



## REFLECTING ON COMMUNITY NEEDS, OPPORTUNITIES AND CONTEXT

### *Supplementary Materials for Compassionate Reconciliation Commission Advisory Teams*

July 20, 2021

Dear CRC Advisory Team Members,

As we move closer to identifying CRC representatives, convening the CRC, and beginning our work together, we want to reach out and provide you with some additional information and context to reflect upon as we prepare for this next stage.

As you know, the role of the CRC is to set goals, and design and coordinate strategies to advance the Compassionate Reconciliation Project. Informed and guided by the input of the Advisory Teams (who are themselves informed and guided by the voices of their constituent groups), the goal of the CRC structure is to ensure that voice is given to all aspects of the community to the degree possible.

The focus of the CRC is to address the needs for healing and recovery for both Reporters of Sexual Harm and Second Generation members, while attending to divisions within the community that have resulted from the surfacing of these reports. To this end, we want to provide you with some of the observations from our Needs and Readiness Assessment (shared with the SSSC Board in Spring 2021), to assist you in reflecting on the tasks that lay before the CRC. These assessed areas of strength, opportunity and need point to key issues that the CRC may need to address, in consultation with the Advisory Teams. We have been writing about issues related to the CRP/CRC in our reflections [here](#).

Below are some of Just Outcomes' observations and assessments based on our current engagement with your communities. This assessment is based on the understandings we have gained through the contacts provided to us through the Interim Compassionate Reconciliation Commission (ICRC) and organizational leadership, our own discretionary outreach, notes from large-group facilitated conversations, and responses to an initial digital survey. All information was interpreted through our experience, research and analysis. The assessment did not attempt to survey a statistically representative research sample within the community. As with all of our communications, the information in this report is based on Just Outcomes' observations only, and does not necessarily represent anyone else's perspective.

We are honored to be on this journey with you and are confident that we will collectively continue to uncover additional strengths, obstacles, and needs that are present within the community. Our hope is that providing you with our initial observations and assessments will help provide shared understanding and common knowledge to launch us into this process together, and to better understand the issues that the CRC will be tackling.

We offer this assessment humbly, with a knowledge that many of the themes discussed here have personal significance for readers and that we certainly have not captured all perspectives adequately. Nevertheless as we navigate this liminal time (between the initiation of the Advisory Teams and the formation of the CRC), we are committed to ensuring to the best of our ability that you have the information, resources, and supports you need to engage in, reflect upon, and prepare for the road ahead.

With great respect and care,

Catherine Barga, Matthew Hartman, Cara Walsh and Aaron Lyons  
Just Outcomes

# ASSESSING COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND NEEDS

## Strengths

Before we address the obstacles and needs that lay before the CRC, we want to highlight the core strengths that were identified as conducive and important resources for compassionate reconciliation. Some of these strengths that we have observed in your communities are:

### Spiritual Training and Orientation

Based on spiritual values and aspirations, many community members have spent years cultivating personal characteristics that can contribute to the success of this work. In our observations with your communities, these have included:

- Emotional grounding/neutrality
- Self-discipline
- An orientation toward growth and conscious evolution
- A willingness and eagerness to serve the greater good
- Attitudes of faith/surrender toward circumstances that are outside of personal control
- Persistence to address and overcome personal tragic or traumatic experiences
- The ability to dwell in paradox and uncertainty

### Value on Relationships

Many community members spoke about the value and importance of the relationships related to the community, including those of differing perspectives, beliefs and opinions. Even within fractured relationships, it is apparent that there is often a latent attitude of care and a desire for togetherness.

### Readiness for Structured Dialogue

Through presentations and large-group facilitated dialogue sessions, our consistent observation was that community members generally have an aptitude and willingness for interest-based dialogue when provided helpful structures. Members and former members alike have seemed generally to welcome the structure of Circles, for example, and to respond promptly to invitations by facilitators to engage in non-adversarial ways on difficult topics.

### Interpersonal Skills

Strong existing skillsets related to reconciliation, including facilitation, teaching/training, healing arts/modalities, therapeutic modalities, and other relational and community-building skills, were observed.

