

May 22, 2014

The United Methodist Church
of the Five U.S. Jurisdictions
United States of America

Dear Sisters and Brothers of the United Methodist Church:

It is with the greatest urgency that we, the Executive Director of the Native American Comprehensive Plan, the Chairperson of the Native American International Caucus and the Executive Secretary of Native American and Indigenous Ministries of the General Board of Global Ministries, write this open letter to our denomination, to share with you our critical concern for the life of Native American and Indigenous ministries of the United Methodist Church (UMC) in the United States.

We testify to you the wonderful and gifted presence of our many Native American tribal communities, each unique in culture and language, many with a historic Methodist presence and witness spanning over 200 years. Many of these Native nations brought Methodism with them as they made their tragic death marches during the "Trails of Tears" and other historic Native removals. We have watched them faithfully serve the call of Christ Jesus, often times in the face of great obstacles as they sought recovery from historical trauma.

Over the course of our service to the church, we have labored diligently to listen, enact, encourage and fulfill our calling to our Native community, celebrating both our indigenous and Christian identities. In recent years we have witnessed demanding and destructive burdens placed upon Native American churches, fellowships and ministries which threaten the survival of a Native American presence within the UMC.

Ministry with poor people in the U.S. most assuredly includes the ministry *of* Native American disciples and ministry *with* Native American communities. In some cases, clergy and lay ministers have devotedly served pulpits while receiving only love offerings that would not provide even a tank of gas. This happened not only in the past, but continues today. We walk in the footsteps of our grandmothers and grandfathers who served and continue to serve as Sunday school teachers, lay leaders and vacation Bible school leaders, giving every penny and every ounce of strength to their churches and ministries. They do so as a way of honoring the Creator and ensuring that their ministry survives into future generations. More directly put, our ancestors lived sacrificial lives for the sake of the Gospel, and for the survival of the Native American presence in this denomination.

At the same time we have witnessed faithful leaders coming forth to serve, only to be disillusioned by the systemic pressures of the institutional church. These pressures are rooted in the dynamics of what constitutes being "church" in United Methodism. The church institution often seems to define who is worthy of being part of the UMC as measured against financial reports, apportionment figures and year-end reports. Our presence in the UMC is in danger of being extinguished because we cannot meet certain criteria and vital definitions required by our denomination. Additionally, Christianity, as missionized to indigenous peoples across the centuries, continues to exist in a historical vacuum without acknowledgement of the cultural backdrop documenting its evolution and relevance to most Native Americans today. These burdens have squeezed Native Ministries to the point of erosion and have destabilized the effectiveness of the UMC to witness to the power of the Gospel.

We write this letter now with hope of awakening our church from its slumber. Today, environmental, cultural and economic injustice threaten the ongoing survival of indigenous peoples throughout the world and clearly represent a threat to Native peoples in the U.S., and the presence of Native peoples in the UMC. We are the peoples to which our Creator saw fit to entrust this sacred land. We are the nations John Wesley believed were worthy sons and daughters of God when he began his ministry in Georgia. While we are concerned with our continued presence in this country, we are also concerned about our long term presence in United Methodism.

This is a crucial time in the life of The United Methodist Church. We have now recognized that sometimes slowly, and sometimes by leaps and bounds, our numbers in the U.S. have dwindled. We, as Native Christians, also know how it feels to see our people in decline. We believe this is a time when our UMC can make a vital difference in the lives of our families, communities and nations; and we, your indigenous brothers and sisters, can offer our wisdom and gifts to the UMC, if we cultivate and tend our partnership.

As you are aware, our denomination has entered a time of working toward healing relationships with Native American and indigenous peoples through an Act of Repentance (AOR) at the 2012 General Conference. It is our denomination's attempt at correcting the harms and trauma that have been and continue to be inflicted upon indigenous communities. We have had conversations and questions from some of our brothers and sisters in annual conferences who are earnestly working on their own journeys toward services of repentance. We have also heard of unreasonable pressures related to AOR activities being placed upon some of our annual conference Committees on Native American Ministries (CONAM's), Native American clergy and laity, and Native American Ministries in general. Because we feel this is an urgent matter, we are sharing these recommendations with the UMC for its work surrounding AOR activities and the work related to Native American Ministries:

