



Dogwood Reflects

Accountability to feed change

By the Dogwood Executive Team: Cheryl Cameron, Kai Nagata, Matt Takach and Laura Benson

Since 2016, Dogwood has been on a quest to become a more just, equitable, diverse and inclusive organization. Under Dogwood's new [2021-24 strategic framework](#), we are also increasingly focusing on decolonization at multiple levels of the organization's work.

As part of the ongoing learning and unlearning that is necessary for navigating this path, Dogwood's Executive team heeded the demands of Indigenous leaders, leaders of colour, our staff and allies to reflect on Dogwood's past and take responsibility for harms and mistakes at the organization. Most specifically, we heard this call to action from the authors and interviewees of [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in B.C.'s Environmental Movement](#) in 2020.

The tens of thousands of people who have been involved with Dogwood over the more than 20 years of its existence have achieved many great victories and successes. The organization has also made some progress towards equity, justice and inclusion. This paper does not in any way negate those achievements, but they are documented elsewhere and are very consciously not the focus here.

Ourselves, past Dogwood leaders, staff and board members have contributed to exclusion, harmful cultural practices and norms, transactional relationships with Indigenous people and groups, microaggressions and perpetuation of inequities. At points over the years we ignored or rationalized the organization's narrow demographic constituency, which shielded us from uncomfortable conversations about why our work wasn't serving a wider cross-section of people living in B.C. We understand these things differently now and feel it is important to articulate what we've learned in order to do better in the future.

This paper is not exhaustive—not even close—but provides four reflections from current Dogwood leaders as case studies that we hope will provide some accountability for past harms. We use accountability here in a very basic sense—an obligation and willingness to take responsibility for our actions and for the impacts of actions at the organization during our tenures. We are not seeking absolution, and this necessarily incomplete accounting is not the same as repair, let alone justice.

Our hope is that this small exercise in accountability can provide context for the aspirations for change embedded in [Dogwood's strategic framework](#) and detailed in annual plans and reports going



forward. The commitments we articulate in this paper are necessarily broad and meant to be specified in our actions, policies and day-to-day work beyond this brief paper.

Those of us who contributed to this paper speak only for ourselves. We cannot speak on behalf of people who don't work here anymore and most especially not for people or groups who experienced the harm. We will specifically avoid naming the individuals involved in these stories, other than ourselves or other leaders, with their permission.

Case Study: Relationships with Indigenous Leaders, Nations and Groups

by Laura Benson

In [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in B.C.'s Environmental Movement](#), authors Rajdeep Dhaliwal and Kate Hodgson pose several discussion questions for Dogwood to examine. One section asks

What is the impetus for Dogwood in forming relationships with Indigenous communities? Can you point to any instances where Dogwood has entered into solidarity relationships with a strategy already formed? Where Dogwood stepped away from an issue once their goals had been achieved? What were the consequences of these actions?

Dogwood staff have held relationships with Indigenous people from many nations since the organization's inception in 1999. Support for Indigenous rights and title has always nominally been part of the organization's core values and strategic vision. Dogwood has worked with and alongside Indigenous leaders, groups and nations in efforts to establish community forestry, save the Sacred Headwaters from coalbed methane development, stop oil tanker expansion on the B.C. coast, fight the Fraser Surrey Docks coal port, promote Indigenous renewable energy projects and update B.C. laws to respect Indigenous self-determination.

However, reflecting on these questions, we cannot think of an example where Dogwood entered into a relationship without a campaign strategy already in mind. While in more recent years staff have worked to develop more reciprocal and respectful relationships with Indigenous people and groups, many interactions have been transactional, conditional and sometimes tokenizing. In this way, Dogwood has caused and contributed to harm to Indigenous people and communities.

We offer a few examples as personal reflections.



Matt, who has the longest tenure of any current staff member and has always held a senior leadership positions remembers,

“Particularly in my early years at Dogwood, the organization had a track record of transactional relationships with First Nations. I think our work around Shell in the Sacred Headwaters was particularly problematic, and left a bad taste for some people in Northern B.C. even many years later.

