

TRUST-BASED PHILANTHROPY WON'T WORK IF IT'S "BUILT ON A ROTTEN FOUNDATION"

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*A conversation with Kris Archie, CEO of the Circle on
Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*



WHY IT MATTERS

The number of cases of COVID-19 in Indigenous communities is rising, and the impacts – exacerbating already crisis-level rates of mental illness among Indigenous youth, for instance – have been devastating since the beginning. If the philanthropic sector wants to help, it needs to use this moment to completely transform how it operates.



The pandemic has changed philanthropy — maybe forever.

In response to the prolonged crisis, many foundations and grantmakers have been operating based on *trust*. They've lifted restrictions on existing funding and created new funding opportunities meant to keep organizations afloat and power emergency response. Non-profits and charities have welcomed the change, but it's unclear how long it'll last.

And Kris Archie, CEO of the Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, says a deeper transformation in the sector's leadership is needed. The Circle works with Indigenous-led organizations, foundations, and grantmakers to facilitate partnerships that truly empower and prioritize Indigenous-led solutions. Archie says there's not nearly enough of this work happening in the sector, especially at a time when Indigenous communities are being devastated by the pandemic and economic crisis.

Future of Good sat down with Archie for a conversation about where the philanthropic and funding world should go from here.

The following conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Future of Good: What is the Circle focused on right now?

Kris Archie: Fall, for us, is a time for harvest. This is about research and knowledge mobilization. It's about doing the sense-making of all of the learning we've had over the year and making it visible. In the Fall, we have a gathering called Foundations Partnering for Reconciliation, a peer learning program for folks in settler-created philanthropic space to do some specific learning related to the philanthropic declaration for action. But we're recognizing, more and more, that the language of reconciliation doesn't actually fit for creating an inviting atmosphere for the work that we do alongside Indigenous partners. **Going forward, this program will be rebranded to Partners in Reciprocity,**

which will set up a different relationship for accountability and an opportunity for folks to demonstrate, by their ongoing participation, their commitment to being in a different relationship with Indigenous organizations.

Future of Good: Can you tell us more about that concept of reciprocity and how it differs from reconciliation?

Kris Archie: The language of reconciliation has been co-opted by the government, by settler-created philanthropy, and by folks who benefit from skipping over addressing the legacy and harm of Indian residential schools and settler colonialism as a whole. So the language of reciprocity, I think, is a truer representation of where settler-created philanthropy could actually move to, which is recognizing that in fact, their work is not a one way street. That it's not actually a simple transaction. That there is an opportunity for transformation. And we think it can happen in the practice of reciprocity, which says, *not only do I give, but I benefit*. It also creates the stronger foundation for an understanding of how **this work doesn't happen one time and then you're done – this is something that happens over a period of time**. There are a myriad of teachings related to reciprocity in Indigenous communities, coast to coast to coast.

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Future of Good: There's a lot of talk about now being a time when people are willing to reimagine systems we've accepted as the norm. Do you think the pandemic is facilitating this kind of reimagining in philanthropy?

Kris Archie: Well, the first thing I would say is that BIPOC communities have been in the labour of reimagining for decades. We at the Circle have been really specific about dreaming into the future. That has been part of our language for the last several years, because we fully recognize that the realities our communities are living in are fraught with violence, fraught with systemic oppression, and fraught with the danger of living in a world that doesn't see us in our humanity. Do I think that the pandemic has helped settlers think about and acknowledge the reimagining that is necessary? Not yet. I would say that predominantly the reimagining that I see here is pretty status quo. It is a reimagining that continues to centre White voices and status quo ideas relating to White supremacy and how it shows up in organizations.

