

The Act of Repentance – Why Me?

In 2012 the worldwide United Methodist church initiated an act of repentance. The Council of Bishops issued a Statement of Repentance, the first paragraph of which reads:

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.

Today I would like to talk about why we are doing this and what it means to the congregation of Evansburg UMC.

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I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear my voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd. - John 10:16

Jesus Christ is all about including. Peter says that God is not wishing any to perish.

Beginning with the Age of Exploration in the 1400's when European navigational technology and shipbuilding had gotten to the point of being able to sail out of sight of land, there were 2 overarching motivations for searching out new lands:

- ✓ Religious - obeying Christ's command to make disciples in all the world
- ✓ Wordly - searching for new resources to exploit

And of course sailing into the unknown also required soldiers and weapons for protection. Therefore the church, for pragmatic reasons, was often allied with adventurers with less noble motives. Also we should keep in mind how strange and frightening the indigenous peoples in many of the new lands must have seemed to the Europeans, and fear often breeds contempt.

Europeans came to the New World for different reasons: some for religious freedom, some looking for a better life, some running away, others looking for riches.

When the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock in 1620 the Native people welcomed them as neighbors and taught them how to survive in this new land. The two groups lived amicably for one generation. Then, though they were friendly, the children of the Pilgrims and the new immigrants maintained an attitude of superiority over Native people. And they were superior in many ways:

- ✓ The written word, with paper and the printing press for communication
- ✓ Sophisticated tools – navigational instruments, shipbuilding, iron tools & cookware
- ✓ More sophisticated weapons

Most European immigrants Europeans considered the Indians subhuman and not worthy of respect. They also assumed a spiritual superiority. Contrast that with the attitude of the Indians who respected everything that God created, including animals, birds, plants, rocks and rivers; they considered all of creation to be a sacred trust. Conversely, deeply ingrained in the European mentality was the attitude of the Doctrine of Discovery, which had been established by popes since the 13th century. Initiated as a series of papal bulls, or edicts, the Doctrine of Discovery had become recognized as international law. It stated that if an explorer representing a Christian monarch “discovered” a new land where the inhabitants were not Christian, the natives had 3 choices: convert to Christianity, become slaves or be killed. Also, land and resources existed solely for the use of the human race, with no intrinsic value other than benefiting mankind. Therefore many European immigrants viewed the American continent as theirs for the taking by right of conquest, basically “Might Makes Right,” and the Indians became collateral damage to Manifest Destiny.

But John Wesley had a heart for the American Indian. When he came to America to evangelize the Indians, he wrote in his diary that the Indians were already so spiritual that they did not need evangelizing; it was the colonists that need to be saved.

The settlers and Natives came into conflict over their attitude toward the land: the Natives saw the land as held in trust and given the right to occupancy, not ownership; the settlers thought it a waste for land to remain “idle” when they could farm it and make it productive, supporting themselves and making a profit. The settlers craved the security that owning land gave them. This disparity led to a watershed event in the American colonies in 1763 in Lancaster County, PA, known as the Conestoga Massacre.

The Conestoga Massacre

William Penn was a friend to the Indians, so when he set up this commonwealth he required that any land purchases be done through the government; no one could purchase land directly from someone else without the government’s approval. Penn also set aside tracts of land to remain for the Indians occupancy.

The Paxton Boys were farmers and squatters whose craving for land led them to use brutal violence to get what they wanted. So at dawn on December 14, 1763, 79 armed men on an unauthorized expedition attacked the peaceful Conestoga Indian settlement, killing the 6 Indians they found there and burning the settlement to the ground. The remainder of the tribe was away visiting neighbors. When they returned, local magistrates gathered the rest of the tribe and took them to the workhouse in Lancaster to protect them, but on December 27 the Paxton Boys came

back, threatened the sheriff with death and gained access to the workhouse where they brutally murdered the remaining elders, women and children of the Conestoga tribe. Then the Paxton Boys claimed the Indian's land "by right of conquest," (remember the Doctrine of Discovery?)

Since the Paxton Boys were never prosecuted, other colonists began to follow suit and the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans in all the colonies began in earnest.

The Sand Creek Massacre

Now let's consider the role of the Methodist Church in the genocide of the American Indian.

In 1874 a Methodist minister named John Chivington led an unprovoked raid on a peaceful camp of Native Americans at Sand Creek, Colorado. The Indians had surrendered to a nearby fort and were instructed to fly a white flag and an American flag at their camp, which they did. Chivington led his militia into the camp killing and mutilating 200 Indians, the majority of which were elders, women and children. When news of the massacre reached other Indians who were in peace talks, the Indians withdrew from the talks because they did not want to be friends with a people who would do such things to "helpless ones." They vowed to fight to the death to keep their land and thus began the 10 years of the Sioux Wars.

Once the American Indian was finally subdued, our government pursued cultural genocide with the mantra, "Kill the Indian, save the man," and placed Indian children into boarding schools like The Carlisle Indian Industrial School to civilize the savages. European evangelists believed that the Native culture itself was evil and in order to be saved the Indians had to give up all of their traditions and language and adopt the culture of the more powerful immigrant culture. Today, with 20/20 hindsight, we can see that cultural differences have nothing to do with the quality of faith; Christians all over the world can worship the one true God in ways that are meaningful to them.

The Methodist Church and the general church of Jesus Christ were complicit in many instances throughout the subjugation of America's original inhabitants. This is why there is a need for repentance.

Now you might say to me, "But Sherry, that all happened a long time ago. What does that have to do with me today in Pennsylvania?"

The land we are now sitting on was once the home of the Delaware Indian tribe. According to Lucille Schaeffer, cranberries were being cultivated in Evansburg. My husband Dennis has found many artifacts along the Perkiomen Creek. But the eastern woodlands tribes were eventually swindled, killed or pushed west by the "civilized" Christians and we now enjoy this beautiful land while many American Indians have been pushed onto small tracts of land with poor soil and no means of supporting themselves. **So although we as individuals may not**

have sinned against the original inhabitants of this land, we here, right now, are reaping the benefits of the sins of our forefathers while many Native Americans suffer from historical trauma in the form of poverty, depression, addiction, violence and disintegration of the family. Our society has sinned and our church has sinned; we bear corporate guilt because of what our predecessors did. This is why we need to repent.

So now what?

You might think there are no Native Americans in our area, but according to the 2010 census, there are 35,000 American Indians living in Pennsylvania, including Philadelphia, Norristown and Phoenixville.

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In 2016 the General Conference of the United Methodist Church will be following through on the Act of Repentance in that was initiated in 2012 and our Eastern Pennsylvania Conference will be offering an Act of Repentance in June 2016. In preparation for that, we will be offering a class on Monday evenings during Lent using the book written by Thom White Wolf Fassett called *Giving Our Hearts Away*. The author will be the keynote speaker at the EPA Annual Conference next June. Among many other things he is a member of the Seneca nation in New York, emeritus General Secretary of the General Board of Church and Society, an internationally recognized champion of human and civil rights, and an outspoken defender of Native and indigenous rights.

I encourage anyone interested in delving into this issue further to consider joining us as often as you can for this revealing and convicting study. I will be happy to talk to anyone interested.