



A CALL TO ACTION FOR ALL MID COUNCILS AND CONGREGATIONS

From the Native American Coordinating Council, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Christian Friends,

I hope you are joining, in whatever way you deem appropriate, the efforts of our General Assembly in supporting racial justice across the U.S. and around the world. Of course the most recent, visible form that has taken for many of our members is participation in and support for the “Black Lives Matter” campaign, through which we are called to acknowledge and repent of systemic racism that has shaped U.S. culture and history for centuries.

As you do so, I urge you also to join our General Assembly in returning our attention to an even older and equally egregious example of our racist past. The 222nd General Assembly (2016) approved an overture repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery, and the 223rd General Assembly (2018) followed with an expanded response that called for engagement by mid councils and congregations beyond mere words of repudiation.

From the earliest moment our European forebears sailed to the so-called “New World,” they were looking for land for freedom and for worldly wealth. Of course, as they approached the land masses we know as North and South America, they first landed on islands scattered throughout our oceans. There—using various forms of deception and coercion and backed up not only by the force of weapons, but also by the power of the church and Christian theology—they proceeded to appropriate and abuse the land and peoples and expropriate valuable resources.

Ironically, they justified these actions as a kind of “divine right,” as if God had brought them to these places and blessed their arrival. This conviction also supported them as they negotiated with the Indigenous people they encountered and encroached farther and farther into this “new world.”

Where they saw no “hard borders” to the land and no “deeds” declaring ownership by the Indigenous people stating the limits of ownership (a European practice)—and despite strong and sustained resistance of Indigenous people—European Christians used tactics of both the pen and the gun to spread out and claim the land, advancing under claims of God’s providence dispossessing, and oftentimes enslaving Indigenous peoples along the way.

This practice, which has become a central part of policy toward Indigenous peoples across the world and which undergirded the invasion across what is now the United States, is called “The Doctrine of Discovery”—a practice roundly condemned by our General Assembly in 2016.

In our contemporary world history, this doctrine is nowhere more succinctly stated (although in a different context) than by the Israeli leader, Golda Meir, as she led Jewish troops in taking over the land inhabited and farmed by Palestinians for hundreds of years. Blind to that reality, she declared that Palestine was for the Jews: “A land with no people, for a people with no land.”

In a sense, that kind of rationalization was used as settlers came into what is now the United States. As if the many nations of Indigenous people did not exist, American presidents supported expansion beyond the original colonies, arguing that this vast expanse of land was “for the taking.” Much of this was underway long before the enslavement of Black Africans became a practice.

As White settlers and citizens—blessed by our U.S. government and by their respective churches (particularly churches of the Reformed tradition)—began to seek their future in “the West,” that movement happened in tandem with the founding of the United States of America facilitated by U.S. presidents like George Washington, Andrew Jackson, and Ulysses Grant. As a British officer, George Washington illegally speculated for land in “Indian Country”—then the Ohio River Valley—in tandem with performing the duties of his office. As president, he made sure that those *were* the duties of his office.

Not long afterward, Andrew Jackson, a Presbyterian, forced what became known as the “Trail of Tears,” in which Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Seminole, and other Indigenous people were uprooted from their homelands and literally forced to march/walk out of the southeastern United States into another, farther out region designated as “Indian Country” (the lands now called Oklahoma), and surrounding territories. For White Christians, that was considered “godforsaken” wilderness,” a land for “heathens” even though by that time many of the uprooted tribes had adopted Christianity.

Many of the PC(USA)’s Native American congregations in the midwestern, western, and southwestern parts of our country today were established as a result of Manifest Destiny, by which white settlers moved west to land “promised to them” by God. Under President Grant, the Peace Policy included government actions to break down Indigenous land holdings, community, and identity as peoples. Many Reformed Protestants had a central role in this move westward, working hand in glove with U.S. government policies such as the Allotment Act and a widespread policy of sending Indigenous children to boarding schools. Under pressure from settlers and fortune hunters looking for gold in the Black Hills, California, and Alaska, the government reneged on its promises. These policies resulted in the loss of millions of acres of sovereign and sacred Indigenous territory. Treaties were ignored and Indigenous people’s sovereignty was flouted. That disregard has continued in how the Presbyterian church has related over the years with Indigenous nations and with the Indigenous congregations across the continent with whom we have historic relations and long overdue covenant obligations.

One of the most egregious outcomes of all these injustices was, perhaps, the effort to “civilize” these “Indians.” And in this, the church was all too complicit, participating in official government policies of assimilation, which were designed to “kill the Indian, save the man.” We, as Presbyterians, must own the part of our history that includes tearing Indigenous youth out of their homes, placing them in boarding schools, forcing them to dress like our youth, requiring them to speak English (“our language”) only, and attempting to replace their own spirituality with our ethnocentric version of the Christian faith. Friends, this is not history long past. This

trauma is perpetuated every time Indigenous peoples are compelled to break with their communities and ancestral traditions in order to be in full communion with the church.

The shattering of families, the uprooting and forced relocation of Indigenous peoples, the persistent undermining of tribal sovereignty, and the denial of these actions as part of American history is part of our church history. As a church complicit in or supportive of these violations of their humanity, and the continuing impact of our decisions on their future, we, as Presbyterians, have much for which to repent.

It is time for all of us to repent of the ways in which we have ignored and intensified the struggles of our Indigenous American siblings and neighbors. For more than half a millennium, they have tenaciously and creatively fought against genocidal programs of territorial and spiritual conquest. Their modes of resistance have been manifested in music, art, law, and economics, as well as theological interventions. Recall the spiritual and territorial protests we have recently witnessed at Standing Rock.

In 2018, our General Assembly called upon this church to ask probing questions of ourselves about “how the Doctrine of Discovery has been present in our history and our theological positions and continues to be present today.” This we must do in order to understand literally *where* we are and how we got here.

Many of our mid councils and congregations are situated within lands taken from Indigenous nations. We must dig into our histories, and in doing so, we must give priority to histories of the peoples from whom the land was seized.

And we must give deep consideration to how our churches and communities were formed in relation and/or opposition to the Indigenous peoples of the region and begin ever so carefully to discern the nature of that relationship today. In doing so, we must be mindful that any dis-ease toward the church that we may perceive in Indigenous communities has everything to do with the disease of white supremacy and anti-Indigenous practice that is as pervasive in the church as it is in the society at large.

Indeed, this is about addressing the original sin of the United States of America and it is not something we can turn away from. We are asked to confront the church’s alliance with regimes of power that has caused untold suffering and oppression. We must ask how deep we are willing to go to deal with the issues of racism and repentance in this country.

What we must do is act. Our General Assembly overwhelmingly approved a report in June 2020 that includes an expansive, but by no means exhaustive, set of recommendations as to how this church may stand in solidarity with Indigenous nations and peoples in their fight for sovereignty and human rights.

I urge every person, congregation, presbytery, and synod in this church to read the report and recommendations of the [Native American Coordinating Council](#); to study it and review all the resources it offers; and to begin a process of unflinching confession and material repentance that

is not merely theoretical or internal, but has real, tangible expressions that truly contribute to the thriving of Indigenous nations and communities.

This is far more than a call to recognize Indigenous peoples in one moment or on one day. Indeed, the call to action before us is a long-term call to unsettle and decolonize a church deeply intertwined in racist, settler-colonial systems of white supremacy.

Let us bring to the fore our commitment to true justice and stand in solidarity with all Indigenous peoples in their efforts for sovereignty and human rights.

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Useful links:

[The Fund for Native American Church Repair](#)

[Native American and Intercultural Congregational Ministries](#)

[PCUSA Doctrine of Discovery Page](#)