



PHILANTHROPIC
FOUNDATIONS
IN CANADA

LANDSCAPES,
INDIGENOUS
PERSPECTIVES
AND PATHWAYS
TO CHANGE

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Dedicated to our dear
friend and colleague
Jack Quarter
1942-2019

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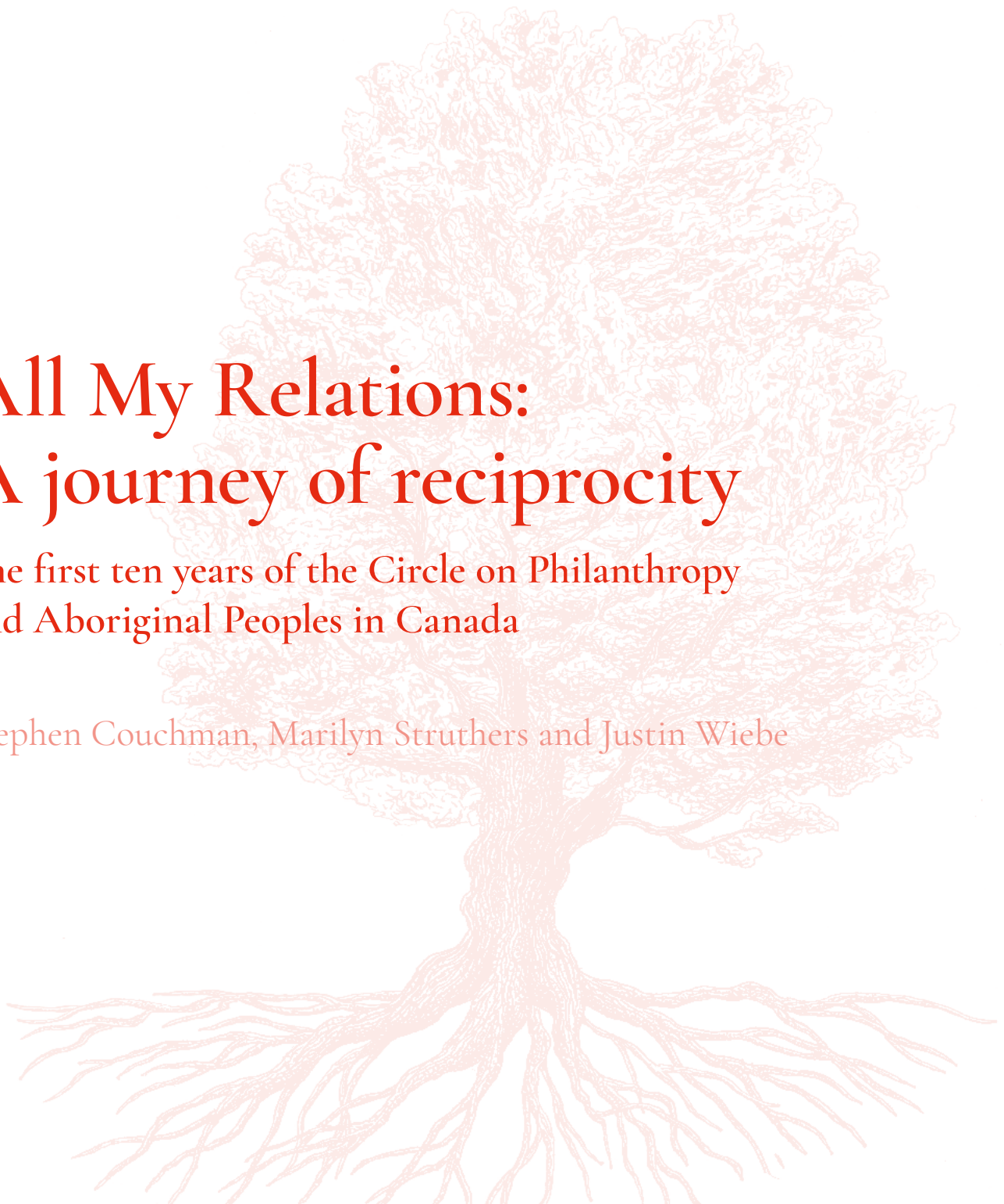
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Part two
Chapter six

All My Relations: A journey of reciprocity

The first ten years of the Circle on Philanthropy
and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada

Stephen Couchman, Marilyn Struthers and Justin Wiebe





For Indigenous people, philanthropic practices were, and continue to be, deeply engrained in Indigenous ways of being and doing. First Nations, Inuit and Métis (FNMI) peoples across what is currently called Canada have complex legal, social and political systems that include philanthropic practices. For example, the Nehiyaw (Cree) concepts of *wicihitowin* (helping each other or sharing) and *kanawayhitowin* (taking care of each other's spirit) demonstrate how integral philanthropic ideas are to Nehiyawak (Cree People). These concepts, and many others, guide the ways in which Indigenous peoples live, engage with other Nations, and govern. Juxtaposed with western philanthropy, Indigenous philanthropic practices aren't merely about extending "goodwill", but, rather, simply the ways things are done in relationships.

Differences between Indigenous and settler worldviews of helping were evident from the moment of first contact. Although Indigenous Nations have long histories of giving and receiving aid, the first written record of an act of philanthropy in what was to become Canada occurred in the winter of 1535–6. Jacques Cartier and his men were overwintering in Wendat territory at Kébec or "where the river narrows", near current-day Quebec City. They had no idea of the severity of winter in this part of the world. They constructed a fort to protect themselves from the local peoples who, they feared, would attack at any time, and hunkered down. Not long into the winter, the crew's health began to deteriorate badly. They became so sick with what, in all probability, was scurvy that they did not have the strength to bury their own dead:

→ [T]heir mouth became stincking, their gummes so rotten, that all the flesh did fall off, even to the rootes of the teeth, which did also almost all fall out. With such infection did this sicknesse spread itselفة in our three ships, that about the middle of February, of a hundred and tenne persons that we were, there were not ten whole, so that one could not help the other, a most horrible and pitifull case.