## Obstacles and Challenges

Several challenges to Compassionate Reconciliation were identified, related to current conflicts along with apparent pre-existing patterns within community relationships and institutions. These obstacles and challenges include:

## Polarization

Polarization is a term referring to highly escalated conflict, characterized by firmly entrenched positions, publicly expressed anger between factions, and little or no direct communication or dialogue. In conflict analysis, polarization is frequently observed as a pre-cursor to permanent divisions within relationships and/or changes in organizational and social structures. Significant polarization within the community, particularly concerning the reports of harm about Yogi Bhajan's conduct, were observed.

## Pervading Historical Issues

Many community members have observed that the pressing issues of the current moment have exposed pre-existing fault lines, grievances and tensions within the community. Examples include concerns over financial and business practices, religious vs secular identities/values/goals, issues of control of policy and economic decision-making, perceptions of unexamined privilege and marginalization (particularly of racialized and LGBTQ+ community members), issues of organizational transparency (and/or perceived secrecy), complex dynamics between Western and Punjabi Sikh communities, relational fallout from past litigation, and other issues. The tendency of community members to experience the current crisis as embedded within past wrongs and unjust relationships creates unique challenges for the work ahead.

## Underdeveloped Decision-Making Protocols

Ambiguity about decision-making protocols in meetings within community leadership structures were observed. This has manifested as:

- uncertainty about who needs to be at the table to make specific decisions;
- uncertainty about which decisions fall within the purview of the group;
- hearing complaints among group members that decisions take a long time to make, proposals not moving beyond the “discussion stage”, and/or decisions are commonly revisited after being initially finalized;
- uncertainty about navigating power imbalances: “am I giving advice or being a decision-maker?”; and,
- inexperience with consensus decision-making.

## Destructive Communication Patterns

Several communication patterns present as barriers to the work of Compassionate Reconciliation. Some of these have been observed directly, while others have been reported second hand.

- Shaming of Those With Unwelcome Views: Many community members expressed concerns for themselves or others about reprisal and assaults on their reputation. Some women reporting harm in relation to Yogi Bhajan or those expressing support for those women experienced this acutely. Some have communicated views about reporters of harm in individual and group settings that exemplify this pattern of shaming.
- Avoidance/Indirect Communication: Within many community settings, it was reported that difficult topics are not discussed directly. Instead, views are frequently expressed indirectly (through gossip, social media etc).

- Unskilled Provocation: Paradoxically to the point above, the view that being aggressively direct and expressing one's opinion forcefully even if it is humiliating or hurtful to another person is considered by some to be a part of the spiritual teachings. Community members have expressed a concern to us that provocations are often used among members in unskilled ways.

### Mistrust

There appears to be a pronounced pattern of mistrust within the community at the current time. In our observation this included (for example) mistrust among various members for:

- those in opposing factions;
- organizational leadership generally;
- the SSSC; and,
- Just Outcomes, as contractors of the SSSC.

Among other effects, the prevalence of mistrust creates uncertainty as to what extent those most impacted by the harms surfacing in the community will choose to engage with the Compassionate Reconciliation Project. The theme of trust and mistrust was the subject of our April 2 communication to the community, which can be found [here](#).

### Attitudes Toward Victimization

Misunderstandings about victimization are common in most of society and are not limited to this community. However, we perceive within the community a relatively strong prevalence of attitudes toward victimization which run counter to common needs associated with recovery from harm or trauma. These included for example:

- judgement toward people who feel victimized or experienced trauma (“Don’t be a victim”);
- projections of personal/spiritual attitudes onto victims (“Hardship makes you stronger”);
- lay-diagnoses of trauma transference (“I believe they were harmed but not by the person they say did it”);
- minimization (“It wasn’t that bad”);
- accusations of fabricating victimization (“It is all lies”);
- judgements and misconceptions about the relationship between time and healing (“It was 20 years ago, why don’t they get over it?”); and,
- attacking the character of those who feel victimized (“If it happened she deserved it”).

