

# How to Become an Indigenous Ally

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**The Two Row Wampum Treaty, also known as Guswentha or Kaswentha,** may best be understood as a Haudenosaunee term embodying the ongoing negotiation of their relationship to European colonizers and their descendants. The underlying concept of kaswentha emphasizes the distinct identity of the two peoples and a mutual engagement to coexist in peace without interference in the affairs of the other. The Two Row Belt, as it is commonly known, depicts the kaswentha relationship in visual form via a long beaded belt of white wampum with two parallel lines of purple wampum along its length. The lines symbolize a separate-but-equal relationship between two entities based on mutual benefit and mutual respect for each party's inherent freedom of movement – neither side may attempt to "steer" the vessel of the other as it travels along its own, self-determined path.

As Haudenosaunee (People of the Longhouse) People, The Two Row Wampum Treaty is a symbol of our understanding of the relationship between our people and those of European descent. This treaty identifies that we are to treat each other with peace, respect, and friendship. Each are to stay within their own canoe. Yes, we can visit each other, but we are to return to our respective canoes, to our respective ways. This defines many relationships such as Nation to Nation, Government to Territories, person to person. In their wisdom, our ancestors saw the possible dangers of allowing others to invade and steer our canoe. As Indigenous children are discovered in forgotten or hidden mass graves located at many Indian Residential Schools throughout the Country, the tragic consequences of being forced to allow others to steer our Canoe are very clear. This article is written by four Haudenosaunee Service Providers from the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory who are trainers in Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA) Level One and VTRA from an Indigenous Perspective.

As Indigenous communities grieve the losses of all those innocent and helpless children and babies who did not make it home, we take this time to mourn our losses and pray for peace for our babies, our families and our Nations. We know this is just the beginning and more children will be found as more grounds of residential schools are examined. We brace ourselves for the numbers yet to come. We have heard the stories of our family

members who attended those institutions. We were listening! We have heard them share what they witnessed and how they wondered what became of their friends who were no longer seen at the schools. We believed them! We are reminded just how lucky we are that our own family members returned home, but know how easily they too could have died in those institutions. They returned home traumatized and broken. Many grew to cope with their institutionalized lived experiences with alcohol and drugs, unable to connect to themselves, let alone others. They were small, vulnerable, and trusting children who were tormented, beaten, abused and yes, many died. Children are not strong enough to survive prison-like practices and institutions.

As Indigenous peoples, if it feels like we have lost our own babies or grandbabies, it is because we have. Those are our babies, our children, regardless of where they lived or what nation they belonged to. They were wanted and they were loved. They were stolen, kidnapped, and trafficked to work in those institutions - child labour in the name of education. People ask why did their parents let them go? We know the answer. Our canoe was hijacked. When we tried to fight, our men were killed, jailed and threatened. They created laws and systems to erode our rights, our power and our voice. In their quest to "civilize the savages", (Duncan Campbell Scott) they did the unthinkable! They took away our children! They stole them if they found them. If one parent died, they knocked on the door and took the children as a form of child welfare. They kidnapped them if they found them walking on the road, coming home from school. They promised they would be cared for and taught a better way of life free from poverty and hardship. Many children never returned home.

We take back the ownership of our canoe because, truth be told, we never gave it up! Neither the church nor the state is welcome to invade our canoe. We are fully capable of making our own decisions and determining our own paths forward. We are proud of who we are, of our strength and resiliency. Our language and culture are so very precious and sacred to us. As we look across the water, we see the outrage from your canoe, from Canadians. We see your shock and dismay as you discover a truth our people have known for generations. We see your inner struggle as you witness evidence of Canada's attempt at cultural genocide. We thank you for standing up and saying that this is a national tragedy! These are crimes against humanity! This is unacceptable! One thing we agree upon regardless of which canoe we are in, our babies, our children need to be protected!

We invite you to stand beside us! We appreciate your compassion and love for our children. We need our Indigenous allies now more than ever! For those of you who are wondering what you can do to become an Indigenous Ally, we present this list from our perspective:

### **Actions needed for effective Indigenous Allyship:**

- 1) Walk beside us, not in front of us!
- 2) Make space for our voice! Hear our voices!
- 3) Make space for our ideas!
- 4) Honour our Expert Knowledge! We have the answers!
- 5) Keep an open mind and believe our Lived Experiences!
- 6) Value Indigenous Knowledge Holders of all ages.
- 7) Accept the impacts of the multigenerational transmission of trauma that continues to exist today! We have been talking about this for years!
- 8) Really, really listen - Listen as if you were a “heart with ears.” We are not needing you to problem solve for us.
- 9) Don't be sorry, unless you have something to be sorry about...if you do then take responsibility for your actions!
- 10) Say something when faced with racism. To do nothing is condoning racism.
- 11) Educate yourself and others in the spirit of de-colonization.
- 12) Find oppressive and colonized systems in your work or school and make change. If Indigenous people are not there at all, problems exist within that system. If Indigenous people are there in abundance (i.e., prisons and Child Welfare) problems exist within that system
- 13) Develop connections, partnerships and network with Indigenous organizations. Do site visits with your Indigenous Partners. Reach out to them!
- 14) Resist tokenism! One (1) Indigenous person should not and cannot be expected to speak on all Indigenous issues.
- 15) Continue to have these difficult conversations within your circles!
- 16) Understand that each Nation may have similarities however, not all are the same. Educate yourself on the Nation(s) in your area
- 17) Re-structure Hiring Practices that value Indigenous Knowledge and Lived Experiences.
- 18) Take Action! There is always something you can do! What are you willing to do to make change in this world?

## **Recommendations:**

- Enlist a Traditional Knowledge Holder to do a Traditional Opening and Closing for your event; OR,
- Do a Land Acknowledgement at the start of each meeting. Be sure you are properly acknowledging the correct Indigenous Nation(s) of the territory. Include the following statement, “The land was often intended to be ‘leased’ to the settlers, but instead was ‘sold’ as land with full title. There are very few legal sales of Indigenous land, most of which was never paid to the Indigenous people of the territory.”
- Research other documents on allyship with Indigenous people.
- Hire Indigenous peoples to educate your workplace / school on Indigenous topics from your nearest Indigenous Community. Value their time and energy!
- Implement the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action into your workplace!
- Implement the MMIWG Calls to Justice as released by the MMIWG National Inquiry Report into your workplace.
- Create policies that are compassionate to Indigenous Experiences.

From a VTRA perspective, generations of trauma, oppression and colonization by the hands of the church and the state creates the potential for violent consequences and justification by generations of people who have been targeted for hundreds of years. We refuse to say the colonization and oppressive practices of residential schools are a part of Canada’s history because we know these practices and policies are deeply embedded in most Canadian systems today. Therefore, we call upon you, across the water, in your own canoe, to implement change within any and all systems you belong to. This is how we will create lasting change, by strengthening the roots so the “tree of peace” can grow tall, strong and proud.

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