Hakluyt, 2008

Journals from the time tell of how they received a gift of medicine prepared by Indigenous women from a nearby community:

→ Domagaia straight sent two women to fetch some of it, which brought ten or twelve branches of it, and therewithall shewed the way how to use it, and that is thus, to take the barke and leaues of the sayd tree, and boile them together, then to drinke of the sayd decoction every other day, and to put the dregs of it upon his legs that is sicke: moreouer, they told us, that the vertue of that tree was, to heale any other disease: the tree is in their language called Ameda or Hanneda, this is thought to be the Sassafras tree. Our Captaine presently caused some of that drink to be made for his men to drink of it, but there was none durst tast of it, except one or two, who ventured the drinking of it, only to tast and prove it: the other seeing that did the like, and presently recovered their health, and were delivered of that sickenes, and what other disease soever, in such sorte, that there were some had bene diseased and troubled with the French Pockes foure or five yeres, and with this drinke were cleane healed.

ibid.

The journals also describe how the recovered sailors repaid the gift by locating and stripping the limbs and bark from the medicine tree:

→ After this medicine was found and proved to be true, there was such strife about it, who should be first to take it, that they were ready to kill one another, so that a tree as big as any Oake in France was spoiled and lopped bare, and occupied all in five or six daies.

ibid.

This early story demonstrates the tension between Indigenous and Western worldviews. For Indigenous peoples, offering support to keep the settlers alive was grounded in their philanthropic practices. The response from settlers was one of betrayal, and so began the complex and tension-filled modern story of settler philanthropy in relation to Indigenous peoples.

Later, terrible suffering began for Indigenous people as a result of illegal occupation, fur trade rivalries, land dispossession and treaty violations. Altruistic intentions, acts of “philanthropy” for the most part, did great harm. Sponsored by the church and wealthy patrons, the first wave of European philanthropy and religious imperialism came in the form of missionaries’ campaigns to convert Indigenous peoples. This was followed by the outlawing of Indigenous traditions of sharing such as the potlatch societies (discussed further by Roberta Jamieson in Chapter 7), and the assimilation, dispossession and reserve policies established by the Canadian government of Sir John A MacDonal. The Indian Residential Schools System, developed through a collaboration between government, church and private donors, would be one of the next forms of European-style colonial “philanthropy” experienced by Indigenous communities, with devastating consequences that continue across generations in families today. The intention, which has since been documented and acknowledged, was cultural genocide aimed at “taking the Indian out of the child” (Chief Justice Beverly McLaughlin in Fine, 2015).

Philanthropy also “supported” programs for Indigenous peoples in recent Canadian history: contributions to child welfare supported the “60s Scoop”, an active program of adopting Indigenous children out of their home communities to non-Indigenous families across Canada and beyond. By 1977, an estimated 15,500 Indigenous children in Canada were living in the care of child welfare officials. In Canada, Indigenous children represented 20% of all children in care, even though they made up less than 5% of the total child population. Unfortunately, not much has changed in the nearly 50 years since: 90% of the 11,000 children currently in care in Manitoba are Indigenous (Johnston, 2016). These sorts of philanthropic endeavours, ones often filled with pain and hurt for Indigenous peoples, have continued from the arrival of settlers to today.

In a nation that likes to see itself as an advocate of justice, diversity, and peace, failing to recognize and act on the national crisis of poverty, exclusion, and dislocation of Indigenous

peoples by Canadian philanthropic organizations is unacceptable. The complexity of the historic relationships, lack of trust and repeated failures to uphold treaty and other obligations mean that old patterns must now be challenged and replaced with new approaches.

Philanthropy, the gifting and sharing traditions of communities, is an expression of care and solution-seeking, and its practices can be found in almost every culture. In Canada, dominant settler traditions of charity are deeply rooted in the Christian churches of colonial England and France. Generally, they refer to the redistribution of accumulated wealth with the intention of goodwill, an act or gift made for humanitarian purposes. What seldom comes into that account are the ways in which that wealth was accumulated on and through stolen land and resources.

Less recognized, and much older, are the different traditions of First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities such as potlatches and gifting, giveaways and sharing traditions. These traditions are rooted in worldviews of relationship – not only between each other, but also between the generations who came before and after – and with spirit and non-human relations: the land, waterways, plants and animals that share the land. This broad view of an ecosystem based in relationship and stewardship of resources contains many lessons for philanthropists seeking social change. It is in these variations in view and the way they shape the application of philanthropy that the conflict co-exists with the opportunity to develop a uniquely Canadian approach to philanthropy based on reciprocity. It is out of this complexity that the Circle began to emerge. This paper tracks the first 10 years of a rich and complicated conversation between Canadian philanthropists and Indigenous peoples.

Creation of the Circle

→ “Where do you begin telling someone their world is not the only one?”

Lee Maracle (1993) *Ravensong – A Novel*, p. 61

The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, known as the Circle, strives to build a community of good dialogue among First Nations, Métis, Inuit communities and private, public and community foundations, corporate philanthropy programs, charitable organizations, and United Ways. It is the only Canadian organization representing this diversity of funding organizations. In the same way that a canoeist seeks a clear path down a set of rapids, the Circle focuses on opportunities that present a clear opening for relationship-building, education, policy development, and philanthropy within values of reciprocity. The journey has not always been a smooth one and the work continues to evolve and grow. New people have continually joined us, and there have been many lessons along the way.

Winston Churchill famously said, paraphrasing George Santayana, that “those who fail to learn their history, are condemned to repeat it” (1948). It is unlikely at the time that he was reflecting on relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada, or that he was thinking in terms of Seven Generations before and after. We have learned to see concepts of “philanthropy” and “charity” as evolving over time, with a history before and after colonization (Struthers, 2018). The unique meaning of notions of “sharing” and “community” in an Indigenous context are profiled by Roberta Jamieson in Chapter 7.

This chapter tells some of the stories of the Circle and some of the lessons learned along the way. Like any organization working at the cusp of change, our wisdom is often held in our stories, and we seldom have time to stop the work long enough to sit together and mine for the learning. Because “we” are, by definition, not a homogenous group, the selection of stories and the interpretations will reflect those doing the writing. This piece has been written primarily by two non-Indigenous long-time funders who were there at the beginning. We are joined by two younger Indigenous people who have joined more recently and carry the vision of the future. One is the executive director of the Circle and the other works at a major global foundation based in Canada. Writing together across difference is one of the practices the Circle has developed to create voice, and it often brings surprises – and so learning.

How the Circle began

→ “The lack of philanthropic involvement in Aboriginal community development does not reflect a lack of need.”

Bruce Miller, *The Circle* (2010)

In 2006, a small group of non-Indigenous funders from the McConnell Foundation, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, Gordon Foundation and an anonymous private foundation began a series of conference-call conversations, all wondering how to better support Indigenous communities. We could see the need, had access to funds and had the will, but “fundable” opportunities (in foundations’ terms) were hard to come by and seldom an unqualified success.

