



GATHERING OF VOICES

Rooted in Culture

Message from the Gathering

Spring 2026



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On March 19, 2026, the First Light community came together to celebrate our second Gathering of Voices, a seasonal community feast where stories from our community guide reflection and shape the work we carry forward. Rooted in culture, ceremony, and storytelling, this feast brought together nearly 100 people to listen, share, and build stronger relationships. As the first event in this year's Culture Camp, guests from other communities joined us, along with local Elders, Knowledge Keepers, youth, First Light staff, and allies from government and service organizations.

The event began with an honoured guest, Aaron Prosper, sharing teachings through Mi'kmaw songs, stories, and language from his home community in Eskasoni First Nation, including some memorable teachings surrounding the ji'kmaq and its historical and cultural significance. Elder Emma Reelis offered an opening prayer, Elder Ellen Ford lit the qulliq (kullik), and Elder Marjorie Muise, assisted by Denise John and Paula McDonald, led participants in a smudge. Drumming shared by Stan Nochasak helped bring everyone into the spirit of the gathering.





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Stories Shared in Circle

Two Storytellers, Draco Dunphy and Angela Christmas, shared their experiences as Mi'kmaw people reconnecting with their traditional language which had been suppressed through colonization. Draco shared that he did not grow up with the Mi'kmaw language being spoken in his home or community and began to connect to his Indigenous language as a student at Memorial University. He spoke passionately about the importance of Indigenous language revitalization and shared his experiences advocating for Indigenous languages to be spoken, taught, learned, and lived.





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Angela spoke about her journey to becoming a teacher of the Mi'kmaw language in Miawpukek. She shared her experience of growing up off-reserve, facing discrimination at school, and the absence of the Mi'kmaw language at home despite both her parents being fluent speakers. For her, finding a Friendship Centre helped her reconnect with her Indigenous culture, which prompted her journey to begin reclaiming her language, eventually becoming a Mi'kmaw language teacher in Miawpukek. She taught the group some Mi'kmaw words using her innovative teaching strategies.

Draco's and Angela's stories engaged and inspired the others in the room, who gathered in 12 circle conversations to share their own stories in response to what was said. At the end of the circle conversations, Tom Cromwell and Pascale Gerdun from Parks Canada spoke briefly on their commitment to include the urban Indigenous community in the federal government's reconciliation work.





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What We Heard

There were three main themes in the conversations that were shared around the room. The meaningfulness of Indigenous languages, the challenges that Indigenous languages are facing in Newfoundland and Labrador right now, and the need to support and revitalize Indigenous languages here at home.

The meaningfulness of Indigenous languages

At each of the 12 tables, people talked about what their Indigenous languages mean to them and to their community. Although many people in attendance were disconnected from their traditional languages, these languages were still deeply meaningful to them. Some who identified as non-Indigenous spoke about the way that their own languages or dialects hold meaning in their lives.

Many spoke about the intrinsic relationship between language and culture. Indigenous languages are woven into musical traditions, spiritual practices, and in teachings about the land and the water. Having access to language and knowledge of one's language was described as building resilience, providing support in times of adversity.

Draco quoted a proverb saying, **“A tree with strong roots lasts longer in the storm.”**

Attendees took the metaphor further: trees also need a forest (a community), good soil (a supportive environment), and to be watered and cared for (language stewards, teachers, and learners).





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Below are some of the ways that attendees described the meaning of language in their lives:

- Language is survival
- Language is belonging
- Language is empowerment
- Language is spiritual, connecting Indigenous people to their ancestors
- Language carries the histories of a People
- Language carries meaning, the possibility of a joke, the words of a song
- Language defines the connections between ourselves, our relations, and the land
- Language gives people strength, a sense of grounding
- Language gives people a way to understand themselves and their identity
- Language gives people ways to express themselves and connect with others

There is a dance behind words that can never be fully expressed in an English translation. Language holds what is important in one's culture, as certain concepts may be easy to express in Inuktitut or Innu-aimun, for example, but very difficult to describe in English. When a language is lost, the ability to articulate complex ideas that are relevant to a cultural community are also lost, along with the possibilities of humour and artistic expression.





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Losing a connection to one's language can devastate the identity of those who cannot speak their traditional language. For the children of the generations who had their language suppressed or erased, the lack of knowledge or fluency brought a deep sense of sadness or guilt. Some in attendance described feeling shame that they did not know or fluently speak their traditional language, even though they recognized that language loss was not their fault.

The challenges that Indigenous languages are facing in Newfoundland and Labrador

Speakers and attendees commonly acknowledged the main reason for Indigenous language loss: colonization. Canada's long history of assimilationist policies includes the Indian Act, which banned Indigenous cultural practices until 1951; and residential schools, which systematically stripped Indigenous children of their language and culture. Even during the wind down of the residential school system from the 1960s to mid-1990s, Indigenous children were still routinely removed from their families and placed in foster care or adoptive homes with non-Indigenous families. What later became known as the Sixties Scoop caused 20,000 children to be forcibly separated from their families, thus breaking the intergenerational transmission of traditional Indigenous languages.

This practice has remained commonplace even in recent years where, despite some policy changes, there are more Indigenous children in the care of the state than ever before.¹ Some refer to this persistence of disproportionate removal of Indigenous children from their homes as the Millennium Scoop.

Residential school survivors who attended the gathering shared their experiences of being forced to speak English – and being punished for speaking Indigenous languages – and the

¹ Tara Hahmann, "Indigenous Foster Children Living in Private Households: Rates and Sociodemographic Characteristics of Foster Children and Their Households," *Indigenous Peoples Thematic Series*, April 18, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/41-20-0002/412000022024001-eng.pdf>.





