

September 2008

Why Should People of Faith Care?

Thoughts from a Montana Pastor

For the past year I have been a member of our ELCA Indigenous Institute—a year-long emphasis on behalf of our church to reinvigorate and renew our church’s relationships with American Indians and Alaska Natives. The task force was composed of leaders from the American Indian and Alaskan Native community (both ELCA and non-ELCA) and leaders from a variety of the

expressions of our church. What an interesting, diverse, committed and enjoyable group of people this was! I was honored to be a part of the group.

But I’ve had to swallow hard, sigh deeply and hang my head in disbelief many times this past year as a participant in the Indigenous Institute. And I need to admit, I was embarrassed at times

to be a part of the group as well. For here I was—born and raised in Indian country, and serving the church for my entire ministry to this point in Indian country—and not really knowing these people, their histories and cultures and their growing influence today on our communities, our church and our individual lives. How in the world did that happen? **I’ll own it**

first of all as my own racism, for as I’ve said in my report on the context of ministry here in our synod—I can’t talk about other people’s and the church’s racism until I admit my own. And surely it is also about the **cultural insensitivity of the dominant culture towards American Indians** in which I grew up and have lived my entire life. I certainly suspect that there are more factors involved as to how I think about this

issue and these relationships today, but as I reflect on it these two complex themes make the most sense to me as to how I think. . .

So, you may ask—what does all this have to do with me and my congregation? A lot of folks across our church in Indian country have asked that question, or have never even let that thought cross their mind. From a practical point of view your congregation and you need to pay attention to the

American Indian communities in our synods because they are our neighbors. Whether on the reservations or in the cities and towns we live in, American Indians have an impact on all our lives—in business, tourism, education, health care and politics. It makes sense to pay attention to our American Indian neighbors and get to know them.

But all of us—individual members, congregations and extended ministries of the synod—need to pay attention to and get to know American Indians for a deeper purpose: “...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself...and entrusting the ministry of reconciliation to us.” As Lutheran Christians we are heirs to a tradition that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord. Christ, through faith by the power of the Holy Spirit, calls us, a people of diverse nations, to be God’s people. Christ sends us among all peoples with a unique mission to baptize and teach (Matthew 28:18-20). God continues to call us to that mission, especially with and to our

American Indian neighbors here in the Pacific Northwest. May we seek and be open to the Spirit’s leading in the days ahead as together we continue to grow in American Indian ministry in our synods.

Pastor Rich Omland
ELCA Montana Synod Bishop, 2001-07
*Excerpt from Montana Synod
December 2006 newsletter*

*“For here I was—born
and raised in Indian
country, and serving the
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Indian country—and not
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*“...in Christ God was
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2 Corinthians 5*

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Discussion

Omland describes his embarrassment at “not really knowing these people, their histories and cultures and their growing influence today on our communities, our church and our individual lives” even though he was born and had served many years in “Indian country”. What might have contributed to this happening?

- What is your experience with American Indian and/or Alaska Native peoples?
- Who is your nearest Native neighbor (an individual, family or tribal group)?

Omland names racism and the cultural insensitivity of the dominant culture as critical factors in restricting his knowledge and appreciation of Native people.

- In what ways has racism been a part of your life experience?
- What are some examples of cultural insensitivity to Native peoples and cultures?
- How have you seen racism and cultural insensitivity expressed or acted out in your church or faith community?

As people motivated by faith, God calls us to a ministry of reconciliation, of relationship building with our Native neighbors.

- What new insight/awareness did this article raise for you?
- How are you invited to respond to the Spirit’s leading in the days ahead?

Scripture Reflections

Read 2 Corinthians 18:16 – 21 The text from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians uses a word translated “reconcile,” which in the original Greek text communicates the action of embracing: “God was in Christ embracing the world, and giving us the ministry of embracing.”

- What ways are you can grow into this ministry of reconciliation?
- What other scripture texts will shape your approach?

Matthew 28:18-20, often applied to encourage evangelization, is here used to exhort us live more completely with people of diverse nations to order to be the People of God. Consider the neighbors you have, near your home and around your congregation.