Too often the “best” funding opportunities were to non-Indigenous organizations interested in supporting Indigenous communities. Our bureaucratic processes were often a poor fit for Indigenous community-led efforts. Our decision-making processes were missing cultural context and often asking the wrong questions. Non-Indigenous applicants often lacked genuine relationships with the communities they applied to work in and seldom had working partnerships or a good grasp of issues at the community level. The projects that did receive funding often shifted in unexpected ways. Our monitoring and evaluation processes were not equipped for the hairpin turns of emergent work necessary to address long-standing problems with no recognized solutions.

The scope of the problems Indigenous applicants were trying to solve required a much more sensitive and engaged kind of philanthropy than our organizations knew how to perform. Philanthropy, and the charitable organizations it funds, is the structural product of the same colonial processes that generated the social upheaval Indigenous peoples have experienced. Worse, we now recognize that charities such as the church-run residential schools have been instruments of terrible oppression and violence.

These conversations began in 2006, before the Prime Minister’s statement of apology to survivors of residential schools and the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and before news of murdered and missing Indigenous women had hit the mainstream. Even then it was clear, however, that to replicate non-Indigenous solutions to community problems, or to assume we, as non-Indigenous people, had any idea of the best projects to invest in, was to simply reproduce the same colonial attitudes that had also built our organizations and frameworks for social investment. These were new ideas, not necessarily shared across our organizations. We also began to notice, then, that we had no Indigenous funder colleagues to turn to for advice. Not one.

Yet within our own networks, non-Indigenous people and funders were beginning to recognize ongoing practices of Indigenous philanthropy within communities. For example, have you ever sat with an Indigenous Elder and experienced that deep commitment to reciprocity and sharing? The

group of non-Indigenous funders soon learned that Indigenous-led philanthropy was new only to us: Indigenous peoples and communities had, and continue to have, unique forms of giving and receiving grounded in each Nation's unique social, spiritual, legal and cultural practices.

At the same time, Indigenous communities had begun to adapt cultural values to familiar corporate forms: community trust funds to support youth and community-led healing projects, fundraising walks and events and, eventually, community foundations.¹ Indigenous communities were establishing the networks of nonprofits and charities that other Canadian communities use to provide service, seek solution and acquire funding – but there were few bridges between philanthropists and Indigenous communities. Funders were learning mostly through the trial and error experience of investment, in and around power imbalances of granter and grantee, and mostly alone.

Something new was needed. As a funding community we needed to enter into conversations with Indigenous peoples, not funder to applicant, but community to community. As non-Indigenous funders, we felt strongly that our foundations were meeting neither the challenge of investing in Indigenous community-led social change nor our mandates to support innovative community solutions. The process of grantors talking to grantees about funding dilemmas was isolating us from the very people we needed to learn from.

And so this small group of foundations began, without knowing where we were going, to generate conversations that attempted not “us and them” but “we”. Along the way there have been many lessons, and the learning is far from over.

Some Circle practices include: bi-annual All My Relations gatherings; deliberate conversations of learning and trust-building across difference; working in ceremony; research that begins to shed light on the realities of Indigenous charities – and some of what funders need to know to fund well; experimental new funding calls and processes to Indigenous communities; and the Philanthropic Community's Declaration of Action, a journey into formalizing the commitment to reconciliation and accountability by Canadian foundations.

The mission of the Circle has changed a little over time. Now, the Circle works to “transform philanthropy and contribute to positive change with Indigenous communities by creating spaces of learning, innovation, relationship-building, co-creation and activation.” We describe ourselves as “an open network to promote giving, sharing, and philanthropy in Indigenous communities across the country. We connect with and support the empowerment of First Nations, Inuit and Métis nations, communities, and individuals in building a stronger, healthier future.” The Circle continues to provide a public platform that seeks to challenge existing funder–recipient relationships, a task that requires listening, trust, sacrifice and a lot of effort. We are committed to our effort being Indigenous-led and collaborative, one that tries to model right relations.

¹ Community Foundations of Canada now includes three Indigenous community foundation members, and a fourth is in the process of being included.

The work begins

→ “If the mission of a foundation is to address social inequity, health, poverty, hunger, child welfare, seniors or education in Canada, and they do not support any Indigenous-led or -focused organizations, there is a massive disconnect.”

Circle member

The language of our work, terms such as “charity” and “philanthropy”, reflects the earliest relationships of colonization and betrayal. It is understandable that these terms are not always understood by First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples to denote benevolence and sharing. At one of the early Circle gatherings, a First Nation leader spoke following a presentation by the head of a foundation who had just explained that his organization had resources which they wished to share with his community. There was a long pause, and the First Nation leader said, “You’re welcome.”

This was a jarring moment for many in the room who had come to learn how to support Indigenous communities better and who held familiar assumptions of gratitude for gift-giving. As profiled by Lefèvre and Elson in Chapter 1, by the early 1900s, the consolidation of wealth by Canadian industrialists, largely the result of resource extraction, led to the emergence of some of the private and public foundations that now make up the philanthropic sector. This wealth was gained through exploitation of Indigenous lands and resources. From this perspective we can see the essential betrayal in the value chain from land to business to charitable gifts that has helped to build and sustain many of the health, social, and cultural institutions of settler culture that improve the quality of life for mostly non-Indigenous Canadians.

Philanthropy is seen by many Indigenous communities as a return of value – in a somewhat diminished form – of what was previously taken. Understandably, entering into a relationship by accepting funds can raise feelings of lack of trust and belief that what is offered is truly intended for the betterment of Indigenous children, families and communities. One of the important lessons for philanthropic members of the Circle is to understand how Indigenous peoples may view western philanthropy and that successful granting must rely on fundamentally different kinds of relationship.

Long before the sharing of medicine with the Cartier expedition, the treaty between the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee created an agreement on sharing of resources in the Great Lakes Basin called the Dish with One Spoon Wampum. This wampum is a sacred treaty and outlines the protocols and obligations of sharing resources and lands in ways that benefited everyone and everything. Conversations in the Circle meetings are often peppered with stories of traditional sharing: wood gathered first for an Elder, moose shared with the community.

Settler actors are much more likely to hold more paternalistic views of giver and beneficiary. Traditions of philanthropy have a long history which predates European arrival in North America, deeply connected with church and faith. Because settler philanthropists may have little access to Indigenous oral history and cultural practices, the Circle offers a potent space to learn and shift understanding.

