

An Indigenous organization advocates for restoration and cultural healing

IN MONTREAL, as in other Canadian cities, the coronavirus situation has increased police presence and practices like ticketing. Often those most affected are those who are homeless and lack access to shelters. Fines of over \$500 are being handed out, frequently to people with no resources and no employment, for not practising proper social distancing.

Rachel Deutsch, Interim Director of The First Peoples Justice Center, has been in countless meetings with the city, police, and various Indigenous organizations, advocating for reduced control and surveillance of vulnerable people, and an increased focus on public health. “Our Elders are now working on the streets, supporting their communities, ministering to those in need as a result of the virus amplifying the issues,” Deutsch says.

Given these and other unpredictable changes, the centre is grateful for Mission & Service funding that is flexible and has an emphasis on culture and healing. “This allows us to focus on the real needs of our recipients and to provide healing that is based on the many Indigenous cultures from which they come.”

The centre partners with the Indigenous community and the justice system to support Indigenous persons in addressing their justice issues as well as transitioning to a healthier quality of life. Operating since 2017, the mostly Inuit and Mohawk clients who visit the centre come for the unique programs it offers as part of an effort to “indigenize” the justice system by incorporating Indigenous cultural practices.

Starting from a place that looks at the root causes of violence and the criminalization of First Peoples—that is, ongoing intergenerational trauma stemming from the legacy of Canada’s dehumanizing residential school system—the centre employs uplifting, active healing components, such as the healing circle.

“Healing circles are key to Indigenous practices of restorative justice,” says Deutsch. “Healing circles hold the person accountable, keeping them in the community, because, in reality, you will keep living in the community that you harmed.”



Indigenizing justice

The First Peoples Justice Center of Montreal works to indigenize the justice system for its mostly Inuit and Mohawk clients.

She cautions that healing is a long-term process: “It’s life-long, and you cannot force people to heal.”

The centre has been building its healing circle, with plans for a spring launch, but now, with the arrival of the novel coronavirus, the launch is postponed.

Active healing at the centre also takes the form of counselling and meetings with Elders. To this end, last fall the centre received a \$15,000 Mission & Service grant to support Elders in mentoring those who seek healing from traditional healers and from the land. Healing on the land, in a Mohawk context, includes learning about different medicines and foods, doing ceremony, going to the longhouse, hunting, and camping.

But as with the launch of the healing circle, the coronavirus has postponed these programs. A planned retreat on the land at Kanesatake has been cancelled, with hopes of rescheduling it later on in the year.

Since the church has a direct role in creating the painful history of the residential school system, foster care, and the youth protection system, Deutsch encourages its members to educate themselves in understanding these broader systemic causes.

“In seeking to support the Indigenous-centred justice system, it is important to do something concrete,” she concludes, “but to allow for the community to define what that concrete means to them.” Through Mission & Service, the United Church is supporting practical, self-directed Indigenous change in becoming a reality in Canada. [m](#)

Your generosity through **MISSION & SERVICE** helps provide healing and hope.

Beatrice Ekoko is a freelance writer in Hamilton, Ont. She is chief-storyteller and social media specialist with Faith & the Common Good.