



GATHERING OF VOICES

Rooted in Culture

Message from the Gathering
Summer 2026



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On June 18, 2026, the First Light community came together for our third Gathering of Voices, held at the Reid Community Center in Mount Pearl. A seasonal community feast brings people together to reflect on stories from our community and shape the work we carry forward. Rooted in culture, ceremony, and storytelling, the feast again brought together nearly 100 people to listen, share, and build stronger relationships. Guests from the Metis community in Saskatoon joined us as part of a research collaboration called “We’re Indigenous and Still Here” (WISH), along with local 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 and lit the Kullik, while Denise John, Paula McDonald, and Kelly Young led participants in a smudge.





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Stories Shared in Circle

Two Community Storytellers, Heidi Dixon and Karon Schmon, shared their experiences of connection to Land, identity, and community as Indigenous women navigating urban life. Heidi, based in St. John's, shared her original poem reflecting on their relationship with the Land. Weaving in memories of childhood on the Land, the pain of residential school, and the ongoing failures of performative reconciliation. She shared her feeling of disconnection from her community while growing up in the city they call home, and about finding healing and purpose through her work with First Light.





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Karon shared her personal experience as a Métis person growing up in a rural area and later moving to urban Saskatoon. There she encountered discrimination and a form of cultural suppression where visible inclusion masks systemic exclusion. She spoke about passing down culture through hunting, fishing, berry picking and values of resourcefulness, even in spaces where people did not always recognize the fullness of Métis culture. Karon reflected on the tension between symbolic gestures of reconciliation such as Land acknowledgement and monuments, and the deeper, sustained action still required drawing on her own history of advocacy.

Heidi's and Karon's stories engaged and moved the participants, who gathered in 12 circle conversations to share their own stories in response to what was said. At the end of the circle conversations, Kristina Bidwell, Director of the WISH project, spoke briefly on her commitment to making the urban Indigenous community more visible to the public and to decision-makers.





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What We Heard

Three main themes emerged in the conversations around the room: Land as relationship rather than resource; disconnection and reconnection of urban Indigenous people from the Land; and a shared call for reconciliation to move beyond words into meaningful, ongoing action.

When the Land Hurts, We Hurt Too

A reciprocal relationship to Land and identity

Participants consistently described the Land not as a resource, but as a relationship. They spoke of the Land as something that feeds, holds, and remembers them. Many shared stories of food, medicine, and healing coming from the Land. Others described finding peace, clarity, and grounding through simple acts such as listening to water and birds, walking familiar trails, tending a garden, or spending time at a family cabin. For many, connection to Land is inseparable from connection to identity, culture, and family.

What happens to the Land impacts our relationship to it. Where there is pollution or ecosystems are damaged, the Land suffers. When the Land suffers, we also suffer in kind. Being cut off from the Land is likewise damaging. Some community members in attendance described how when they are hurting, carrying addiction, or working through mental health struggles, the Land offers a path back to wellness, supporting their healing journey. Walking the trails their ancestors walked, gathering medicines, or sitting by the water is where many find real healing, not as an escape from their struggles but as a return to good relationships.

Reciprocity means care flows in both directions. Participants spoke of the understanding that they must take care of the Land for it to continue taking care of them. In particular, participants described the importance of showing respect and gratitude before taking from the Land, such as through offering tobacco, using all parts of the animal when hunting caribou or





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moose so that nothing is wasted, and taking only what is needed when foraging so that the Land can continue to provide. These practices are not separate from healing, they are the relationship itself in action. This is why Indigenous stewardship, when supported and trusted, allows both the Land and the people to heal together.

Away From the Land, Not Apart From It

Indigenous connection to Land in urban settings requires deliberate intention

Connection to Land in an urban setting requires deliberate intention; it doesn't happen as easily or passively as in rural or reserve settings. Many Indigenous community members living in urban centres described a persistent sense of disconnection from Land, from community, and at times from their culture. While cities like St. John's and Saskatoon offer access to a variety of green spaces, several participants noted that connection still takes effort to build and maintain.

Being away from the Land doesn't mean being apart from one's identity even though many expressed experiencing it that way. Connection to Land is also tied to Indigenous attendees' sense of identity. For Indigenous people in urban settings, experiences of disconnection from Land echoes and amplifies disconnection from their cultures and identities. Some shared that they didn't fully grasp their own Indigenous identity until later in life, having grown up in urban or off-reserve settings where they were in the minority.

Belonging, however, is not tied to a single place. Community members found Land-based belonging without a fixed physical location: family, community, and intentional relationships created a sense of home wherever they were. Spaces like First Light Friendship Centre matter precisely because they help fill that gap, offering connection and cultural grounding that physical distance from Land can make harder to access. To build this foundation, community





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members expressed a desire to see more Land-based programming offered at Friendship Centres.

Friendship Centres are where that intention gets put into practice and were specifically named as vital urban infrastructure. They offer access to Elders, language, and ceremony, as well as practical support like for housing and systems navigation. For many – especially those who grew up disconnected from culture – Friendship Centres like First Light became an entry point into identity and community they hadn't been able to access before.

Reconciliation must be demonstrated through action, not symbols

Performative allyship in urban settings

Land acknowledgements without action mean little. A strong and recurring theme was frustration with performative reconciliation. Participants shared examples of Land acknowledgements treated as a formality, something to complete and move past rather than making a genuine commitment. Symbols such as suncatchers, statues, and signage were seen as insufficient without meaningful action behind them. As several put it, "we are what we do." This points to a need for accountability through sustained funding, policy change, and long-term partnership with Indigenous communities, rather than one-time gestures or symbolic commitments.

The consequences of residential schools and the Indian Act are ongoing, not historical. Participants described that these harms are surfacing today in mental health struggles and addiction within families and communities who live with intergenerational trauma from these systems. Some attendees who were residential school survivors shared how these colonial institutions limited their dreams and opportunities, describing the limitations placed on them as they approached release.





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Discrimination and recognition are not experienced equally across Indigenous communities. Those who were more visibly Indigenous described facing more frequent and direct discrimination than those who could "pass" as non-Indigenous. This shaped where they felt safe and how much of their identity they displayed in public. Recognition between Indigenous groups was similarly uneven. In Saskatoon, for example, participants noted that Cree identity is broadly recognized, while Métis people described having to continually fight for the same level of recognition and cultural visibility. While Land acknowledgements are often intended to bring recognition to the Indigenous presence and history of a place, participants clearly expressed a desire to have Land acknowledgements be directly linked to action, allyship, and true reconciliation.

What We Are Carrying Forward

A common thread running through both stories and all circle discussions was the need to move reconciliation from symbolism to substance, and a consensus that this can only be done through genuine Indigenous participation in governance. Further, the importance of Strengthening urban Indigenous connection to Land and community through accessible spaces and intentional programming was frequently noted.

Participants identified the following needs and priorities:

- Increased access to, and stewardship of, green spaces that are accessible for urban Indigenous people, reaffirming Call for Change 23.
- Greater visibility of Indigenous cultures in the city by reclaiming and Indigenizing place names, reaffirming Calls for Change 21 and 22.
- A highly visible monument to honour residential school survivors, their families, and those who never made it home, reaffirming Call for Change 24.
- Expanded Land-based programming and food sovereignty were also raised as priorities, reaffirming Calls for Change 18 and 26.
- Reduced barriers to cultural and Land-based practices such as sacred fires, harvesting, and ceremony, reaffirming Call for Change 19.





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