For the most part, it is only in the last thirty years that the philanthropic sector can be seen as beginning to contribute positively to the well-being of Indigenous peoples. However, it is important to recognize that most non-Indigenous people working in philanthropy have little sense of Indigenous history, including resistance and resilience, as the result of a Canadian education system that has omitted or white-washed Indigenous history. This can make foundations impatient to see change happen, but also confused when “best intentions” are met with scepticism. If handled with respect and care, this dynamic can be fertile soil for careful conversation and learning.

Telling our stories: Where the learning begins²

→ “Origin stories are important. They remind us where we were and who we were with, what the weather was like and where we came from.”

Circle member

The birth of the Circle took place on a spring day on Treaty 1 and Métis territory north of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Although the Circle was formally incorporated in 2012, its story really begins on that day in June of 2008. The group had no name then, but the series of teleconferences had grown to a gathering called All My Relations. This phrase is often used by Indigenous peoples at the end of a prayer or public statement to indicate their inclusion of ancestors, non-human relations, people in the room, and those yet to be born. It is spoken with humility.

It had been raining all week and the Red River was cresting. The land was soggy with spring runoff. About forty people from philanthropic organizations and First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities gathered to spend two days together to explore what deeper relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people could mean for the work of philanthropy and social change.

² The following section draws from ‘Journey of Reciprocity: The First Eight Years of the Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada’, *The Philanthropist*. March 14, 2016.

The first day took place on land that was then the Grandmother Moon Lodge, an hour away from Winnipeg, and was hosted by Elder Mae Louise Campbell. Most of the forty participants arrived not knowing more than two or three others. Many were afraid of being devoured by mosquitos or washed downstream into Lake Winnipeg by the torrential rains of the previous week. Despite dire weather forecasts, it was a perfect day – sunny and spring warm and dry, because organizers bought every pair of rubber boots in Winnipeg and had laid plywood over the muddy meeting space.

The day began with everyone sitting around a fire, making introductions. It ended pretty much the same way. Elder Mae Louise began in prayer and created a space that was unlike the usual meetings of philanthropists. She encouraged us to take our time and when participants had finished saying who we were and why we were there, the day was nearly done. For those focused on process and agenda, this was the first lesson of this newly forming group: the bedrock of any solution to the challenges is taking the time to build relationships, trust and mutual understanding. To do this, you must start with listening. There is no shortcut.

The next day, June 11, 2008, has since become an historic moment. For most participants it seemed a profound coincidence. Organizers had no idea that the meeting would coincide with the federal apology to residential school survivors and their communities. We were together on such an important moment, and yet many of the non-Indigenous participants were taken completely by surprise. After lunch, with still much of the formal agenda to cover, the Indigenous participants called for an early end to the gathering. The hotel, owned at the time by the Tribal Councils Investment Group of Manitoba, was opened to the public for a video viewing of the Prime Minister. People, mostly Indigenous, packed every ballroom, meeting room, and gathering place in the building. Volunteers distributed tissues and together we watched big TV monitors as Stephen Harper apologized on behalf of the Canadian people for the atrocities of the residential school system. It was an emotional, cathartic experience for everyone present and, looking back, a critical juncture in the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada and also for the Circle.

The first All My Relations gathering didn't go at all as planned in terms of "desired outcomes and goals". Or, rather, because our ancestors were invited into this circle and allowed interactions to take place in a good way, perhaps it played out exactly as it should have. The result was that an unlikely group achieved a remarkably quick alignment around a common vision.

In the 480 years since the first written account of a philanthropic act in what would become Canada, the history has become painfully clear. "Cultural genocide" was the term used by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 2015) to describe systematic attempts to absorb Indigenous peoples into "Canadian" culture. Some would argue that what has taken place is much worse. These attempts have not only failed but have led to social, political, cultural and environmental degradation with a significant human toll. This is tough terrain on which to create a new vision of relationship.

There were many lessons for the group who gathered just outside Winnipeg. The first was an idea that has become more commonplace in the subsequent decade, that Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians are all in some relationship with how this land was settled and with each other, and thus have obligations to the lands and to one another. Reconciliation is inevitably a shared proposition. Secondly, we recognized that philanthropy is a way for communities to innovate, share, learn and build resilience in a process of self-determination that is separate from government. Finally, when we recognize how the wealth held in foundations was accumulated, often through business exploitation of Indigenous lands and resources, it forces us to think differently about how and why foundations “do” philanthropy and on whose terms. “You are welcome” becomes a play on words, a subtle rebuke and an invitation to historical lesson all in one.

There are also important lessons about how the work is done. Very different ways of meeting create very different outcomes. Settler philanthropy too has a culture and way of meeting, around board tables and in suits and ties. Disruption of how we meet allows new possibilities for relationship and ways of thinking.

The All My Relations strategy

→ “All My Relations’ is an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within the universal family by living our lives in a harmonious and moral manner (a common admonishment is to say of someone that they act as if they had no relations).”

Thomas King, in Nelson Education Ltd (2004)

The first All My Relations gathering (AMR) at Grandmother Lodge provided the template for future Circle convening activities. Held every second year, the intent of the AMR gatherings is to create space for a broad range of individuals from Indigenous communities, philanthropy and beyond to come together to share perspectives, problem-solve, examine and share best practices and innovations and learn together in community. Some of the principles the AMR has developed over time and in constant regeneration are to:

- host in different territories across Canada, and in some relationship to the land and Indigenous peoples
- embrace Indigenous traditions of dialogue where possible, including the long view of seven generations forward and back, listening and sharing, working in ceremonial space
- seek out diverse and sometimes challenging participation

- recognize the critical role of Elders and young people in creating and holding conversational space
- design and facilitate well to create space for hard, sometimes disruptive and creative conversations
- encourage connection and relationship building
- focus on the possibility and potential
- invite others in to continually build a community of practice which energizes the work

Over the past decade the Circle has hosted four AMR gatherings, along with several smaller regional or issue-specific meetings and many webinars. The Circle has become somewhat known for the ability to host these kinds of dialogue across difference. By convening in conjunction with partner organizations such as Canadian Environment Grantmakers' Network, Philanthropic Foundations of Canada (PFC) (now Environment Funders Canada), International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) and Community Foundations of Canada (CFC), the Circle has often helped to bring issues to the surface and to raise awareness in good, positive learning environments. In describing how the Circle helps, we say: "The Circle develops programs and spaces that cultivate better conversations, connections and relationships among Indigenous peoples and philanthropic organizations to create awareness, through education and engaging communities and organizations, [in order] to create alliances on the path to true reconciliation."