- What are some practical ways to prepare to participate in the multicultural community that is the People of God?

Ecumenical partners include:

American Baptist Churches Evergreen Conference; Episcopal Diocese of Olympia; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Region 1; Lutheran Public Policy Office Washington State; The Church Council of Greater Seattle; United Methodist Church Pacific Northwest Conference

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Next steps

Find out about your denomination's history of ministry with American Indian and Alaska Native peoples.

- Who are the leaders?
- How can you meet them and learn from their experiences?

Where is the nearest American Indian/Alaska Native congregation or outreach?

- How can you and your congregation get involved?

For more information and educational resources, contact:

The Ecumenical Declaration to American Indian and Alaska Native People

**c/o Pacific NW Conference UMC
P.O. Box 13650
Des Moines, WA
98198-3650**

Repentance & Reconciliation

American Indian people believe that everything the Great Spirit does is done in a circle. The canopy of the sky is round and the earth is round like a ball. The wind, in its great power whirls. The seasons form a great circle in their changing and return.

The sun comes forth and goes down. The moon does the same, and both the moon and the sun are round. Birds make their nests in circles. A person's life is a circle, from childhood to childhood.

And so it is in everything where power moves. Tipis are round like the nests of birds and they are always set in a circle; therefore the nation's hoop is a nest of the many nests.

In the old days, it was believed power came to the Indians from the sacred hoop of the nations and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished.

A Litany for Healing

One: Let us pray together for wholeness to be restored to the hoop of God's people.

People: Spirit of God, mend the hoop of your people.

One: People of God, we have gathered to ask God's forgiveness for the hurt and brokenness we have done to each other through ignorance, fear and prejudice. In our contrition and by God's grace, we can celebrate our oneness through reconciliation and healing.

People: Spirit of God, mend the hoop of your people.

One: The hoop, the circle has been broken by hurt, war, massacre, discrimination, by stereotypes, mean words and suspicious stares. It is time to say, "Forgive me" to each other and to our Creator.

People: Spirit of God, mend the hoop of your people.

Resources:

- The Museum of the American Indian (Washington DC): www.nmai.si.edu
- “Indian Country Today” - Newspaper with weekly current events: www.indiancountry.com
- *A Vision of Partnership and Unity: A Resource for Friends of Christian Indian Ministry*. ELCA Commission for Multicultural Ministries, 2003.

People of color: A great injustice was done to our people. The memory is part of the pain of our experience. It is part of our life. Spirit of God, redeem our pain.

European Americans: Our people participated in this great injustice. The memory of the shame is part of our experience. It is part of our life. Spirit of God, Redeem our shame.

One: We seek to enrich our cultures, traditions, and spirituality through the insights and perspectives of one another.

All People: Spirit of God, mend the hoop of your people.

One: We desire to cast off destructive stereotypes of each other that we have constructed and perpetuated

All People: Spirit of God, mend the hoop of your people.

One: We commit to learning from the pain of our common past and transforming that pain by working together for our mutual benefit.

All People: Spirit of God, mend the hoop of your people.

One: Let us be like rays of light, like a great tree mighty in their tops, that reach the sky where the leaves catch the light and sing with the wind a song of the circle. Let our lives be like the rainbow whose colors teach us unity. Let us, Holy Spirit, follow the great circle, the roundness of power, and be at one with the moon and the sun and the circling ripples of water.

All People: Spirit of God, mend the hoop of your people.

Spirit of God, mend the hoop of your people.

Spirit of God, mend the hoop of your people.

Spirit of God, mend the hoop of your people.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen!

Litany adapted from material by Dr. Martin Brokenleg. Office of American Indian and Alaska Native Ministries, Episcopal Church, 1991 found in Resource Guide, 1992 Columbus Quincentenary Task Force, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1992.

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- *Women and Power in Native North America*. Laura F. Klein and Lillian A. Ackerman, eds. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995
- Visit your library's website to learn more about local tribes
- Teaching Tolerance: A website with numerous resources and articles discussing American Indian and Alaska Native culture and current events. For example, an article calling for the end of American Indian mascots: www.tolerance.org/teach/activities/activity.jsp?ar=46