### Cultural Differences

Beliefs and perceptions about harm, healing, justice and transformation are inherently cultural. Within the global SD/KY/3HO community, there are many cultural differences at play which inform perceptions about how the current crisis should be addressed. This creates a situation in which the Compassionate Reconciliation Project must foster a negotiation of worldviews at several levels.

### External Forces and Opportunities

In addition to the intra-community observations outlined above, we will also briefly note what we believe are influential pressures on the current work, coming from society at large. Firstly, it is important to recognize that there are many spiritual and faith communities who are going through, or have gone through, a crisis of navigating reports of sexual harm concerning spiritual leadership. There is currently little precedent for the application of restorative and non-adversarial approaches to these circumstances. We believe there is an opportunity for this community to demonstrate leadership that

achieves justice for those harmed while strengthening, rather than weakening, the community and avoiding lengthy adversarial contests. This does not mean that everyone agrees, but that an internal culture is nurtured that supports those harmed and makes space for a variety of lived experiences and opinions. In short, we believe the community has an opportunity to create an important precedent for other communities in similar circumstances.

With that said, this work is taking place within a wider social climate placing (sometimes conflicting) pressures on the current process, including:

- ongoing patriarchal attitudes/privileging of male identities and experiences;
- frequent shaming and silencing of women who speak up about sexual misconduct;
- the stigmatization, ‘cancelling,’ and increased public litigation of men responsible for sexual harm; and,
- social normalizing of “alternative facts” circulating within silos of information, identity and ideology; a willingness to discount the narratives of others.

## Identified Needs

The current focus of the CRC is to support the community to address the needs of Reporters of Harm in relation to Yogi Bhajan and Second Gen members, while attending to emergent divisions within the community. The following assessment of needs is organized by these categories. This description attempts to summarize thematically what was learned about perceived needs among stakeholder groups.

It is important to note here that the recognition of needs is not a zero-sum game—that is, identifying these needs is a first step toward supporting all community members in collective responsibility taking, self reflection, grieving losses, and moving toward a preferred future. By focussing on the needs within specific areas of concern, the Compassionate Reconciliation Project intends not to marginalize other collective needs, but to understand through the lens of these acute circumstances how the community may wish to progress toward just relationships for all members.

## Reporters of Harm

Common themes that emerged, either directly or through other means such as written statements, included:

- a desire for acknowledgment of their value and contributions within the community;
- for some, a desire for reconnection with relationships within the community;
- to feel that they could be released from having to hold secrets without facing reprisals/shaming;
- for their financial security to not be jeopardized, and/or for their financial needs to be met if their financial insecurity is a perceived result of their involvement with the organization;
- to have support for trauma recovery and healing;
- to have a sincere apology from community leadership and/or from individuals who had wronged them through shunning or exclusion from the community because of speaking out;
- to see the community meaningfully address corruption and sexual harm within its institutions; and,
- symbolic and substantive gestures indicating that addressing harm is more important than “the brand” and profit.

## Second Generation

The Second Generation is comprised of the children of those that started this community (First Gen) around the late 1960s and 1970s. Their ages now are from their early twenties to their early fifties. Many of them, but not all, attended boarding school in India and most of them attended 3HO programs of some kind (such as Youth Camps). At the Khalsa Council meeting in April 2020, this cohort began to publicly share stories of the pain, and in some cases abuse, that they have been carrying for many years or even decades but had not been expressed. This expression led to Listening Tours to further hear from Second Gen from approximately July to September of 2020. For many in the community, this was the first time that these stories had been expressed, and it activated deep grief and sorrow for many in the First Generation and other community members.

Over the course of the last year, it seems that the expression of pain has also (for many) shifted toward feelings of anger and a desire to see action toward change. Our observations of and interactions with Second Gen are based on our individual and small group conversations with a (non-representative) sample of Second Gen members, along with media released by this cohort (podcasts, websites) and the meeting on March 6, 2021 for all interested Second Gen members facilitated by Just Outcomes.

Recurring themes related to needs expressed by Second Gen include:

- acknowledgement of their experiences by leadership and First Gen;
- support for trauma healing through counselling and group therapy (we are aware the current counselling program is underway);
- greater transparency by the organizations;
- honesty about perceived past corruption including business practices;
- meaningful involvement in decision-making and leadership;
- the need to address the root causes of harms that have occurred and may continue to occur in the India school program (Miri Piri Academy and earlier schools) and prevent any further harm;
- reparations toward those who were most grievously harmed; and,
- opportunities to better understand the history of the organization and how the culture has shaped the current reality.