Stepping into the deep end: The Ashoka Changemakers Competition

- Funders said: "It was amazing for us, as a non-Aboriginal organization, to hear directly from such a diversity of First Nations, Inuit and Métis educators and social change agents about what is working and needed in their communities. It reinforced our approaches but gave excellent ideas of how we could strengthen as well."
- Participants said: "This type of initiative is critical for ongoing learning. The simple act of conversation, learning [and] sharing has value notwithstanding what will result after the Summit ends."

The Ashoka Changemakers Competition in Indigenous Education

The growing group of non-Indigenous funders had begun to imagine how philanthropic dollars and Indigenous participation might come together to support unique ways to explore, test and scale social solutions in Indigenous communities. The Ashoka Changemakers Competition in Indigenous Education was an early and bold experiment for the fledgling Circle. It was a way for some of the philanthropic community to “try out” the idea that many foundations working together in relationship with people in Indigenous communities could create impact beyond what each might do alone. It was a venture that we would now characterize as “engaged philanthropy” (Alberg-Seberich, 2016) and “collective impact” (Kania & Kramer, 2011). When the adventure began, these terms were not widely used, there was little of the guidance the philanthropic body of literature offers today, and the group was largely unaware of Indigenous literature that could have guided the work.

The Circle convened its second AMR gathering in Treaty 7 Territory in 2009. Part of that event was a long bus ride from Calgary to Blackfoot Crossing on Sisika First Nation. The intention for that day was to focus on building understanding of the twin themes important to both Indigenous communities and to philanthropic granting: the wellbeing of Indigenous youth and their community’s relationships to the land. Imagine Indigenous leaders, many of the heads of Canada’s largest foundations, young emerging leaders and others, on a long-curated bus ride. We began with a simple exercise: “Tell us the story of your name.” There were traditional names and English names, names from adoption, names of Portuguese and Somali origin, funny nicknames and complex histories.

Celia Cruz, a consummate networker and the new director of Ashoka Canada, had been a last-minute addition to the gathering. Seizing the opportunity, she worked the bus, pitching the idea of a Changemakers Competition. By the time the bus returned to Calgary, the idea had set. Cindy Blackstock, Ashoka’s first Indigenous fellow, became part of the organizing group.

Philanthropists from the Circle created the financial means to launch the Competition, with Ashoka Canada acting as the secretariat. The Ashoka model provided the vehicle to reach across Canada and attract entries to both see the work that was emerging in communities and try to map the range of outcomes these initiatives were reaching for. The goal was a national online competition and final summit where innovators in Indigenous education and philanthropists could share ideas, learn from each other, and explore the potential for funding relationships.

Nine foundation partners – including Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative (now the Martin Family Initiative), the McConnell Family Foundation, the Counselling Foundation of Canada, the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the RBC, Donner, Chagnon and Vancouver foundations – entered into a partnership with Ashoka Canada and eleven other participating organizations, ranging from the Assembly of First Nations, Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, Indspire, Métis National Council, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and the Native Women’s Association of Canada, along with the Canadian Teachers Federation and Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win, and The North South

Partnership for Children. Some partners came to the table with funds, others with participation and still others as contributors toward cash awards. Some 266 educational initiatives entered the competition, more than anyone had imagined, and almost one hundred thousand dollars was awarded to support the activities of thirty “winning” organizations in the three-day summit.

The event was a stunning success. The competition enabled the cash awards, and the presentations were opportunities for shared learning. Perhaps most important were the number of quiet meetings that created relationship between funders and potential grantees who didn’t usually have access to philanthropists. We will never know the actual amount of investment that resulted from those conversations, but it was an important lesson that access to funding is often more about who knows whom and that potentially impactful Indigenous initiatives were often unnoticed until those relationships were established.

The back story of getting to the Summit was of course much more complex, and few in the room for those sparkling three days knew that the event had come together in an eleventh-hour effort to salvage the entire venture from conflict and power struggles among steering organizations. The story is recounted in a developmental evaluation document created by a team of evaluators, one Indigenous and one not, called *The Road to the Summit* (Wilson & Coates, n.d.). Job changes had upended the relational balance between organizers. Goals had become uncertain. Power struggles emerged everywhere – between seasoned funders, new ones and non-funders; between powerful and less powerful foundations; between different Indigenous representatives; between staff and the steering group and even between evaluators. The evaluators made an intervention, but tension was already running high.

Although as organizers we set out with the best intentions and an explicit desire to be aware and wary of power dynamics, we relied too heavily on relational organizing. Both Indigenous communities and philanthropists tend to work in highly relational ways with people they know well. In a diverse collaboration without structural agreement on process and roles, the discriminating use of power and privilege thwarted our efforts. Confusion reigned even within Ashoka about whether the project “lived” inside Ashoka Canada or Ashoka Global, and over who would own the knowledge development. The partnership templates didn’t account for the rather fluid orientation of new partners through relational invitation. The confusion ultimately manifested in a showdown about who actually held decision-making power.

While, the deeply relational process brought well-meaning people together to commit to the enterprise, it couldn’t limit the circumvention of the process and power plays that emerged. The evaluators set out six important lessons for foundations entering into complex collective solution finding:

- Don't underestimate the power of personal relationship in the work and the importance of weaving people in
- Be mindful of multiple aspects of individual and collective wellbeing in the group
- Don't underestimate the complexity of power and difference
- Focus on the important outcomes and the conditions needed for collective success
- Deliver well on what you can deliver, scale your results to your capacity
- Balance flexibility and adaptability with the efficiency and predictability needed to actually get the work done

So in the midst of this jumble, how did the group use the lessons to align our efforts and pull off a highly successful summit? First, all players were motivated not to lose the work done and concerned about loss of reputation and accountability for investment – so the will was there. Second, a project charter was developed using a template from the Counselling Foundation of Canada which articulated three clear goals. Finally, the group appointed a small working group with a single staff person and chairperson with solid process skills, who took pains to reach clarity and consensus on each direction forward.

How do we know it was a success? Apart from the number of participants and the clear engagement of funder and organizational participants, the evaluators created two composite evaluative narratives suggesting impact for both Indigenous educators and non-Indigenous foundations. Each of the philanthropic players continued to build relationship and deepen investment in Indigenous solutions to educational challenges. As for the Circle, for years, in moments of uncertainty, we would look at each other and say “Remember Ashoka”, a touchstone reminder of the importance of building genuine working relationships across power difference.

