

From our research, we have become more acutely aware of the impact that the Quakers and other missionaries have had in the effort to “assimilate”, to imprint the dominant culture, and we are aware of ongoing harm which we perpetuate when we tell only an inaccurate and glorified version of our Quaker history.

We are now correcting the stories we have told ourselves, and want to lift up your truth for ourselves, our families, our Quaker and wider communities. This is a small but important first step we are taking to promote healing for you and for us personally. We will be sharing more about this.

5) Missionaries — read by Carrie Farr

Hearing from you, the Truth Providers, and other AK Native people, about the impacts of Quaker missionary works is completely different from reading the missionaries’ perspectives.

We heard that “Quaker” is a trigger word. We heard that Quakers were worse than other churches and tried to take away everything, and that our presence at the Tribunals brings up memories of harms done.

One truth provider in my breakout room was quiet until the end. She said that she hadn’t spoken until she had a chance to see where our hearts were. I now understand why.

One person said, “Seeds of hatred were planted by missionaries. These seeds are being removed.” You are giving each one of us the opportunity to participate in removing those seeds.

6) Apology — read by Cathy Walling

Learning about the boarding schools, moved us to want to apologize for what Friends broke and took away from your lives, and make a commitment to teach about the impacts of boarding schools, and work together with Native people to find a good way forward.

Listening to and receiving your truths contributed so much to being able to write our apology. Your truths and working with Jim LaBelle and others afterwards were critical to the process.

We requested and received feedback from several Native people, and we re-drafted the apology, over about a year. The whole statewide body of the Alaska Friends Conference approved the apology in August 2022.

We thank Jim LaBelle for connecting us with a Ɓingit organizer of Juneau-Douglas’s Orange Shirt Day event, who asked us if they could share it on Orange Shirt Day in a few days, or better yet if we would share it. In Sayeík (Douglas) the Orange Shirt Day event was taking place at the actual site of the Douglas Friends Mission School to help with the healing journey of that boarding school trauma. Two of us offered the apology to about 150 people, most of whom were Ɓingit.

It has been a very humbling honor for us to be part of a process, in which those of us whose institutions have done great harm, are meeting with you whose communities have been harmed. We recognize the obligation and the healing potential of that.

We are strongly aware that approving and offering an apology was a beginning, and now we get to live into the commitments we made for the rest of our lives.

Our apology is available to you and other AK Native people if requested.

(AFC apology is available online at: <https://www.quakercloud.org/cloud/alaska-friends-conference/announcements/afc-formal-apology-alaska-native-people>)

7) Actions — read by Art Koeninger

In recent years, Homer Friends Meeting has been active in Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons issues, with the creation and dedication of the “Loved and Lost Memorial Bench” for their own Anesha “Duffy” Murnane and all the missing and murdered in Alaska.

The dedication ceremony and bench plaque acknowledged the disproportionate missing and murdered in the Indigenous community. Audrey Sunnyboy and Diane Little Eagle gave opening and closing prayers and blessings. Walter "Scotty" Barr of Kotzebue, Edgar Otis of Homer, and the family of Flo Okpealuk of Nome gave testimony to their missing loved ones. Their travel and lodging assistance was provided. Ingrid Cumberlidge, the coordinator for the US Attorney’s Alaska Office for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons also addressed the dedication. Several of those people are here with us today, and we are grateful for their participation.

The molds for the memorial bench are available for duplication by other communities who wish to memorialize their missing and murdered loved ones.

The “Bring Duffy Home” Facebook page continuously shares information about missing people, including Indigenous persons. We are advocating for the “Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies” national legislation.

Per the request of two Interior Healers, Friends raised money to cover their lodging and airfare to the First Alaskans Institute’s Elders and Youth Conference. Friends also volunteered many hours at the conference. Friends gathered and shipped supplies requested by Hooper Bay following last fall’s storms. Interior Friends have supported Nenana tribal people’s efforts to reverse or delay the state’s Nenana-Totchaket agricultural land sales. Friends statewide have been teaching our children about Alaska Native history, including the sharing of the Molly of Denali episode “Grandfather’s Drum” about boarding schools. We are exploring the Quaker missionary history archived at George Fox University in Oregon, as well as archiving our own findings for widespread future access.

Finally, we are studying possible future actions beyond the writing of an apology. We want to increase our awareness and to prepare to partner in efforts that may come forward from you and other Alaska Native people.

8) Future — read by Maia Genau

It is an incredible gift that we were entrusted with, to hear your heart-felt stories. We will not let them fall to the ground, but will have them guide our next steps. And we will listen to understand, when you tell us what is needed, and if there are reparations we Quakers can make.

We are grateful to be in an ongoing conversation about a possible healing center. And some of us are participating in language revitalization efforts.

We have heard how Land and People are lonesome for one another, longing for a restored relationship. We will listen for your guidance in working against laws that still carry forward the Doctrines of Discovery, which, among other things, extinguished Indigenous land rights.

We will remain Native-led in our actions. This is not a superficial gesture. It truly leads to different outcomes.

Put “Native” in front of everything! And spread the word!

Thank you, dogedinh