## Divisions within the Community

As you are likely aware, a major focal point of polarization within the current context is organizational responses to the surfacing of reports and narratives of harm experienced within this community. Experiences of personal and/or institutional betrayal are commonplace among individuals within each faction. The obvious challenge that this presents to Compassionate Reconciliation is that it is difficult to facilitate the offering of concessions, narrative reconciliation, or acts of relational repair that would normally be required to heal wounds of this depth, without undermining other vitally important objectives of the work. Any overt and/or public effort to address the needs for healing and recovery of those directly impacted by harms within the community carries with it the risk of further alienating those who believe these harms to be fabricated, overblown, self-induced or irrelevant. Similarly, overtures toward the

interests of those who have expressed doubt and concern about the handling of reports of harm carry a risk of alienating and/or revictimizing reporters of harm and their advocates.

### **Narrative Reconciliation**

In our assessment, the current polarization is not simply based on differing understandings of ‘what happened.’ Instead, it appears to be rooted in concepts of loyalty, values, personal identity, and vision for the community. Reconciliation within this polarity will thus likely depend not only on the availability of a generally shared (or less disparate) narrative about the past but (for some) may also require a willingness and ability of the parties to make difficult identity choices which support a path of reconciliation. Some individuals express a willingness to coexist in community with those who hold opposing beliefs concerning the reports of harm. Others express no willingness to entertain relationships with people whose narratives contradict their own. Nevertheless, a common interest expressed to us by community members of various persuasions was that of gaining greater narrative consistency and clarity about the past. In summary we assess that there are broadly two inter-related needs emerging with regard to addressing community divisions:

1. Bringing into the collective domain stories and ‘truths’ of the past
2. Working together to create shared meaning out of these experiences

On a narrative level, a collective healing process must work to assist parties not in establishing a single uniform ‘Truth’ but rather in narrowing the range of acceptable ‘truths.’ In our assessment any collective narrative that wholly dismisses the validity of the reports of harm, will fail to resonate ethically with a large number of community members, public onlookers, and of course the reporters themselves. Acknowledgment and recognition of harms experienced is a vital component of reconciliation. This acknowledgement is quite distinct from specific meaning attached to that acknowledgment, for example concerning the identity of the community, the validity of the teachings, or other related issues that will need to be negotiated by the community through this process.

We recognize that some narratives of acknowledgment will be unacceptable to some community members. Some spoke to us about the profound sense of shock, grief, and betrayal they experienced by the way in which the reports of harm were documented and publicized. We heard perceptions that there was a lack of respect granted to Yogi Bhanjan as the person responsible for establishing the community. A few people expressed that they would never believe a report of harm concerning Yogi Bhanjan, no matter the circumstances. Some may ultimately choose not to be a part of a community adopting any such narrative.

### **Cultural and Geographic Influences**

An added layer to the narrative complexity of community divisions is the influence of culture within the global community. Culture has a profound influence on perceptions of honor, shame and reputation; the role of teachers and elders; concepts of what does and does not constitute ‘misconduct,’ and the acceptability and desirability of public communications about these issues. Community members in some locations (notably China) have also expressed political and personal safety concerns about any action that would increase publicity about Yogi Bhanjan’s conduct.



In addition, community members and leaders outside of North America appear generally less focussed on meaning-making concerning Yogi Bhanan. An example from the digital survey:

*Outside of the US many of us we don't feel the need to keep dwelling on this process, we are not suffering or in need of healing. It's just that organizations keep extending the pain more than needed.*

Members outside of North America focussed their conversations with us more frequently on organizational dynamics concerning issues of autonomy, decision-making, financial arrangements etc.

Thank you to all Advisory Team members for taking the time to read these observations. We hope this provides helpful considerations for the work ahead, and we look forward to our continued collaboration.

# APPENDIX

## Conflict Escalation Stages