Holding tension: becoming a registered charity

- “Charity implies the opposite of self-determining, community-based ways of being and knowing. In particular, spiritually and culturally based relationships based on reciprocity of giving and receiving among one another, are viewed by Indigenous Elders and Traditional Knowledge Holders as outside the parameters of ‘charities’ which carry with them confining methods and rules.”

The Circle, 2017a, p. 25

Formally, the Circle registered as a charity in 2012. There are similar organizations around the world, such as Native Americans in Philanthropy and International Funders for Indigenous Peoples, which are focused on building understanding about systemic racism and increasing the philanthropic resources to support Indigenous solutions to the problems facing Indigenous communities. Systemic racism creates invisible barriers inside large systems such as philanthropy in ways that limit access often invisibly though the nature of processes and relationships:

- “When I fought to protect my land and my home, I was called a savage. When I neither understood nor welcomed his way of life, I was called lazy. When I tried to rule my people, I was stripped of my authority.”

Chief Dan George, ‘A Lament for Confederation’, July 1, 1967

Over the ensuing years, there was much discussion about the formal/informal relationship structure of the Circle. When the name was still the Canadian Aboriginal Grant-making Circle, the group had begun to expand membership to include other foundations and Indigenous people with connections and interest in the work. The Circle had begun to take on projects that required receipt and administration of funding – the first research, publication and a website. The workload began to increase and funders, on top of their day jobs, supported the more complex work sometimes with administrative contributions of their organizations. We rotated our chair about every ten months and began to think about attracting an intern to provide some support. By 2011, an Ontario Trillium Foundation application was made to provide initial funding for the Circle.

Working as an ad hoc committee of representatives of foundations, with several Indigenous people with connection to the work, had gone well when the work was focused on attracting

participation from foundations and creating new conversations on funding Indigenous communities. But the work had begun to expand – and become more political.

In June 2010, the Circle convened the core group in Toronto for a first planning day. David Paul Achneepineskum, a committee member from Metawa First Nation, pointed out that we could not just invite Indigenous people to the gatherings for funders' learning, but needed to answer the question Indigenous participants had asked at the Blackfoot Crossing AMR gathering: "When will we be asked to get involved?" It was time to structure in Indigenous participation and not just rely on relationships. Of course, that also raised the necessity of seeking new relationships to include both Métis and Inuit representation. Once again, the lesson was how easily a purely relational approach can exclude, even with the best of intentions. We learned to continually ask ourselves: "Who needs to be here? Who is missing?"

So what sort of structure did the Circle need to steward the burgeoning interest? Form follows function – but any structure also begins to shape the work and the relationships within. The group wrestled with ideas of whether the Circle should remain a network with fluid relational ways of working, or find a sponsoring organization or become a charity with a government-regulated structure with the ability to receive funds directly and issue tax receipts for donations. The Circle had, until this point, quietly avoided any relationship with government. We had not accepted government funds or courted government funders for participation, and members had simply "managed out" any requests from government funders to attend events.

That day the group set priorities for what the Circle's new structure must accomplish: create the ability to receive and spend money; support a staff person; include significant influence from First Nations, Métis and Inuit people; create a flexible adaptive structure that would enable changing partnerships; be administration-light and not costly to operate; maintain a relational capacity but also have a reporting structure and the capacity to communicate – to listen and be responsive.

The options for a more permanent structure were weighed carefully or, as one member put it, "agonizingly". In the end, with the advice of a prominent charity lawyer, the Circle sought charitable status, which would help ensure its presence over the long term. The permanence and accountable structure made us "players" in the nonprofit scene. But tension can still be felt between the charitable structure and a network's more relational style of organizing – flexible, and well suited to a mobile agenda in a fast-changing social issue. The Circle preserves the language of a network in our description of the work, but has also "structured in" Indigenous and regional engagement on the governance circle and recently moved to a new model with Indigenous and non-Indigenous co-chairs along with the commitment to hire Indigenous staff.

The first official board of the Circle was sworn in on Toronto Island around a picnic table in 2012. Five Indigenous people representing First Nations and Métis communities (including a representative of Canada's then only First Nations Indigenous-engaged Community Foundation)

and four non-Indigenous funders from as many philanthropic organizations were on the roster. The name was changed slightly, but significantly, to fit the shift in our thinking and goals, from the Circle on Aboriginal Grantmaking in Canada to the Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. The organization was no longer just about grant makers' learning, but on a shared journey in which First Nations, Métis and Inuit people would participate more fully in a conversation about access to non-governmental funds to seek community solutions.

Once registered, the governance circle began to put the governance systems in place to ensure national and balanced representation and build the usual policy pieces to ensure accountability. One of the key pieces was to identifying key partners and core offerings.

To date, the Circle has had three executive directors and one acting director. Each has been an Indigenous woman. They have brought very different skills and perspectives to the organization. The path has not always been smooth, as the Circle has struggled along on a shoe-string budget and the usual project-based patchwork of funding, and a tremendous demand for representation and partnership with other organizations seeking to engage with Indigenous communities. All the original foundation partners remain as members and many new ones have signed on. For the Circle – born as it was at the moment of the Apology in 2008, and then engaged through the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report in 2015, the effort involved in both not missing opportunities and not burning out our people has sometimes felt overwhelming. This has not always been successful, but the amount of activity the Circle has generated on the national stage belies the small staff complement it has been able to fund. It has also managed to remain independent of both government and any particular philanthropic agenda – two small but important measures of success.

More recently, the idea of adaptive and emergent strategies for social change organizations has begun to appear in the social sector literature. A recent paper (Darling *et al.*, 2018) compares the strategy options in playing a game of chess with those of playing a team sport. The chess game requires an adaptive strategy: strategy that limits play to a set of rules and outcomes, in this case driven by a funder. The latter requires emergent strategy, one that shifts constantly in the huddle of community as the ecosystem both emerges and also becomes visible through the work. The Circle has done a little of both but, as the organization has matured, we have become much more effective at engaging in the more emergent work.³

Today, the Circle's board includes Indigenous funders and change makers. Many of the original members have retired into positions as volunteers or on the Ambassadors' Circle, others remain actively engaged on the governance circle. As the understanding of the change we desire becomes deeper, the Circle's goals have become a little broader.

