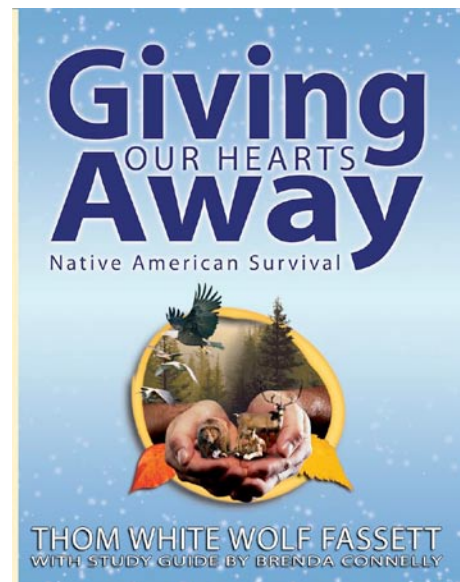


Giving Our Hearts Away: Native American Survival

Issue Update for the 2009 Mission Study

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In these times of political change in the United States, there is a collective hope that a new tide may lift all ships. At least that is the hope of a vast majority of citizens, and certainly, the members of Indian tribal nations. American Indian tribes and organizations have never before been so involved in the presidential elections nor have they ever concentrated on mobilizing the Indian vote as they did in the 2008 run for the White House. While the general electorate may have voted for ideological, structural and economic change, American Indians sought change that would bring about greater recognition and support for core values associated with survival, sovereignty, economic development, education, health care and other concerns specific to Native peoples. In this election there was a sense that Barack Obama articulated a point of view and policy projections that most suited the needs of Indian Country, not partisan political perspectives.

At the same time, United Methodists emerged from another General Conference that voted on measures to strengthen American Indian survival and principles of sovereignty. And while the legislation adopted by the 2008 General Conference was heartening, the voting patterns reflected the majority of the general (secular) electorate participating in the political elections for the president of the United States. Majority votes won the day at General Conference, still it is noteworthy to observe that there were large numbers of delegates who opposed these new or revised measures to recognize Native viability. Perhaps we can find encouragement in this study as we reach out to the church sharing the most important and compelling concerns facing Native peoples today. Church members know little about American Indian history, culture, religion and current survival issues. This study may be the best opportunity we have to bring information and direction to our United Methodist sisters and brothers who rarely encounter the realities of 21st century challenges to the ongoing survival of Native Americans.

General Conference 2008

General Conference renewed or revised older legislation related to Native Americans, adding fresh insights and defeating measures introduced to blunt the church's Indian agenda. Perhaps the most important legislation passed to strengthen the ministry of the church with Native people was the renewal of the Native American Comprehensive Plan. General Conference also changed the accountability base of this program from the General Board of Global Ministries to the General Board of Discipleship. Other 2008 General Conference resolutions addressing issues critical to Native American communities include:

- *Protection of Native American Sacred Sites.* Through the General Board of Church and Society, the church shall continue to strengthen the American Indian Religious freedom Act of 1978, and preserve the

God-given and constitutional rights of religious freedom for American Indians, including the preservation of traditional Native American sacred sites of worship. Principally underscored was the fact that the loss of sacred land leads to a loss of identity. Currently, there is no real protection for the practice of traditional Indian religions within the framework of the American constitution or statutory law. The courts have traditionally avoided addressing the religious aspects of Native sacred sites. Through the General Board of Church and Society, the whole church may enter into and support court cases relating to the American Indian Religious Freedom Act.

