



## Native American International Caucus of the United Methodist Church

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### **Land Acknowledgement vs. Welcome by the Original People; Suggested Guidelines for the United Methodist Church**

Offered by Ragghi Rain, Chairperson

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#### **Introduction:**

Many Annual Conferences and local churches want to acknowledge that they are meeting, worshipping, and living out ministry on land occupied and cared for by Indigenous people long before the Christian Church arrived. This is an honorable intent. In many cases the Original People are still living in those same areas but doing so with the historical impact and trauma resulting from centuries of land dispossession, broken treaties, child abduction, mass genocide, and practices of forced assimilation.

A Welcoming Ceremony by the Original People differs significantly from a Land Acknowledgement. Both practices help non-native people learn more about those who came before them AND help make visible those who have too long been invisible.

**A Welcome by the Original People** involves inviting and providing genuine hospitality to the Indigenous guests as they share something of their people, culture, and the land on which they or their Ancestors have lived for millennia.

**A Land Acknowledgement** addresses the injustices experienced by the Original People, both past and present, through truth-telling and a concrete plan of action, walking, and working with Indigenous Communities. A Land Acknowledgement is integral to a Conference's ongoing work, beginning with their Act of Repentance and Reconciliation, of mending the harm perpetuated through centuries of colonization.

In both cases, non-native people need deep humility in recognizing what they do not know and willingly take on the work of learning and listening to shared truths. Any suggestion or attitude that the Original People or their traditional spiritual practices are somehow "less than" or antithetical to Christian faith or practice is simply not acceptable and deeply harmful to all present.

### **Deciding between a Welcome or a Land Acknowledgement:**

There may be uncertainty about when a Welcome or a Land Acknowledgement is more appropriate to open a Church or Conference meeting. The simple guideline recommended is this: if the leadership is willing and has begun its work on working through the research, Truth-telling and action step planning in conjunction with Native partners, then a Land Acknowledgement could be appropriate; if not, then inviting local Tribal representatives to offer a Welcome is best.

### **A Welcome by the Original People at a Church or Conference meeting:**

A Welcome by the Original People involves inviting and providing genuine hospitality to the Indigenous guests as they share something of their people, culture, and the land on which they or their Ancestors have lived for millennia.

Conference staff would be responsible for inviting Indigenous people from the area to open a Church gathering. Ideally, this would happen in consultation with the local CoNAM. The invited guests would stand and welcome the event participants to the land which is their home. They might share whatever else they want that is meaningful or educational, something that is important for the gathering to hear. This sharing might include speaking in the original language or explaining a ceremony like making smoke.

The invitation to make a Welcome must be more than a token expression or checklist item on the gathering's schedule. That would mean that a minimum of 10-15 minutes should be anticipated. A time frame would be communicated to the guests as part of the invitation. Still, interruption of the welcome would be disrespectful if the visitors should inadvertently go beyond the time expected. The responsibility of the Conference leadership is to provide genuine hospitality to the visiting Tribal guest(s). A tangible acknowledgment that they have taken time from their life to come to share with the Conference is necessary. The hospitality would include some compensation for their time and payment for their mileage to the event, and/or an honorarium, and/or sharing in a meal together so that nourishment is offered.

Most often, the Indigenous visitors would come with a gift to present to the gathering as the practice of gift-giving is part of traditional greetings.

Likewise, in recognition of the Indigenous practice of gift-giving and appreciation of the Original People's presence, the Conference leaders should be prepared with a gift to offer the Tribe that has some local meaning. This gift would be beyond and in addition to the actual compensation offered to the individuals themselves.

### **An Indigenous Land Acknowledgement:**

A Land Acknowledgement addresses the injustices experienced by the Original People in that locale, both past and present, through Truth-telling and a concrete plan of action, walking and working with Indigenous Communities. A Land Acknowledgement is an ongoing process involving an ever-widening group of leaders from the Church or Conference. This group must take the time to discuss and define their purpose in writing and living out a land acknowledgment. Why are you doing this? What do you hope to make different? What is your current relationship with the Indigenous people of your area? What do you know about the original people's history in your area before European arrival and subsequently? What do you know of contemporary contributions, concerns, and problems? What more do you need to learn? How might you walk in a closer way, listening and contributing in ways that the Original People of your area define?