³ For more thinking on this topic, see *Emergent Strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds* by Adrienne Maree-Brown, AK Press. <https://www.akpress.org/emergentstrategy.html>

The 2018 strategic plan recognizes six key goals:

- Increase capacity of Indigenous organizations
- Increase capacity of philanthropic organizations
- Increase organizations' commitment to and engagement in reconciliation
- Foster investment in Indigenous communities and Indigenous-led initiatives
- Increase accessible information about Indigenous philanthropy
- Become a nimble, professional, credible, efficient and self-sufficient organization

Circle Strategic Plan, 2018

Part of the core offering decided on in those early formation days was the inclusion of a research agenda. In 2010, the Circle began to research projects that would develop and share learning at the juncture of philanthropic practice and Indigenous community efforts for change. The first project, *Aboriginal Philanthropy in Canada: A Foundation for Understanding* (The Circle, 2010), was written by Bruce Miller, an Indigenous partner in the United Way of Winnipeg. One of the most striking findings was the degree to which the Indigenous organizations he interviewed lacked access to fundraising training, a finding that led to training development.

The next project was in partnership with AJAH, a social sector data firm that has developed “big data” methodology and access to the CRA database. Called *Measuring the Circle*, it was an early attempt to ask ourselves who the philanthropists were who were funding Indigenous projects and who and how they were funding. AJAH’s methodology develops a 1,200 keyword list used to scan CRA charity data to pull out charities whose name or description contains one or more of the keywords. From here, they could begin to sketch the outline of Indigenous-focused charitable activity and the funders who support the work.

The first report of this work, *Measuring the Circle: Emerging Trends in Philanthropy for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Communities in Canada* (2014), included a data report and case study stories of philanthropic investment. The second, an infographic, set out an early framework to tracking indicators of the organizational health of the Indigenous-focused charities compared with the Canadian “core”⁴ charitable sector (The Circle, 2017b).

The data provided only the broadest snapshots at the time the data was gathered. About 1% of the core charitable sector in Canada could be considered Indigenous-focused, in that they provide some form of service to Indigenous peoples. But the data told us nothing about whether their governance included or was led by Indigenous peoples. Generally, these organizations received smaller grants than the average core sector organizations, had less fundraising and were growing more rapidly in numbers than the core sector as a whole. More Canadian foundations than were

⁴ In Canada the “core” charitable sector refers to organizations that are not municipal, universities, schools or hospitals.

Circle members were making grants, outsiders to the conversations that had started the Circle – and potential members (The Circle, 2014).

The Measuring the Circle research was conducted mostly by settler philanthropists, and the reports started to raise more questions than the data could answer. What was an Indigenous charity anyway? How could a set of key words developed by a non-Indigenous company capture the right charities (this was compounded by the occasional Sikh temple that appeared in the results as the word “Indian” was in the name)? What about the work being done by organizations that would never be charities, didn’t want to be charities, and found the whole concept of charity oppressive? Further, the data varied dramatically from one region to another across Canada.

CRA can offer nothing reliable to determine “how Indigenous” an Indigenous-focused charity actually is. Lumped together as “Indigenous-focused”, we might find a church-run meal program that serves Indigenous people, picked up in the data scrape along with an Indigenous-operated healing lodge. Some programs may be governed entirely by Indigenous people – or have none at all on the board; they may take a traditional approach or eschew tradition altogether. The research brought us back to the same dilemma that engaged the original group of funders in conversation.

In 2017, the Circle released *Measuring the Circle – Emerging Trends in Philanthropy for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Communities in Canada: A focus on Manitoba* (The Circle, 2017b). This research was undertaken under the direction of Indigenous leaders at United Way of Winnipeg. The project looked in depth at what the data meant for one region and then interviewed and listened to story after story of charitable work from an Indigenous perspective. The report creates an articulate message about the conflicts inherent in making change in colonially produced social issues from within a colonial structure of organization and regulation still based in Canada on 15th-century British laws. The focus groups in the Manitoba study asked people – from Indigenous executive directors to Elders – what they thought an Indigenous charity was. Many participants felt the words “charity” and “charities” connote a deficit model of helping that is not culturally relevant and does not fit within the Indigenous concept of reciprocity. The term has connotations of one group acting out of benevolence to assist others who may be incapable of acting for themselves. The respondents’ answers created a much more complex view than that of the data research.

It has been a strong theme in the Circle’s work that language matters – a lot. Reconciling difference in understanding is just not possible when we are speaking without agreement on what our words mean. The Circle’s commitment has been that a “good” definition is one that makes sense in Indigenous communities. This commitment often creates new perspectives for philanthropy, and the Measuring the Circle study offers three distinct categories of “Indigenous-focused” charity (*ibid.*, pp. 48, 49):

- **Indigenous charities** are led by, operated by and dedicated to Indigenous peoples and historically rooted and contemporarily grounded in Indigenous culture and self-determining ways
- **Indigenous-led charities** are organizations where the majority of board members and management are Indigenous people
- **Charities that have Indigenous beneficiaries** include other non-Indigenous-led charities that serve Indigenous peoples, nations, communities, organizations and individuals who benefit from charitable donations

Two further definitions help us to clarify the philanthropic side of the discussion. These originated in the broader data work of the Measuring the Circle project, but their endorsement by the Manitoba project helps us to move more confidently in our future work (*ibid.*, p. 5):

- **Indigenous philanthropy** refers to activities of both donors and recipients that are directed to the benefit of Indigenous peoples. The term encompasses charitable foundations, charities, non-profit organizations and qualified donees.⁵
- **Charitable funders** are registered Canadian charities that make grants or gifts to other charities. “**Charitable funders of Indigenous charities**” have made one or more grants to an Indigenous-focused charity and “**active funders**” have made 23 or more gifts or grants in 2013 – a list that included 100 foundations.

There is a movement taking hold in Manitoba, and other parts of the country, which advocates for a “new” – or, more accurately, “old” – model for “charity” seen through Indigenous lenses. This focuses on the exchange of gifts, roles for caring in multi-generational communities, and resilience. There is a tension in the disconnect between these approaches and the charitable structures required for CRA charitable status, but there is also opportunity. As reforms begin to creep into the regulation of charities, there is hope that, in a spirit of reconciliation, traditional practices will eventually be better understood to be a “fit” with charity regulations.