1. An AOR Service of Repentance is only a starting point for Annual Conferences, not the end. Bishops, Cabinets and annual conferences must realize that there can be no timeline to “complete” this work. This will be an ongoing task of the United Methodist Church.
2. Any AOR actions must be conducted in communication with Native American peoples within each annual conference. This can be done with CONAM's, Native American churches and fellowships, Native American organizations and/or local tribal communities. (It is inaccurate and insufficient to say, "we have no Native Americans in our conference"). Annual conference commissions on archives and history should provide leadership in this effort as well.
3. It is inappropriate and even sinful to insist that the Native American community plan this work for the annual conferences. Any actions of repentance must be led by the non-Native American leadership of the annual conference, including the provision of financial support for meetings, trainings, publications, etc. that the conference deems necessary.
4. The structures and organizations of the church must recognize it is inappropriate to telescope Native American Ministries under the broader umbrella of “Racial-Ethnic Ministries”, assigning this crucial ministry to a single person who in many cases is not a Native American. It is the purpose of conference CONAM's to "... determine the distribution of the Native American Ministries Sunday offering, coordinate the promotion of Native American Ministries

Sunday, and monitor Native American ministries within the annual conference." (§654) If the work of the CONAM is relegated to a single person under the umbrella of "Racial Ethnic Ministries" or "Connectional Table" structures, how can the *Disciplinary* directive be appropriately carried out? It is particularly important that Native American United Methodist persons be engaged in this work or we find ourselves back in all-too-familiar situations where non-Natives make decisions for Native people related to the creation and conduct of Native ministries.

Additionally, it is outside the letter and intent of *The Book of Discipline* to combine gifts given through the Native American Ministries Sunday Offering with the wider field of Racial Ethnic Ministries or Connectional Table funding decisions, or to insist that these funds be used for AOR work in annual conferences. In many conferences this offering constitutes the entire budget for ministry with Native Americans. Annual conference participation in the promotion of Native American Ministries Sunday is essential for both the actual realized funding that it provides, but also symbolically for the sense of affirmation offered to Native Americans inside and outside of the UMC.

5. Engaging in repentance for historic and contemporary actions against indigenous peoples must include a plan for restoration of right relationship with Native Americans in each conference. Examples of what might be included in such a plan are:
 - to work toward fully implementing §654 including the identification of a representative to advocate for Native American awareness within the local church/charge;
 - encouraging churches to give to Native American Ministries Sunday; in this way, there are funds within the conference to strengthen and initiate new Native ministries;
 - investing in resources related to Native Americans which may enrich the conference's "lending library" for local churches;
 - including Native American representation on conference boards and committees;
 - and, when a local church is closed by the conference, explore all the ways the physical property may be used to benefit Native Americans such as leasing properties to CONAMs or other Native groups, designating proceeds of property sales for new or existing Native churches/ministries, and/or deeding property back to indigenous nations, etc. Conference Native Americans must participate in these critical discussions and decisions.
6. Annual Conferences must develop a process for the education of local churches regarding Native Americans and the related history within their conference boundaries. Annual conference commissions on archives and history should provide leadership in this effort. Archivists and historians found in universities and colleges and resource persons from Departments of Native American Studies can also provide valuable information.
7. The United Methodist Church must acknowledge and respond to the real and recurring trauma experienced by Native American communities, honoring the continued hope we maintain in our People, in our call and in our Creator.

We pray that our letter and our recommendations are received in the same Spirit with which they are offered -- the Spirit of Hope. It is our greatest fear that this repentance movement will be only token in

nature, not producing any tangible change and resulting in the continued erosion of our presence, even until our light as part of the United Methodist Church is extinguished.

A more detailed document related to many of the issues raised in this letter, *The Study on Native American Evangelism and Discipleship*, is planned for publication in the fall of 2014, written by Rev. Anita Phillips. Ms. Cynthia Kent is available for consultation related to advocacy and organization of CONAM's within conferences and jurisdictions. Additionally, Rev. Chebon Kernell has the specific responsibility to work with Bishops and annual conferences in the work of AOR and is available for consultation. A Tool Kit for AOR is available through his office.

With the sincerest blessings for the work at hand,

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