

ACTS OF REPENTANCE: *Listening Sessions Review*



Over the past year, the Northern Illinois Conference began its Acts of Repentance with Native Americans by listening. We engaged in six listening sessions at Community UMC Naperville, Kateri Center in Chicago, Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, Midwest Soaring Foundation, Starved Rock Lodge, and the American Indian Center in Chicago. This information is a summary of what was shared at those sessions, organized by headings. The action items are an invitation to local congregations to act with the Annual Conference and Native American communities to bring healing.

IDENTITY

Many American Indian people feel as though they are invisible. Native people are thought of in a historical sense and not in current terms. Although understanding the historical narrative of interactions with European nations is important, that interaction is not the basis of the identity of American Indians.

There are over 560 federally recognized tribes in the United States, each with its own distinctions. Some still remain unrecognized by the Government for political reasons. As sovereign nations, Native identity is defined by each tribe as well as the criteria for tribal membership.

Hurtful images continue to exist in the media, and there are misunderstandings of Native American identity and culture. Many Native American communities have experienced a forced diaspora from their homes and encountered Christian hostility towards their American Indian background. United Methodists like Richard Pratt once taught, “kill the Indian and save the man,” meaning ending the Native American cultural identity would allow salvation. Boarding schools have also led to invisibility.

Action Items

- Teach about Native American people’s identity and culture as an integral way of knowing God.
- Advocate against hurtful “Native American” images in the media (from team mascots to offensive movies).
- Ask the Federal Government to recognize ALL American Indian tribes.

EDUCATION

There is a cultural disconnect in many American Indian communities regarding education and the way it functions. From the Boarding School model to modern elementary schools, the lived culture and reality of what impacts Native communities today is not heard. Boarding schools actively tried to eliminate the Native American identity. Many current historical narratives “sanitize” the history by using phrases like “and many Indians also died” when referring to early settler incursions into American Indian land. There is the desire for Native American-centered education that would both preserve culture and give training for job skills later. There is a desire for education by Native Americans for Native Americans (and not using the kinds of dominant narratives or traits in many modern educational models).

Action Items

- Provide scholarships to learn Native American languages and to teach them, for the sustainability of tribal languages “for seven generations.”
- Provide scholarships to attend higher education.
- Continue support for North Central Jurisdiction Native American Course of Study and Lay Speaking School.
- Advocate with school officials to see that Native American education is taught and accurate. Ask Governor Rauner to appoint a Native American Commission to create and reform educational opportunities.
- Provide space in local churches for education by Native Americans for Native Americans with the understanding that there is no expectation other than for American Indians to learn and participate more fully in their culture [i.e. without rent or space sharing agreements.]
- Provide education about the “real history” and how that impacts where people are today economically, socially, financially, developmentally, etc. For instance, early in its history, the Northern Illinois Conference was supported by railroad jobs and money that directly and indirectly displaced Native American populations.

LAND

Throughout the listening sessions, we heard many ideas of how to recognize land as Native American land. Those included ideas such as compensating Native American organizations for the cropland used for corn to recognizing land rights for Native American organizations. The system of reservations for Native Americans has not benefitted the vast majority who now live off reservations. Since the 1980's, the Federal funding for those off-reservation has decreased dramatically. Without current land, without the ability to use historic land, and without Federal funding, many organizations have little ability to preserve identity and provide Native American education. Land rights are a continued struggle for tribal nations around the world, from sustaining shellfish beaches for fishing rights to protecting sacred burial grounds. It is an ongoing struggle.

Action Items

- Ask for the state to set aside land for Native American use. This would include powwows, continuing Native American centers like Midwest Soaring, Kateri, American Indian Center, and Chicago American Indian Community Collaborative.
- Offer land (or money) from closed churches to American Indian communities.
- Advocate for the reinstatement of off-reservation Federal funding for Native American organizations, communities, and basic health services.

CURRENT CHALLENGES IN THE NATIVE COMMUNITY

Many people think of American Indian's historically, as though we are a people of the past. We value and thrive on our traditions, but we have many challenges in the present that people do not always know (or want to know).

There are unique and extreme health needs, a high rate of rape, high rate of suicide, alcoholism, the highest rates of tuberculosis, infant mortality, breast cancer mortality, and depression. In some communities, there is a spiritual emptiness with generations of culture and language torn away. In many ways, Native culture is primarily about survival. Hard work is needed to bring healing, and we need people that are highly qualified. They don't have to be Native American, but willing to totally immerse themselves for long period of time.

–Rev. Carol Lakota Eastin

Action Items

- Make decisions “with” organizations and not “for” them.
- “We need investment, not people who are ‘interested.’” Those who are willing to go the long distance.

ABOUT THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

There was broad consensus that congregations need to have a continued emphasis on American Indian spirituality beyond just one Sunday a year. This could also include a broader study of Native American theology and ways of understanding Scripture; there are several good resources for congregations who want to learn. For further study:

[Giving Our Hearts Away-Native American Survival](#) (UMW) & [On This Spirit Walk](#), Henrietta Mann and Anita Phillips

There are many Native people who practice traditional American Indian ceremonies who may not be comfortable in a local church, or who have been hurt by the Church. Please be sensitive to this reality. **Remember that we are invited to make ACTS of repentance, and all are encouraged to engage in continuous and sustained relationships with Native Americans.**

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