- *Treaty Obligations.* The United States has failed to honor its obligations in the more than 375 historic treaties with Native nations. The General Conference resolved to call upon the United States to review treaty obligations and determine a course of action that would honor them. The resolution also urges clergy and laity to educate themselves and their churches about tribal sovereignty and explore actions that they can take to support American, Alaskan and Hawaiian Native peoples.
- *Return to the Earth.* The United Methodist Church pledges its support to the “Return to the Earth” project of the Mennonite Central Committee, an effort to support Native Americans in burying unidentifiable ancestral remains now scattered across the United States and to promote a process of education and reconciliation between Native and non-Native peoples. The resolution calls for United Methodists to use the Mennonite’s Return to the Earth project study guide; advocate when appropriate; and assist with the construction of small cedar burial boxes, the sewing of burial cloth and making monetary contributions. These efforts will support the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act, which mandates the return of human remains and ritual objects to Native American tribes and nations. The implication of this measure further specifies that proper respect be shown towards human skeletal remains and their proper interment when returned to their identified ancestors.
- *Economic Development.* While employing the language of previously adopted measures identifying gambling as “a menace to society, deadly to the best interests of moral, social, economic and spiritual life, and destructive of good government,” this enhanced resolution also calls for more church action on economic issues impacting Native peoples. Economic development involves everything from creating jobs to reforming tax codes to establishing banking institutions, expanding tribal autonomy, and developing basic physical infrastructure, telecommunications and literacy for Native people. The resolution calls for the creation of educational tools for local churches and individuals to study Native issues, advocacy of federal economic development programs and participation of United Methodist Native Americans in the work of the United Nations. Further, the resolution calls for the General Board of Global Ministries to support funding of Native American economic development projects and urges the Board of Pension and Health Benefits to invest monies in Native American financial institutions and community organizations.
- *Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site.* This resolution authorizes the United Methodist Church to contribute \$50,000 to the development of a research and learning center at the historic site established as a memorial to the more than 160 Native Americans massacred in 1864 by troops led by a Methodist preacher, Col. John Chivington. The General Conference expressed regret for the Sand Creek massacre and issued an apology for the “actions of a prominent Methodist” in 1996.

Native American Comprehensive Plan

The General Conference created the Native American Comprehensive Plan (NACP) in 1992 to assert that Native Americans are partners in ministry, not simply a mission of the church. While its major mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ within Native communities, it does so recognizing the unique cultures, languages and traditions of Native peoples. As a reauthorized entity in The United Methodist Church, the 2009-2012 NACP plan will emphasize evangelism, programs for Indian leadership, learning opportunities for new leaders, cur-

riculum development, church growth, ministry with the poor, global health and developing conference committees on Native American ministries (CONAM). Achieving these goals calls for:

- Development of evangelism resources based on Native American experience.
- Schools of evangelism for clergy and lay leadership.
- Consultation services to clergy and laypersons, both Native and non-Native.
- Lay speaking schools and a lay academy.
- A second Native American Women in Ministry Conference.
- Intergenerational gatherings.
- Empowerment of Native American writers and creation of a directory of Native American United Methodist resource persons available to local churches.
- Development of new Native American faith communities and churches, and strengthening existing ministries.
- Development of a second Native American hymnal.
- New opportunities for Native young people within the church.

Native American International Caucus of The United Methodist Church

The Native caucus (NAIC) of The United Methodist Church is not a board or agency of the church but derives its funding from some of the official boards of the church. Financing of the caucus has become very thin, and it is struggling to maintain a voice of advocacy on very few resources. It is an organization that maintains a history of solid accomplishments with the flexibility to advocate critical issues often overlooked or resisted by the larger church. During the 2008 General Conference, the caucus sponsored legislation on the “Return to the Earth Project” and worked with the official agencies of the church to make certain that an Act of Repentance for Native Americans be conducted at the 2012 General Conference in Tampa, Fla. The caucus observers at General Conference worked to support the \$50,000 contribution to the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site. Native American Family Camp is one of the caucus’ hallmarks, bringing together United Methodist Native families for worship celebrations, continuing education classes and cross-tribal cultural events for years.

The Federal Government and the New Administration

Administration of the Indian trust responsibility resides with the federal government, and its success depends primarily on the leadership of the U.S. president. The attraction of Barack Obama as president for Native Americans can be found in his projected policies and his current practices. For example, the new president included Native Americans in his transition team, and his representatives are working with the National Congress for American Indians to gain insights into policy needs. In the early stages of his administration, the president seems committed to tribal nation building and enforcing the federal government’s obligations to Indian people. As a candidate in 2008, Mr. Obama spoke in Elko, Nev., saying, “We’ve got to make sure we are not just having a BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) that is dealing with the various Native American tribes; we’ve got to have the president of the United States meeting on a regular basis with the Native American leadership and ensuring relationships of dignity and respect.”

