



GATHERING OF VOICES

Rooted in Culture

Message from the Gathering
Winter 2025



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On November 18, 2025, the First Light community came together to celebrate our first Gathering of Voices, the beginning of a new seasonal rhythm where stories from our community guide reflection and shape the work we carry forward. Rooted in culture, ceremony, and storytelling, this opening feast brought together more than 85 people to listen, share, and build stronger relationships. Joining us were Elders, Knowledge Keepers, youth, First Light staff, and allies from government and service organizations.

The event began with grounding in culture and ceremony led by Elders and Knowledge-Keepers. Emma Reelis offered an opening prayer, Ellen Ford lit the qulliq, and Marjorie Muise, assisted by Margaret Cranford, led participants in a smudge. Drumming shared by Stan Nochasak helped bring everyone into the spirit of the gathering.

Stories Shared in Circle

Two Community Storytellers, Jordan Lawrence and Brenda Blake, then shared their experiences. Jordan spoke about growing up as an Indigenous person seeing his Mi'kmaw culture being consistently misrepresented and even erased altogether in the education system. He described his anger, frustration, and feeling of isolation living in ways far removed from his ancestry, culture, and community. Nearly dropping out of university, he began working to improve Indigenous visibility in public places. He found renewed meaning and connection with his Mi'kmaw identity by channeling his anger and frustration into his work as a Community Advocate with First Voice, and now with his graduate research.





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Brenda shared her story of harmful experiences in healthcare. As a child growing up in Labrador and then as an adult living in St. John's working with First Light's medical transportation team. She spoke about the hardships of those from rural and remote parts of the province having to leave community and loved ones behind in order to seek care in urban areas like St. John's. She also shared her own feelings of isolation and alienation when trying to access a healthcare system that was not designed with Indigenous Peoples and cultures in mind, and the frequency of stereotyping and outright racism that too often leads to missed or delayed diagnoses of serious conditions.

Jordan's and Brenda's stories resonated with the many others in the room, who gathered in 11 circle conversations to share their own stories in response to what was said. Laura Winters, Lead Executive Officer of Stella's Circle, and Stacey Howse, President and CEO of First Light, spoke briefly on their commitments following what was shared.

What We Heard

Poor public education about our histories and cultures continues to fuel ignorance and racism. Participants shared that when schools exclude or misrepresent us, the impacts ripple across daily life, including in classrooms, in hospitals, and in public spaces marked by colonial monuments. Many Indigenous people described hiding their culture, avoiding services, or distancing themselves from their identity at a young age as a way of coping with racism. These harms are not historical. Some participants shared that they had experienced racist treatment as recently as that same morning.





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The absence of positive representation makes it harder to understand our own identities.

Participants spoke about growing up in Newfoundland and hearing time and again from non-Indigenous people who insisted we were never here. Even in communities with other Indigenous families, many felt pressure to hide who they were in order to be accepted. Parents shared stories of their children having to correct teachers about Indigenous cultures and ceremonies.

Experiences in healthcare show a continued need for mandatory cultural and anti-racism training.

Many people described mistreatment within the healthcare system, including racist comments, assumptions of intoxication, sexual harassment, and misdiagnoses based on racial stereotypes. Some recounted instances where traditional medicines were taken away, even as Christian practices and supports were readily available. These stories point to systemic barriers that undermine trust and make seeking care unsafe for many Indigenous people.

Healthcare is not universally accessible. Participants from rural and remote communities described the hardship of leaving home, family, and community to access care in St. John's, often after long delays that worsen health outcomes. Urban Indigenous participants noted that even when services were close by, dismissal and misdiagnosis based on stereotypes were still common. When people are mistreated in healthcare, they understandably avoid seeking it, which leads to more serious illness and greater strain on the system. Most importantly, it causes harm to individuals and families.





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Despite these challenges, Indigenous communities remain strong. People spoke about the way culture, ceremony, and community relationships strengthen and empower us. These connections can help us regain our voices, pursue justice, and advocate for change. Participants emphasized that when we support one another, we can counter the isolation caused by colonialism and strengthen our collective resilience.

What We Are Carrying Forward

Participants at the Gathering told us they want to see the following:

- Indigenous voices represented in the telling of history and in the education system, reaffirming Call for Change 1.
- More positive representation of Indigenous people, especially Indigenous advocates.
- More storytelling to share Indigenous knowledge in the education system.
- More spaces and opportunities to inspire connection, relationships, and the courage to advocate for change.
- Spaces where anger and frustration can be channeled into community-building and advocacy.
- Mandatory training on Indigenous cultures and on anti-racism for people working in service delivery, especially healthcare and education, reaffirming Call for Change 6.
- Supports for holistic wellbeing, which includes housing, food security, traditional healing, access to community and access to culture, reaffirming Calls for Change 18 and 25.





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