In the near term, these definitions help philanthropists to better target grant-making. Many well-intentioned philanthropists invest significant resources in charities with Indigenous beneficiaries, rather than seeing Indigenous communities and people as experts in what their communities need and investing directly in Indigenous or Indigenous-led charities. If we believe that settler solutions have largely failed to alleviate the social issues produced by settler practice, it makes sense to put a priority on strengthening Indigenous-led organizations and funding the solutions developed close to the ground and in Indigenous communities. This must be where the innovation lies: recognizing and funding Indigenous expertise and solutions rather than setting a funding agenda. This will bring us closer to a practice of reconciliation.

⁵ In 2011, First Nations could register with CRA as “qualified donees”, with the capacity to receive charitable donations under the provision that recognizes “a registered municipal or public body performing a function of government in Canada” (CRA, 2011).

Learning forward together: A declaration of commitment

→ “[U]ntil people show that they have learned from this, we will never forget, and we should never forget, even once they have learned from it, because this is part of who we are. It’s not just a part of who we are as survivors and children of survivors and relatives of survivors; it’s part of who we are as a nation. And this nation must never forget what it once did to its most vulnerable people.”

Senator Murray Sinclair

Eight years after the agenda for the first AMR in Winnipeg was shelved for the Prime Minister’s Apology, the Circle joined the march and held a gathering to coincide with the release of the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 2015) in Ottawa. During the TRC’s final sessions, members of the Circle and allies presented the Commission with the Philanthropic Community’s Declaration of Action, committing signatories to act on the 94 TRC recommendations through their funding programs.

At the point of inception, thirty of Canada’s major foundations signed the declaration. Signatories to the declaration committed to learning, truth-telling, engagement, measurement and action. Over the years since the original document was presented to commissioners, many additional organizations and individuals have signed on and joined the learning journey.

The signing of the declaration is largely a symbolic gesture, a statement of commitment made by foundations to act as allies to do more in supporting Indigenous Nations, communities, and peoples in achieving their goals. It also expresses the belief that self-determination – the real innovation of community-led solutions – can come only from investment directly in Indigenous communities, and Indigenous and Indigenous-led charities. The overarching lesson of the Circle is that supporting meaningful change always comes back to relationships.

Not replicating colonial or settler-centered frameworks in philanthropic practice means seeking out and investing in those organizations that are Indigenous-led to strengthen capacity and support innovative and impactful work that supports self-determination. When faced with competing opportunities to fund, this is often difficult for foundations. The work of review and relationship building is often more time-consuming, the path forward is emergent and the outcomes are less certain. Indigenous charities, despite under-investment from the philanthropic sector, are still working hard to deliver essential programs and services. Often framed as lacking capacity, many Indigenous organizations have not had significant opportunities to work in

relationship with foundations and many foundations still use rigid and bureaucratic application forms and evaluation criteria. Furthermore, many Indigenous organizations have more experience with restrictive and sometimes punitive government funding processes than those required by philanthropic organizations. We cannot begin to catalogue the many quiet interventions the Circle and its members have undertaken over the last decade. Some, like the AMR gatherings, have had a significant profile. Others, like coaching foundation staff on how best to support reconciliation with their boards, or travelling to Indigenous communities, may bear fruit in the long run.

Senator Sinclair's words and influence, along with those of fellow TRC commissioners Marie Wilson and Chief Wilton Littlechild, have emboldened members of the Circle to continue to press forward. On many occasions Sinclair has reminded us that reconciliation is not an exercise which is likely to be completed in the lifetime of those currently engaged in this work. It has taken generations to come to where we are now, and it will take generations for balance to be restored.

At the moment of writing, the Circle is shifting again, from the early partners – many of whom were non-Indigenous agents in private philanthropy, leadership and governance – to a new generation of First Nations, Métis and Inuit leaders who are imbedded in the sector and their communities, and are committed to supporting Indigenous philanthropy and building a new type of uniquely Canadian philanthropy.

The Circle will continue to push the philanthropic sector to transform the ways funders think, act, and fund. It is critical for philanthropists to recognize Indigenous leadership, invest in Indigenous-led solutions, and support Indigenous peoples and communities in their pursuits of self-determination. The 2019 All My Relations gathering offered a unique focus on the seasons and how alignment to the seasons connects to governance and operations (winter), emergence and partnerships (spring), relationship-building and celebration (summer), and increasing wisdom and knowledge dissemination (fall). This slowed-down seasonal framework has shaped how the Circle does all our work. Winter is a time for ceremony, the integration of learnings and reflections from the year before, and governance and operational foundation-setting for the year ahead. Each spring, the Circle offers a multi-day facilitation and personal leadership training that increases our shared efforts to design, co-convene and be together in times of change. This growing network of Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners is returning to its philanthropic and community settings equipped and eager to make change. Our summer season is dedicated to being on the land and in relationship with our members in shared learning experiences. And finally, each fall, our focus shifts to a collective story harvest to gain more insight and wisdom. During this time, we see the patterns, practices and policies that enable foundations to move forward on the Declaration for Action, their commitments to new ways of thinking and doing, and ultimately what it takes to co-create a new future.

The Circle has thus oriented itself towards a focus on inviting new ways of thinking and doing. Through convening, fee-for-service offerings, research and knowledge mobilization, and the development and use of a unique storytelling methodology focused on people, practice and policy, we continue to influence the sector through unique experiences and resources. As the Circle moves into another year of strategic orientation, aligned to the seasonal approach, we will continue to show up where invited, invite others to join this learning journey alongside us, and continue to amplify solutions led by Indigenous and Indigenous-led organizations. We will continue to enable and expand thinking and doing differently in the space between settler-created philanthropic organizations and Indigenous and Indigenous-led charitable and grassroots organizations. The last ten years have taught us that truly taking action on reconciliation requires asking ourselves the hard questions, naming power and privilege imbalances, owning up to the ways in which non-Indigenous Canadians have benefited (and continue to benefit) from colonization, working tirelessly to eradicate white supremacy, and even questioning the existence of settler-created philanthropy in the future we envisage. If you're excited by the prospect, and challenge, of envisaging and practicing new ways of being and doing, we invite you to join the Circle and our members on that learning journey.

Three key takeaways

1

Philanthropy isn't the solution or the point. The key point is honouring and building partnerships with Indigenous communities and organizations to make their ideas, programs and solutions a reality on their terms.

2

Building relationships takes time and trust, requires an openness to thinking and doing differently, and offers limitless opportunity and learning. Canada will be a better place to live if Indigenous ways of thinking, being, and knowing and caring are embraced, celebrated and adopted.

3

This work is a long journey. There have been tears and mistakes, and there will be more, but there will also be laughter and transformation. You've been invited on the journey. Don't be afraid to join us.

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