## **A Land Acknowledgment is NOT**

\*a document that one person writes

\*a document written without consultations with Tribal persons from the local area

\*words without actions

\*a once-and-done statement that is used repeatedly

\*a superficial, feel-good effort at including Indigenous People without addressing issues of justice and equity

An attitude of honesty and respect is necessary to enter this process, acknowledging that the stereotypes of Native people continue a "less-than" status that was begun by early Christian doctrines defining non-Christians as heathens and savages. Christianity has much to repent historically AND is currently devastatingly impacting Indigenous people, culture, and community. Awareness of the harm that has been perpetuated on multiple fronts, both past and present, as well as the impact on future generations, is vital to the successful work of pursuing justice, healing, equity, and relationship building.

A land acknowledgment requires Truth-telling, which is the hard work of facing the harm and pain that has been enacted against and experienced by the Original People. Phrases like "why can't you get over it? It's our land now" or references to "our founding fathers" brings further negativity and disrespect that continue the attitude of Indigenous people as less than human.

A land acknowledgment could create an experience of gratitude by those working on its development as they learned to appreciate the care of the land for the millennia preceding their arrival up to the current day. Likewise, the very real possibility exists that learning from traditional Native spiritual practices will expand, strengthen and deepen non-natives' practice of their Christian faith.

Understand that just because a person is Native, they may not necessarily be engaged in justice work as defined by the Church. Recognize that everything the CoNAM members may offer to the larger Conference reflects either positively to uphold the full humanity of Native people or negatively to reinforce the demeaning stereotypes of Native people. Work carefully with CoNAM teams to ensure that the Original People are fully respected with grace and gratitude.

## **Guidelines for Writing a Land Acknowledgement:**

**\*Research** - Learn more about the way in which your Conference, as well as other Europeans, acquired the land where your site is. Learn who the First People were who originally lived in your area. <https://native-land.ca/> Learn more about the Indigenous people whose land you now reside upon, and remember, even though generations have passed, your local Indigenous community still exists in one way or another. Understand that the non-native leadership tasked with the work needs to do the research.

**Truth-Telling** - Truth-telling includes deep listening and hearing the pain experienced by Indigenous people. When we tell and receive the Truth repeatedly, it becomes a part of us and helps us grow in understanding at deeper and deeper levels. The possibility and promise of Truth-telling are to bring healing to all creation. Truth-telling is an ongoing process revealing greater and broader connections. As such, a Land Acknowledgement is a living document and will need work before and after it is published.

**Develop a Comprehensive Action Plan** – Consider what more you and your ministry leadership can do to create a circle of friendship and healing with your local Indigenous communities. Listen to your Conference CoNAM leadership about the kinds of actions and activities that would be helpful to local Tribes. Work with them on how best to follow through on possible action steps. Understand and

commit to this work as an ongoing effort, with a proactive and respectful approach acknowledging that your timetable may not coincide with how the work unfolds in the Indigenous Community.

**Examples of Possible Action Steps:**

- Develop land return practices and policies so that Church (es) and church property that is abandoned or closed would first be offered to Tribal communities at no cost prior to sale on the open market;
- Establish mandatory training on Indigenous history and culture for pastors assigned to traditional native churches;
- Provide a significant number of scholarships for children or youth to attend Conference camps; with CoNAM participating in seeking to seek out and send the children, without the required completion of scholarship application processes which are often arduous and off-putting for Indigenous families;
- Maintain a consistent presence and participation by Conference staff with and at Native ministries and events;
- Provide administrative support from the Conference, both of staff time and talent, and in terms of supplies and services, for example, provision of Laptops, printing services, internet cost;
- Implement a real commitment to anti-racism work throughout the Conference, holding Conference staff, pastors, and local congregations accountable for growing in building relationships across racial/ethnic lines and in educating themselves about the history and current conditions;
- Engage in active support for advocacy efforts at the federal and state levels;
- Hold conversations about the challenges of a Christian tendency to forgive without making the wrongs right; strive to come to a respectful understanding of the harm inflicted when non-natives of good will suggest that “it’s time to forgive and forget in Jesus’ name;”
- Commit to twice-a-year meetings between Conference leadership and local CoNAMs to identify, educate and communicate issues of concern to Indigenous communities to the larger conference body, including Mascots, Supreme Court hearing re: ICWA, Native Boarding School, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives and more.

\*from Greater NW Circle of Indigenous Ministries, <https://greaternw.org/circle/landacknowledgment>