The organizations who are moving the fastest are the ones who have the largest budgets, the Whitest staff, and the ability to mobilize quickly because of their relationship to government or their relationship to other entities – I see that as hugely problematic. When we continue to move at a speed that prioritizes urgency over relationship, we will continue to maintain the status quo, and people will die. This work of reimagining the future, for me, is not about making sure that my organization or institution is best set up to receive a bunch of money from the government. It's about: what are the things that we can do that make sure that less of the humans that I care about die? How do I

make sure that the folks who are thinking about reimagining this future are doing it in actual relationship with BIPOC individuals?

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I don't see a whole lot of that happening, to be frank. It is not the people who are going to use the same tools that got us to this place who are going to get us out. I'm worried that for all the conversations about recovery, if they're led by those voices, it will continue to perpetuate harm. But I have absolute hope in the future that BIPOC leaders, as we have always been able to do, we get out of bed and we do the work and we care for our families, we care for our communities. We'll keep doing the work we've always done. And the one benefit to this particular moment in time is there are possibly enough White people with the wisdom and the ability to see what's happening, to get out of the way, to make space for our leadership and to amplify the voices and the labour of BIPOC communities, especially during this time when our people are dying.

Future of Good: How can the world of settler-created philanthropy get there? How can it begin to reverse the power dynamic and imbalance between funders and fundees?

Kris Archie: If you want to do something transformational, it doesn't necessarily need to involve establishing something brand new. If you want to work quickly, then work within where you live, work and play. **It is super easy to figure out who the Indigenous-led or the BIPOC-led organizations are that exist where you are, to write a cheque — and walk away. It is actually that simple.** And anyone who says it's more complex than that is lying under a veil of the belief that they need more accountability, or whatever else. No, if you want to help save lives, then you write a cheque and get out of the way. One of the things that's become really evident through this moment is that the organizations who have relationships with BIPOC-led and Indigenous-led organizations, they knew immediately who to give to. They knew what was needed and they were in enough relationship to make it happen quickly. There is a whole host of organizations who have openly stated that they work with Indigenous-led or BIPOC-led organizations who scrambled to find places to put money, because they didn't have the relationships. They didn't have the kind of relationships that meant they could call the executive director of the local Friendship Centre and ask what was needed and send the cheque. And those that did, they did. And they didn't splash it all over the place when they did — they just did it. It is not enough to just create an Indigenous advisory and ask them to work with the exact same grantmaking structures in the exact same decision making matrix to put out the same kinds of status quo decisions on grants that any other advisors who could have done.

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There are organizations that we get to work with, like the Catherine Donnelly Foundation and their Healing Through the Land initiative. We're on a multi-year journey with them to establish a completely unique way of grant-giving. It means that even in the moment of COVID, when it could have been really easy to freak out and throw money out the door, there are communities of Indigenous folks who have said, *We need to stick with the work that we're doing, because when all of this is over, when this moment in time is over, the work that we've been focused on, which is supporting land-based healing work, still needs to be funded and it still needs to be done well.* In the urgency, when stress and perfectionism tend to really ramp up for some folks, they said, *We're going to stay calm. We're going to maintain our pace. And we're going to continue to build relationships.*

Future of Good: For organizations that weren't already on this path, where should they begin? And how should they continue this work post-pandemic?

If you really want to support a new future, you need to be doing your own self-reflective labour, and this moment of pandemic and things being a little slower is a pretty great time to be doing that introspective work. That means following BIPOC leadership, and it's not just any BIPOC leadership. It's not just the first to the party who shows up and says, *I can work with you. I'll give you all the answers. I'll write all the checklists and make you feel comfortable and safe and happy about the work you're doing.* It's about standing behind and beside the leaders who make you shake a bit. It's about standing with the folks who make your fragility visible.

Sharing power is also really big – giving money locally, giving it quickly, without strings attached. I think what the philanthropic sector is recognizing about itself right now is, *Oh, wow, look at all the rules we can actually break.* When they see their own lives on the line, how quickly they can move money now. Will that be maintained post-COVID? I'm not sure. I know there's a ton of work happening at the federal government level with CRA a variety of advisories to understand the way that settler-created philanthropic organizations are giving money and they're doing it in creative ways. I hope that the government can actually create the laws and the policies that enable more of that giving.

