

A Statement from the Council of Bishops as We Embark on a Journey Toward Healing Relationships with Indigenous Peoples

Preamble

Today, as the Council of Bishops on behalf of The United Methodist Church, we stop to listen to our own hearts and our own voices. History is not only a body of information stored in archives for reference and study waiting to be mined by scholars and researchers. It is a living, breathing phenomenon that resides in us and among us framing our understanding of ourselves and each other. The history we recall in this moment continues to weigh upon all of us. Together we grieve the history which still weighs upon indigenous people around the world and Native Americans in the United States.

This is not a romance of discovery and the struggle of pioneer life, settlement and tragedy. This is about the violent history of peoples whose families, communities and sovereign nations were destroyed by aggressive powers lusting for their lands, riches and seeking domination at the expense of their own existence. This is a story about the church's role in cooperating with and entering into collusive relationships with political forces resulting in the killing of Native women, children and men, the removal of Native nations from their homes, forcing them to march long death-defying distances to live on lands unsuitable for habitation, destroying peaceful villages, massacring helpless innocents, stealing tribal lands and resources, breaking sacred treaty agreements, removing children from their homes to imprison them in schools that would steal their heritage to make them "civilized," and in tragic intentional and inadvertent ways, sharing in and implementing the goals of Native extermination resulting in genocidal policies, programs and actions designed to vanquish, forever, whole Native and indigenous nations and peoples, communities and families from the earth.

Scripture

"For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (Matthew 9:13)

"Therefore I will judge you Oh house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!" (Ezekiel 18:30-31)

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 4:17)

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister* has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister,* and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24)

Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. (Ephesians 2:13-14)

Native Quotes

When one sits in the Hoop of the People, one must be responsible because all of creation is related. And the hurt of one is the hurt of all. And the honor of one is the honor of all. And whatever we do affects everything in the universe.

(Modern version from the Lakota White Buffalo Calf Woman)

“I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people’s dream died there. It was a beautiful dream...the nation’s hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.

And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell, and I understood more than I was, for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being.”

(Black Elk, Lakota)

“There are many things to be shared with the Four Colors of humanity in our common destiny as one with our Mother the Earth. It is this sharing that must be considered with great care by the Elders and the medicine people who carry the Sacred Trusts, so that no harm may come to people through ignorance and misuse of these powerful forces.”

(Resolution of the Fifth Annual Meetings of the Traditional Elders Circle, 1980)

“How smooth must be the language of the whites, when they can make right look like wrong, and wrong like right.”

(Black Hawk, Sauk)

“I live in sorrow imprisoned, You are my Light, Your glory, my support. Behold not with malevolence the sins of man but forgive and cleanse; and so, O Lord, protect us beneath Your wings and let peace be our portion now and forever more. Amen.”

(Queen Lili’uokalani, the last monarch of the Kingdom of Hawaii, composed as a prayer, March 22, 1895, while she was under house arrest in her palace in Honolulu.)

Statement of Repentance

As the Council of Bishops, we are here to repent and express remorse for the church’s past conduct in its relationships with Native and indigenous peoples in all the places where we have extended the mission of the church for over two hundred years. We are here to commit ourselves to addressing the wrong and asking for the forgiveness of those who have been wronged by failing them so profoundly. We confess to God, acknowledging our guilt, resolving to cease the harm, pledging ourselves to live differently, reversing the damage that has been done through our participation in violence, maltreatment and neglect of Native and indigenous peoples so that we may bring about healing and restoration to all.

It is time to free captive Native and indigenous peoples from institutional church oppression and learn from them spiritual values that will see us through our own current spiritual emergencies, save our embattled earth and enable humankind to live as one with creation and all living creatures within it—including ourselves. The question is whether the church is strong enough to bring about change in the United States and around the world where indigenous peoples have been decimated, assimilated, abused, and left victims of dominant Western economies and the imposition of oppressive materialistic cultural values. Our work in healing broken relationships must be specific, actionable and accountable. Morally, it must be part of our denomination’s discourse, programming and policies.

To our Native and indigenous brothers and sisters we say: We have destroyed your way of life, dehumanized your people and degraded your cultures, along with your dreams, your peace and your great love for the land. We acknowledge the pain of your nation peoples and our sinful behavior in these events. We know that past history has been filled with violence against you. We have confiscated your land. We have recklessly destroyed your cultures. Today we acknowledge that all this is not in the past. Assaults continue on your cultures, continuing the historic patterns of abuse, the demeaning of your spirituality, the questioning of your leadership, the neglecting of the critical issues of hunger, health, employment, and sovereignty. We must not yield to historical amnesia. We pray to God to give us a new heart and a new spirit through Jesus Christ, who breaks down the dividing walls of hostility, so that we may truly repent of our grave sins, petition for forgiveness, and work towards healing.

The Future

The Council of Bishops will:

- Affirm commitment to empowering the presence of Native and indigenous people in the life of the denomination.
- Support Native American Ministries Sunday in U.S. annual conferences.
- Strengthen Committees on Native American Ministries (CONAM) in the U.S. and Native ministries in the central conferences.
- Support General Advances and church-wide funding for Native ministries.
- Commit ourselves to the development of new Native and indigenous ministries and strengthen our support for existing community entities.
- Create a theological statement that demonstrates a respect for the diversity of theology and ecclesiology that is found in the context of Native and Indigenous ministries.
- Commit to host Acts of Repentance in annual conferences.
- Commit to developing relationships of mutuality with Native peoples in local contexts.
- Initiate programs of education for non-Native people about why the Act of Repentance is important.

In partnership with Native ministry leaders and resource people throughout the Connection, the Council of Bishops will support:

- Developing new Native and indigenous leaders across the Connection including an increased number of people nurtured for service in congregational, annual conference, jurisdictional and central conference, and general church ministries, including the episcopacy.
- Initiating a plan of advocacy related to land and treaty rights, support for tribal sovereignty and cultural preservation; better health care and education for Native people and the safety of Native and indigenous women.