

## COMMENTARY: The Price of Repentance

Monday, 26 December 2011

by The Rev. Anita Phillips The 2012 General Conference will be a turning point for The United Methodist Church. I'm not referring to budget discussions or organizational changes but to the planned "Act of Repentance to Indigenous Peoples" that will test the fragile relationship between the denomination and Native peoples. As a Native American United Methodist I view the Act of Repentance as a double edged sword. On the one hand, it will be a time when delegates to the top decision-making body of the denomination will stop and listen and, I pray, engage seriously in the reflection and self examination that repentance requires.

On the other hand, we have a long history with Euro-American brothers and sisters -- since first contact -- that leaves me and other Native Americans with little trust that true repentance will take place.

The idea of repentance is one of the cornerstones of the church. When Jesus Christ began to share in the gospel, his words were "hear the good news and repent." This was essential for those who followed Jesus. Repentance is the first step toward reconciliation, a step that concerns me and many Native Americans. It is a great challenge of faith for us to trust acts of repentance from any institution of this country -- be it the government or the church.

I have mixed emotions about whether the church is ready for the Act or Repentance and if this is the right time. As I have traveled and spoken around the country on behalf of the National Native American Comprehensive Plan since the 2008 General Conference I have met people who don't understand the connection to our ancestors and the past. "Why can't you get over it?" they ask. "That was then and this is now," they argue.

The history we have experienced is at the very core of our being as Native people. We live our history every day of our lives. I don't think that is true for the dominant society. They certainly benefit from this collective history. They may claim their history but for the most part it doesn't have a lot to do with how they live and walk day to day.

If it does not result in change throughout the denomination there is a real chance that the 2012 Act of Repentance could backfire. This single act could contribute to historical trauma of Native people, not unlike massacres and broken treaties of the past. This is a very serious matter. I pray that delegates and church leaders understand the repercussions of their actions --- one way or another.

I am encouraged by Act of Repentance services that have taken place in some annual conferences. I pray that these seeds of repentance will take root and produce the fruits of dialogue and reconciliation.

Between the 2012 and 2016 general conferences I and my Native brothers and sisters will be watching with prayerful hearts. Will we see fruits from the Acts of Repentance? Will we see change? I hope so. I hope inaction will not prompt us to ask if the United Methodist Church is where God is calling our Native people to be.

I implore delegates and leaders of this church to take the Act of Repentance seriously. I pray that they will seek opportunities for dialogue and understanding with Native people all along on this journey. Become our champions, become our voice.

I can't imagine my life without the United Methodist Church. The Holy Spirit called me into this church. I have stayed in good times and not-so-good times. I will continue to pray, like the doubter in Scripture: "Lord I believe, help my unbelief." I choose to go forward with hope and with great desire to see repentance and reconciliation take place across this denomination. I pray you do as well.

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#### About the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns

GCCUIC is the part of The United Methodist Church that engages with and talks to other Christian denominations to work toward unity and peace. The Commission seeks to strengthen interreligious relationships, which enable community building. The Commission has been mandated by the 2008 General Conference to fulfill the "Healing Relationships with Indigenous Persons" resolution. More information about the 2012 Act of Repentance, including a resource list, may be found at [www.gccuic-umc.org](http://www.gccuic-umc.org).