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effects that this had on their families. Attendees talked about how these policies systematically separated Indigenous children from their cultural identities in a deliberate effort to assimilate them to Eurocentric ways of being, knowing, and doing. Likewise, some attendees were directly impacted by forced enfranchisement under the Indian Act. Between 1880 and 1985, Indigenous people who earned a university degree were automatically stripped of status, which meant they could no longer live on-reserve. Forced separation from their home communities caused many Indigenous people to become disconnected from their languages as well.

Given this history, attendees addressed the urgency of language revitalization. Many spoke about how just one generation of suppression can cause a family to lose their language. There are only a small number of fluent language speakers who grew up in households that spoke the language at home. In the case of Mi'kmaw, colonization has all but erased the language on the island of Newfoundland, which leaves us to seek guidance from Mi'kmaw relations in other provinces. Indigenous community members who did not speak their language fluently voiced feelings of guilt and shame at not knowing their language. This was a further barrier to initiating conversations in their language. English is so dominant in our society that many fluent language speakers will switch to English to help others feel more comfortable in conversation. There were several in attendance who told about their parents speaking only English to their children at home, despite speaking a different language to one another, in order to give the children opportunities that were or are only available to English speakers in our English-dominant society.

The number of people who want to learn is far greater than the number who can teach it. Our language carriers need to be supported in their efforts to share the language with others. To make this possible, there is a need for engaged youth, coordination, and financial resources. Those who grew up hearing the language, but not speaking it, acknowledged how hard it is to learn a language as an adult, even having exposure to it as a child. It takes time and mental





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energy to reach a point of fluency, and many Indigenous adults do not have these resources. Many in attendance were inspired by how Angela Christmas teaches children to be the Mi'kmaw teacher in their family. Unfortunately, Indigenous language education is not accessible to families in St. John's. Attendees also spoke to the importance of access to the land as a necessary component of culturally-relevant language learning, which particularly affects those living in urban areas.





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The need to support and revitalize Indigenous languages here

Revitalizing Indigenous languages in Newfoundland and Labrador will take time and effort on the part of many. The most prominent aspect of this need is to enable families to speak the language at home. Formal language training and additions to the existing curriculum are necessary, but attendees emphasized that the language will only be alive when it exists in community and in people's homes. Families are often busy and stressed, so they need supports to be able to learn or relearn their language as a family. People were consistently inspired by the way Angela Christmas empowered the children to become their household's Mi'kmaw teacher, helping them become ready to share their language at home.

Communities are crucial, especially for those who do not live with others who they can share and learn the language with. Many in the room spoke to the importance of Friendship Centres as a way to connect language carriers and language learners in an urban setting. Friendship Centres are a great place for Indigenous people who are experiencing disconnection from their culture to feel a sense of community and belonging. This grounding in culture can help give people the confidence to learn, relearn, or share their language.

It was widely acknowledged that the education system, particularly the K-12 curriculum, needs to include accurate information about Indigenous Peoples. This is not only an avenue for sharing Indigenous languages: it is a way to normalize the cultural presence of Indigenous Peoples in this province. The group talked about how Indigenous children need to see their cultures represented. At the same time, teaching Indigenous languages in classrooms across the province comes with challenges, as there are only a small number of language carriers and language needs to be shared in a traditional, rather than academic, way. This means that people learn by listening and sharing, which can't be done through textbooks. Indigenous languages hold meaning in a cultural context, so any language initiatives in school must be culturally grounded.





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Attendees discussed that the visibility of Indigenous cultures in NL seems to have improved since Orange Shirt Day was federally recognized. This visibility, however, occurs through the work of individual teachers and not because of an established curriculum. The group consensus was that the K-12 curriculum needs to have accurate representations of Indigenous Peoples in this province and this needs to be prioritized.

There were a number of other strategies that were discussed in the 12 circles:

- Supports for our language carriers that enable them to share the language without having to develop skills for teaching in a Western-style classroom.
- Immersion programs in which the Indigenous language is truly the dominant language (not English or French).
- Nonjudgemental spaces and nonjudgemental conversation partners where people can feel comfortable trying to communicate.
- Communities of learning, where people can come together and share their knowledge.
- Visibility initiatives to normalize the use of the language, such as signage, social media, or fun events like Mi'kmaw bingo.
- Youth who are engaged.
- Individuals and organizations that will undertake coordination of language revitalization initiatives.





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Notably, attendees stressed that it is not too late to revitalize, speak, and live Indigenous languages. Despite the destruction that colonization has had on Indigenous languages and cultures, and despite the small number of fluent language speakers of some languages, there are examples from other places where languages have been revived. This will take much effort and collaboration, but the group was hopeful that this revitalization can and will happen.

What We Are Carrying Forward

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

- Accurate representations of Indigenous people in the K-12 school system to destigmatize Indigenous cultures among the general public, reaffirming Call for Change 1.
- Supports for language carriers, which could include platforms for them to share the language, coordinators to arrange the connections between language carriers and learners, and intergenerational language sharing opportunities.
- Programming and support for families who want to become more fluent speaking their traditional language at home.
- Access to Indigenous language learning opportunities in Newfoundland and Labrador, including community-based settings, land-based learning, student exchanges, and full immersion programs.
- Access to Indigenous cultural practices, including in government institutions (e.g. prisons, hospitals), which is intrinsically intertwined with language learning, reaffirming Calls for Change 25 and 35.
- Visibility initiatives, including signage and social media.
- Anti-racism training for service providers and school teachers to destigmatize the speaking of Indigenous languages, reaffirming Call for Change 6.
- Funding for organizations that want to build these programs.





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