Looking back, ‘title and rights’ was seen as a useful tactic to leverage if it fit with a specific campaign--in the same way Dogwood could choose to use financial pressure or field organizing to move our goals forward. I can remember hearing some extremely loud and offensive phone conversations between our staff and Indigenous leaders on the other end of the line. I’ve always been on the internal, operational side of things at the organization. But, I’ve also always been in a leadership position and my inaction and silence during those key moments further contributed to the harms the organization was involved in perpetuating.”

In another instance, current Board Chair Jessica Dempsey remembers,

“While I was a student at UBC in and around 2008 or 2009, I recall hearing from an Indigenous leader and ally that they felt Dogwood was using their ideas and analysis without attribution and taking credit for work they had led and invested so much time and effort into. At the time I was not working with Dogwood, but it stuck with me. Thinking back to when I joined the board in 2013, I wonder why I didn’t raise this, or ask questions directly to leadership. I think I assumed that was all in the past. It was easier for me to just stay quiet, a silence that also means complicity.”

I remember being part of several conversations with the Dogwood leadership team and board directors about the desire to recruit more Indigenous leaders to join the organization’s board. This would have been about 2015-16. I weighed in very little because the role of the board felt unclear to me at the time and I didn’t have relationships with Indigenous leaders or much knowledge of First Nations in B.C.

Looking back now, however, I recognize these discussions as quite tokenizing. As I see it, the organization wanted a symbol of its commitment to Indigenous rights and a single person who could somehow represent the views and wisdom of First Nations in B.C. I do not remember any discussion of the unfair burden this role might place on an Indigenous person, nor the fact that Dogwood would be asking them to do unpaid labour. I did not raise any of these issues as a participant in the discussions and I share the responsibility for this harmful, tokenizing approach.



Case Study: “Stand Up to China” petition

by Kai Nagata

In January 2016 the Globe and Mail reported on comments by Han Jun, Vice Minister of Financial and Economic Affairs for the People’s Republic of China, on the prospect of a free trade agreement with Canada. According to journalist Robert Fife, Han said a trade deal “will require Canadian concessions on investment restrictions [in the oil sands] and a commitment to build an energy pipeline to the coast.”

With the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline stopped by the courts, the newly-elected Liberal government under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was facing a decision on the Trans Mountain expansion project. Dogwood maintains that pipeline projects require consent from Indigenous nations, and support from the people who bear the risks. We were alarmed to see Trans Mountain used as an apparent bargaining chip in an international trade deal.

With Trudeau about to fly to Beijing to kick off trade talks, we launched a petition urging him to “Stand Up to China” and reject the precondition of a West Coast pipeline floated by Vice Minister Han. More than 30,000 people signed the petition, while the accompanying video racked up 300,000 views on social media and featured in some online news articles.

We also faced immediate criticism from friends, allies and supporters who said the campaign tapped into xenophobia and nationalism, and risked worsening racial animus toward Chinese diaspora communities. I am painfully aware of the province’s long history of violent anti-Asian racism. As the organization’s only staffer of Asian descent at the time, I tried to walk a narrow line defending the petition as a political tactic aimed at powerful governments in Ottawa and Beijing.

But I knew then as I do now that racists are not looking for nuance – they’re looking for validation of their fears and hatred. My own grandmother (who was born in Canada to parents from Japan) was screamed at by a stranger to “go back to China” at a bus stop in Burnaby. Although there were some Chinese Canadians who welcomed us taking a poke at the government in Beijing, the majority of petition signers seemed to be angry white people and some, whom I received phone calls from at the office, were outright bigots.

It is telling that most of them subsequently unsubscribed from our email list, where we talk to supporters about climate issues, Indigenous rights and democratic reform. Five years later, only 157 people who discovered Dogwood through the Stand Up to China petition have shown any signs of engagement in the last six months – the lowest percentage from any online action we launched that year.



