From Reconciliation to Decolonization:  How Settlers Engage in Indigenous Solidarity Activism

JEFF DENIS is a white Settler Canadian who grew up in East Toronto near the former site of a Seneca village, learned much about colonization and treaties from the Anishinaabe and Métis peoples of Northwestern Ontario (Treaty 3), and now teaches Sociology at McMaster University on traditional Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe territory. He is the author of the forthcoming Canada at the Crossroads: Boundaries, Bridges, and Laissez-Faire Racism in Indigenous-Settler Relations.

How do Settler Canadians become engaged in solidarity activities with Indigenous peoples? What do reconciliation and decolonization mean to them? And what are they doing to make good on their commitments?

As a white Canadian sociologist, over the past few years, I have attended Truth and Reconciliation Commission events across the country and intensively interviewed non-Indigenous participants about how they came to participate, how they understand their roles in the process, and their vision for the future of Indigenous-Settler relations.

Although there is no single pathway to engagement, a few common factors stand out. While some Settlers describe a continuous learning journey, many recount pivotal experiences that deeply unsettled their fundamental beliefs, leading them to ask new questions, seek out more information, and think differently. These “wake-up calls” ranged from witnessing shocking cases of racial discrimination to hearing residential school survivors’ stories for the first time.

Many also noted the importance of close friendships with Indigenous people, and some transitioned into this work from other forms of activism. For example, one man recalled protesting the South African apartheid and being asked by a black South African what he was doing about the injustices imposed on Indigenous people in his own backyard.

Among Christians (about two-thirds of the interviewees), one salient theme was the quest for redemption. Many expressed collective guilt and sorrow, as a result of the Church’s role in residential schools and more generally in the settler-colonial project. Yet, rather than reject their Christian faith, many felt compelled to take responsibility on behalf of the Church, to redeem their people by supporting Indigenous peoples’ healing and rebuilding efforts; being a “good” Christian, in their eyes, depends on it.

Many Canadians (Christian and non-Christian) similarly described how learning about the oppression of Indigenous peoples challenged their image of Canada as a fair, peaceful, and generous society that respects diversity. They still strive, however, to realize these ideals; being a “good” Canadian, and a decent human being, depends on it.

The challenge is to develop a shared understanding of what reconciliation and decolonization mean or what kind of society we are working towards. Although many interviewees identified as “allies,” they attributed diverse meanings to the term, including listening and learning from Indigenous peoples, working together on issues of mutual concern (for example, environmental contamination), educating fellow Settlers, speaking out against racism, and advocating for changes in government policy. While such roles are potentially useful and not mutually exclusive, these same “allies” sometimes conceived of the long-term goals in contradictory ways, ranging from the integration of Indigenous peoples into a multicultural Canada to the radical restructuring of society based on recognition of nation-to-nation treaties and Indigenous self-government.
More concretely, "engaged" Settlers have found many creative ways to enact their ethical commitments in their daily lives. Among other things, these include:

- Teachers making it a priority to teach (primarily non-Indigenous) students about residential schools, treaties, and related issues, whether or not it is mandated in the curriculum;
- Church ministers including concepts of reconciliation and decolonization in their sermons and articulating connections to Christ's messages about love, peace, and social justice;
- Members of churches and community groups organizing educational workshops (sometimes facilitated by an Indigenous elder or scholar), movie nights, book clubs, and plays about colonization and reconciliation;
- Researching, writing, and creating resource lists for fellow Settlers who want to learn;
- Reaching out to local Indigenous communities to plan bridge-building activities together, such as music festivals, sports leagues, and community gardens;
- Confronting racist comments by fellow Settlers at social gatherings and on social media;
- Offering food and shelter to homeless Indigenous persons;
- Supporting local Indigenous artists and businesses, and boycotting Settler businesses that are known to discriminate or that disregard Indigenous and Treaty rights;
- Voting (at all levels) based on candidates' support for Indigenous and Treaty rights;
- Writing letters to newspapers and to elected officials about Shannen's Dream (for equitable funding for First Nations schools), the lack of clean drinking water in many Indigenous communities, and the need for a public inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women;
- Participating in Idle No More rallies and round dances, as well as Indigenous-led walks and protests;
- Fundraising for Indigenous education programs, language camps, and legal campaigns; and
- Finding ways to live more sustainably, as Settlers, and thereby minimizing environmental impact (for example, walking or taking public transit).

Despite these and other important actions, it is striking how few participants mentioned supporting initiatives to reclaim or restore Indigenous lands, to protect Indigenous lands from resource extraction, and to revitalize and recognize Indigenous self-government. In fairness, a few had supported or even participated in blockades, such as the anti-clear-cutting campaign at Grassy Narrows First Nation. But, overall, there appears to be a disconnect between the reconciliation movement (with which many Settler participants in Truth and Reconciliation Commission events strongly identified) and the broader struggle for decolonization and Indigenous self-determination. Settlers need to remember that, as noted in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report, the residential school system was only one part of an ongoing settler-colonial project that seeks to strip Indigenous peoples of their land and usurp their political authority.

Implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples would be one important step towards a deeper reconciliation (that includes political, economic, cultural, and spiritual dimensions). But it cannot be seen as just an "aspirational" document. The values and principles underlying it must be applied daily, on the ground, in local communities, across Canada.

As Settlers, this means respecting Indigenous leadership and jurisdiction, including the principle of "free, prior, and informed consent" on any project that affects Indigenous lands or rights. It means building ongoing relationships with local Indigenous communities and contributing meaningful resources (financial or otherwise) to Indigenous healing and rebuilding efforts, where desired.

And it means holding one another accountable for upholding our end of treaties. It means developing more sustainable, self-determining ways of life that do not depend on the exploitation of Indigenous lands, resources, or peoples, but that thrive in partnership with them.