The cataloging of the president’s policy intentions toward Native Americans provides us with both a federal agenda for Native Americans as well as a compendium of issues to track and act upon:

- Support for tribal self-determination. Native American tribal nations are sovereign, self-governing political entities and enjoy a government-to-government relationship with the U.S. government.
- Ensure Native American inclusion in decision-making processes. President Obama will appoint an American Indian policy advisor on his senior White House staff.
- Honor the federal government’s trust responsibility by repairing broken systems that manage and administer lands and other trust assets belonging to tribes and individual Indians.
- Increase Indian Health Service funding. Current per capita funding for Indian health care amounts to half

- of the federal per capita health funding for federal prisoners.
- Provide an additional \$1 billion for Indian Health Services to modernize the Indian health care system and strengthen urban Indian health facilities.
- Emphasize Indian education reversing past federal policies aimed at eradicating Native languages and cultures, and increase high school graduation and college matriculation rates.
- Reform the No Child Left Behind Act to better incorporate Title VII provisions, which impact Indian, Hawaiian and Alaskan education.
- Increase funding for the Head Start program, including the American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start programs.
- Build Indian schools to meet the needs of growing Indian populations.
- Increase funding for operation and construction of tribal colleges.
- Protect Native American cultural rights and sacred places.
- Address economic and infrastructure protection to aid the more than one-fourth of all Native Americans living in poverty with unemployment rates reaching 80 percent.
- Assist tribes in providing housing. Fourteen percent of homes on reservations do not have electricity, and on some reservations as many as 20 individuals live in a single-family home.
- Support for tribal gaming to finance tribal funding of education, health care, law enforcement and other tribal functions.
- Protect women's health and stem alarming rates of violence against Native women. For example, 1-in-3 Native women suffer rape in their lifetime.
- Provide adequate reproductive health care for Native American women often denied equal access to birth control and prenatal care. There is a history of forced sterilization of American Indian women.
- Support for Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) employed by many tribal law enforcement agencies, and strengthen tribal courts and the ability of tribes to protect their communities.
- Empower tribes to address the scourge of methamphetamine use and distribution, which has dramatically increased cases of domestic violence, child neglect, sex crimes and weapons charges.
- Protect hunting and fishing rights so tribes can live their traditional way of life.

Ongoing Work and Issues

The following listing of current developments in Indian Country is not exhaustive or detailed, but rather provides a quick reference on compelling issues addressed in a variety of ways among Native Americans. These are examples of ongoing efforts of the federal government, state governments and Indian tribes to address historic challenges.

- Indians are being hit the hardest in these difficult financial times. Several senators are seeking to increase the financial resources for Indian Country in the budget for fiscal year 2010. In November 2008, several senators signed a letter to President Bush requesting \$400 million to address the lack of resources for tribal justice, health care and water projects.
- Liquor licenses are still being renewed for bars and restaurants to accommodate the annual motorcycle rally in Sturgis, S.D. Sturgis is two miles from Bear Butte, S.D., the spiritual home of many tribes who come to the town for religious ceremonies. Bear Butte is one example of numerous attacks across the country on Native peoples' rights to practice their spiritual beliefs in privacy and without disruption.
- The Fort Belknap tribes in Montana are still fighting for clean water after mine closures left large open-pit, cyanide heap leach gold mines that do not comply with environmental and water quality standards. Other tribes are resisting the development of gold mines on their land such as the Western Shoshone in Nevada.
- White Bison, Inc., a Colorado-based nonprofit organization offering healing resources to Native Americans, is sponsoring a "Journey" (www.wellbrietyjourney.org) to Indian boarding schools for ceremonies to bless and release the spirits left there from abuse and neglect, and to help heal the survivors. Local churches and annual conferences can become involved in the support of this tremendous issue.
- The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde struggle to rebuild after regaining its status as a federally

recognized tribe in 1983. The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and many other tribes were denied sovereign nation status by the Western Oregon Indian Termination Act of 1954. At that time, the tribe's members received \$35.00 in a final distribution of its trust funds. Legislation restoring the Grand Ronde's status was signed Nov. 22, 1983, but recovering its ability to function as a nation is difficult, particularly in the current economy.