Trudeau approved the Trans Mountain pipeline and oil tanker expansion in November 2016, bought it from Kinder Morgan in 2018 and is now trying to build it with our tax dollars. Ottawa abandoned trade talks with Beijing in 2020. But violent anti-Asian racism in Vancouver and around North America has only worsened. Our petition did nothing to stop that, and contributed to a drumbeat of anti-Chinese sentiment that has real-world consequences for everyday people in B.C.

The potential for harm outweighed any positive political impact but I, along with other leaders at Dogwood at the time, were loath to put the brakes on a viral campaign. We should have shelved the petition after receiving feedback from our community. Dogwood's work remains unapologetically political, but going forward we are committed to ensuring it does not perpetuate – or tap into – xenophobia and racism.

Case Study: Staff Culture and Diversity

by Laura Benson

Over the years, lots of people with diverse identities, backgrounds and talents have worked at Dogwood. At the same time, when it comes to racial identity, Dogwood's staff has always been predominantly white.

In preparing for this paper, Matt recalled that over the years Black, Indigenous and people of colour have tended to leave the organization after relatively short tenures. In 2017, during the early days of Dogwood's first Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) team, we moved quickly to implement changes to hiring in the hopes of attracting a more diverse range of people to work at Dogwood.

It worked. With steps in place to remove bias from hiring processes, more colleagues of colour soon joined our team. But the culture of the organization was still not built in a way to prevent them from being tokenized, and suffering disproportionate burdens and harms during a period of sweeping organizational change.

In those early days of the JEDI team, staff started some brainstorming work around defining Dogwood's internal culture. This was soon set aside as we focused on developing Dogwood's [statement on justice, equity, diversity and inclusion](#) and pursuing further training for our staff.

In 2019, many of us, myself included, were just starting to go beyond understanding inherent bias and learn about characteristics of white dominant culture with the help of expert facilitators. We did this in all-staff sessions where our colleagues of colour had to sit through the rest of us "waking up" to and learning language for things they experienced every day at work and elsewhere. Looking back now I can see how exhausting and harmful this must have been.



One particular example I remember was ahead of Dogwood's 2019 Staff-Board retreat, after I had just stepped into my current HR and Administration role and onto Dogwood's JEDI team. A colleague of colour on the team asked if there would be two facilitators at the retreat to allow for caucusing--breaking into discussion groups based on racial or ethnic identity, e.g a BIPOC caucus and a white caucus. At the time, I only vaguely understood the concept of caucusing and immediately shut down the idea because we didn't have enough funds in the retreat budget for two facilitators.

We did a lot of great work together at that retreat. But during discussions about turning Dogwood's JEDI commitments into action I saw the harmful impacts some comments had on my colleagues of colour. That could have been avoided and why should there be a price on avoiding harm?

The budget excuse in this example is emblematic of the kinds of structural barriers embedded in the "non-profit industrial complex" that Dhaliwal and Hodgson explore in [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in B.C.'s Environmental Movement](#). The scarcity mindset creates barriers to change and to creative problem-solving in the face of accepted traditions and tropes of non-profit management. Meanwhile, the people with the least amount of power continue to bear the brunt.

We haven't undertaken a serious analysis of turnover at Dogwood over the years and certainly cannot speak for those who have left the organization. But Matt's anecdotal observation that tenure seems shorter and turnover higher for Black, Indigenous and people of colour on staff is quite likely tied to the unexamined culture that others experienced differently than Matt and I have, for example.

This trend is just one of the compounding factors that continually privilege white staff and leave staff of colour more vulnerable. This was most painfully clear when, in early 2020 Dogwood lost a significant amount of funding and had to cut staff positions. Our leadership team considered many factors in the excruciating decision of who would lose their jobs, But, inevitably, staff who had been with the organization longer and therefore had more experience in the core operations of the organization had the advantage, and were more likely to be white, while most people of colour had less seniority and were in more junior positions.

In the end, of the four staff members who lost their jobs, two were people of colour. A third colleague, who was in the already precarious position of a parental leave contract, ended their contract early. When the dust had settled on this painful and tumultuous time, Dogwood was briefly left with a single person of colour on staff.