However, **I really think that the settler philanthropic sector may actually experience a complete backlash.** Right now there's this notion of abundance, of quick action. But in two years time, when people are taking a look at what their endowments are and where interest rates have gotten their asset base, there's going to be a very different kind of response and reaction – in a moment when, I imagine, two years from now, we're going to need more generosity, more abundance, not less. So am I worried that this kind of wide open, rule breaking, quick acting, rapid response – that you've just swung the pendulum too far to the other side. It's going to swing back with rigor, and that's concerning, because again, it is Indigenous-led organizations and BIPOC and queer-led organizations who will feel that backlash.

Future of Good: Is sticking with trust-based philanthropy the answer to this? Is it the end goal, or is there something more transformative to work toward?

Kris Archie: I love the work that's been happening around the conception and the practices and the policies required to make trust-based philanthropy work. I think if that's the place that people want to move to, awesome. But here are the other things that prohibit that from actually flying: If you want to move into trust-based philanthropy, but you continue to have a mostly White board and a White leadership team and an organization that can't retain BIPOC staff, not because they're not capable or interested in working at this level or with these organizations, but because your organizational culture is harmful to their bodies and their brains, then you're never actually going to have the capacities that are required to pull off trust-based philanthropy. If you think just taking the trust-based philanthropic model and transplanting it makes it all good, without an analysis for how your internal workings at your organization are inherently bound by White supremacy, it doesn't matter what kind of pretty tool or new approach to grantmaking you put on top. **It's still built on a rotten foundation.**

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We believe fully that Indigenous communities have the solutions for what they experience in the world. And they have solutions that not only will support the wellbeing and the thriving of their communities, but they have the solutions that will support the wellbeing and the thriving of humanity and of this planet. And so the longer that people take to invest in those solutions, the worse things are going to get. White-led organizations, environmental organizations, folks who think they know the answer and just need the Indigenous people to get on board with their answers — they need to be quiet and get out of the way. They need to recognize that their moment has come and gone. They need to amplify and work with Indigenous communities and their solutions for change. The work that we want to see supported is about supporting Indigenous sovereignty. And so if a community says, *We want to do A, B and C*, we'd love to see members of the Circle say, *We're going to fund it. We don't need to understand it. We don't need to justify it. We don't need to do a song and dance about how it's aligned to our values.* If you're an organization who values Indigenous solutions, then you find a way to make it work. It's that simple.

Here's the other thing: reparations are required. The wealth of Canadian and US-based settler philanthropy was created on the land and on the backs of Indigenous peoples, so reparations should be paid, and it is absolutely possible to do it. **Any organization can look back into their history books and figure out who made the first gifts to their endowment. They can figure out how those people made their money, and they can pay reparations to the people whose land that money was extracted from.** If you're going to be around in perpetuity and your original wealth came from merchanting or logging, then you go back to those communities and say, *In perpetuity, we're giving you a percentage of our annual grant making dollars, every single year, to the end of time.* That's a very easy

thing to just do. No, one's done it yet. We keep asking people, inviting people, *You want to do something bold? Do this.* No one's done it yet.

It's also really important to actually consider what redistribution of wealth looks like. The philanthropic sector, more and more, has been behaving like they are investments and have a side hustle in grantmaking, and it should be the other way around. Grantmaking and getting rid of the money they have should be the primary act, but instead they continue to amass wealth. Redistribution of wealth requires a complete rethinking of the settler-created philanthropic sector. I think there are individual families and donors out in the world who are doing this – they're doing things like giving their wealth anonymously. They are not putting their money in donor-advised funds. They're doing everything they can to take money from their bank accounts and put it into the hands of organizations, no receipts required. And that's the kind of behaviour that will shake up the sector.



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