- A movement is underway to urge the U.S. Supreme Court to reconsider the legal doctrine of sovereign immunity for Indian tribes. This is critical to economic development and the expansion of tribal business operations.
- Department of Housing and Urban Development funds for Indian housing have been rescinded, cutting millions of dollars for Native housing retroactively.
- Several cases of free exercise of religion for Indians are pending across the country. For example, Indians in some public school districts in Louisiana are not allowed to wear braids despite a Native religious belief that hair should not be cut. Students can wear crucifixes as a religious expression, but the same practice is not applied to Native Americans.
- Tribes are engaged in efforts to regain sacred sites. For example, the Mississippi Choctaws recently regained ownership of the Namiah Waiya Mound, the birthplace of the Five Civilized Tribes. The land had been a state park.
- Indian Health is still in crisis mode. Look for legislation and administrative developments to fund health care in Indian Country.
- Medical researchers are still using tribal people without their consent. The Havasupai, located in the Grand Canyon, have claimed the misuse of their blood samples. Blood originally taken for diabetes research has been used in research on schizophrenia and ancient population migration.
- Black Mesa, Ariz., coal strip mining by Peabody Coal may be reopened, which would deplete water tables of the Hope and Navajo, dry up wells and further destroy a sacred mountain.
- Sports teams and mascot names still plague Native communities with derision and insult, disrespecting their history and traditions.
- The use of genetically modified plants threatens the existence of the original flora, many of which have significant religious meaning to tribal spirituality, including natural healing properties.
- Archaeological theft has contributed to the loss and destruction of important sacred sites for Native peoples.
- Important tribal efforts continue to have aboriginal remains returned to tribes from museums for proper ceremonies.
- Opposition to open-pit mines producing uranium and other metals.
- The Klamath Tribe in Oregon is working to buy back 90,000 acres of its traditional homeland confiscated in 1954 during the termination period, a time when the government discontinued many tribes' federally recognized status.
- Tribes continue to experience severe conflicts with states over sales tax on goods sold on Indian Territory.
- Address the exclusion of Native American in movies and on television.
- Track the almost invisible incidents of hate crimes against Native Americans.
- Support the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- Support Native people in the spiritual care of the earth, a basic religious principle of Native Americans. These practices are often seen as caring for the Seventh Generation, a philosophy often described as "one dish, one spoon."
- Track freedom of religious practice for federal and state Indian prisoners.
- Watch the progress of the lawsuit calling for the return of \$47 billion illegally taken from Native tribes by the federal government.

As Tim Coulter of the Indian Law Resource Center in Montana reminds us, Congress is considering an apology to Indians and other Native people for wrongs such as forced relocations, land confiscations, treaty violations,

destruction of sacred sites, and bans on Native religions and languages. However, there can be no apology unless the federal government will not do these things again. Without new commitments to Native Americans, no amount of apologizing will right the wrongs inflicted on Native tribes since the signing of the Constitution of the United States of America.

Discussion and Conversation Starters:

- What relationships do violations of American Indian treaties over the last 233 years have with core values stated in the founding principles of the United States and the various religious expressions articulated by the nation's Christian Churches?
- Write a brief but comprehensive "apology" to Native Americans as if you were on the committee to draft such a statement in the U.S. Senate.
- Picture yourself living comfortably in your home. It is filled with history, tradition, meaning, sentiment, tragedy, tears and powerful memories. Today you received a certified letter from the U.S. government stating you must move, and the government is paying you 15 cents an acre for your land. You later learn the government has sold your land to a Canadian-owned gold-mining operation for \$2.50 an acre. You now have no land or home. How could such a thing happen to you, and what are you going to do about it? (This is a true-life example of what is now happening to nine Western Shoshone tribal governments in Nevada.)
- Your local government leased lands to raw metal, ore and gold producers with high expectations of tremendous economic gains for your community. Open-pit, cyanide heap leach gold mines have now contaminated surface and groundwater resources, destroyed your ability to use your churches, degraded or eliminated wildlife habitat and left your community lifeless. What recourse do you have in seeking a remedy for this tragedy?
- The Bible tells powerful stories through Abraham, Sarah and Joseph about the importance of burial sites and the interment of bones (Genesis 23). Native American traditions and Christian faiths have similar views. How can you support the "Return to the Earth" project as an expression of Restorative Justice in your community?
- How can you work with Indian communities in your state to lift Indian issues as a priority for the Obama administration?
- Tribal sovereignty and the federal trust responsibility are the linchpins of the relationship between the U.S. federal government and Indian tribes. What are these, and how do they differ?
- The loss of sacred land leads to a loss of identity and even freedom for the people of Israel (Genesis 15:13). That loss of freedom can prevent full religious expression, an experience conveyed as the Psalmist asks, "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalms 137:4) Native American religious understanding of the sacredness of land is paramount and even precedes Christian theology of land by thousands of years. Today, there is no real protection for the practice of traditional Indian religions within the framework of the U.S. Constitution or statutory laws. Can you support the ongoing viability of Native American religions and the protection of their homelands as the center of their spiritual reality?