I have contributed to the harms that resulted from all of these mistakes, and for that I am sorry. Going forward, I and the rest of Dogwood's Executive Team are committed to making the organization a place where people of diverse identities want to work and feel safe working. Through the process of collective bargaining, Dogwood now has new principles and practices for job classifications, seniority, hiring and layoffs that we hope will mitigate the vulnerability of BIPOC staff. We are committed to resourcing the ongoing staff development, mentorship, expertise and support needed to change our



workplace culture. And we will continue to be guided by the expert insights and recommendations compiled in Dhaliwal & Hodgson's report in the months and years to come.

Case Study: Organizing and Outreach

by Cheryl Cameron

As a new Dogwood volunteer in 2013 I spent a lot of time canvassing. The need to bring our people together in common cause – which then was to stop the Northern Gateway Project – made perfect sense to me and I threw myself into the work. As a new canvasser, I quickly learned the usual responses to commonly asked questions about the pipeline, as well as regarding Dogwood's methods and practices as an organization.

As we built teams of volunteers across the Lower Mainland, we did organizing outreach work in the neighbourhoods of those volunteers, which were largely white, more affluent, and English-speaking. If petition-signers happened to be from Richmond or Surrey, we had to let them know that “no, we don't have teams in your community.” It was a self-perpetuating situation. One argument made by Dogwood leaders at the time was that a small organization could not afford to translate communications (website, emails, information on our campaigns, etc.) into languages other than English.

Seemed logical enough! But the facts don't support this thinking. Three in 10 British Columbians have a mother tongue other than English. But the vast majority of ESL households in the Lower Mainland, and across B.C. include English speakers. After all, these are people and families who function in an English speaking city, province, and country. So how did we come up with this perceived language barrier?

My colleague Matt who had been with Dogwood for years previous to when I joined as a volunteer feels he may have contributed to this misunderstanding of our demographic reality. Based on his experiences in Ottawa and the relationship between English and French Canada, Matt said he supposed the situation would be similar in B.C. Quebec's situation is unique, as organizations working in that province are expected to have a fully bilingual team with resources and materials to meet the needs of both language speakers. His experience was that if this was not possible, there was no point conducting outreach and organizing in French-speaking neighborhoods, or in much of Quebec for that matter.

Matt's assumption was that this same approach would be required in the Lower Mainland to reach diverse populations. This assumption, other assumptions leaders held at the time, affected where Dogwood organized, therefore contributing to the predominant whiteness of many volunteer teams. In the Burnaby South by-election in 2019 Dogwood volunteers distributed flyers in English and



Chinese., We learned that we could have been doing outreach anywhere using a combination of English and translated materials, with interactions at the door and during community events acting as an olive branch to start building bridges and new relationships.

Having accepted the idea that language barriers presented an obstacle to organizing in more diverse communities, our focus continued to be in the more white and primarily english-speaking communities and electoral ridings. As a result the conversations volunteers were having were limited to these constituencies, and the views we took back to Dogwood, contributing to our strategic direction, were from a pretty homogenous demographic.

As detailed in [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in B.C.'s Environmental Movement](#), the lack of diversity in Dogwood's base is problematic and self perpetuating. The false premise of perceived language barriers has contributed to this lack of diversity, as affluent mostly white volunteers did outreach almost exclusively with their peers in familiar settings. With this approach, we will clearly not achieve our goal of building a movement that "reflects the diversity of British Columbia". The Executive Team is accountable for this tunnel vision with respect to the communities and regions we have focused on reaching.

Organizing practices at Dogwood clearly need to shift to facilitate engagement with racialized and marginalized communities. Canvassing at farmers' markets alone is not going to get us there. Staff organizers need to plan with the specific objective of serving constituencies who have less power and less of a voice in our democracy. Over time the richness of conversations with a broader, more representative set of British Columbians will inform new strategy and tactics for the organizing department, and for Dogwood as a whole.