

## GC2012 to include a call to repentance

A UMNS Report

By Kathy L. Gilbert and Linda Bloom\*

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Historically, the treatment of indigenous people by Christian churches –including Methodists – has been good, bad and ugly.

As The United Methodist Church gathers for its worldwide legislative session April 24-May 4 in Tampa, Fla., the denomination will recognize that history and take steps toward healing with Native Americans and other indigenous people around the world.

The Rev. Anita Phillips, director of the church’s Native American Comprehensive Plan, is praying her fellow United Methodists will make a “spiritual investment” during the service that will bear fruit for years to come.

“I will pray for my brothers and sisters in the church to be able to draw on a sense of courage of Christ to be able to make themselves vulnerable to hear our story,” she said.

An “Act of Repentance for Indigenous People” worship service is planned April 27 during the 2012 General Conference, as part of a charge to the United Methodist Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns by church legislators four years ago.

Since then, the commission has held nearly two dozen listening sessions with indigenous people in the United States as well as two sessions outside the United States. The agency also has submitted a resolution asking the denomination to continue the process of healing relationships with indigenous persons. The legislation calls on annual (regional) conferences to be in dialogue and to hold their own Act of Repentance service.

The Rev. George E. “Tink” Tinker, a citizen of the Osage Nation and an indigenous advocate and theologian, will be the worship service’s keynote speaker. Tinker is on the faculty at United Methodist-related Iliff School of Theology in Denver and an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Tinker said churches have a long history of being a part of European colonization in which native people were killed and had their land taken and put in the hands of white people.

Those things call for repentance, he said.

“The United Methodist Church is the first national denomination in the U.S. to take this sense of culpability, sense of corporate sin, seriously and to make a statement about it,” he said. “I have such great respect for Methodists who are actually intending to do something about this history of violence that most Americans just ignore.”  
Tampa’s history

Originally, the 2012 General Conference had been scheduled to meet in Richmond, Va., but the location was moved to Tampa in 2006 because of a church policy regarding meeting in cities that are home to professional sports teams with Native American names.

The site selection team initially was unaware that Richmond was home to the Richmond Braves, a minor league baseball team affiliated with the Atlanta Braves. Church members had raised concerns about team mascots when the 2000 United Methodist General Conference met in Cleveland, home to the Cleveland Indians baseball team.

Tampa, it turns out, has its own dark history regarding the treatment of indigenous people, said the Rev. Stephen J. Sidorak Jr., top executive of the Commission on Christian Unity.

He noted that the city’s connection to the Trail of Tears “the forced relocation of Native Americans from the southeastern United States after passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830” “is not widely known.”

But the history is being acknowledged locally. A “tweet” on April 11 from the Tampa Bay History Center, for example, said, “Today in 1836, 407 Seminoles were “deported” from Fort Brooke, Tampa, to New Orleans and forced to walk to Indian Territory (Oklahoma).”

The area surrounding the Tampa Convention Center, where General Conference will meet, holds other acknowledgements of the vanished Native American culture.

Under a highway overpass directly behind the center, a historical marker commemorates the former site of the 50-foot-high Timuquan Temple Mound thought to date back before the time of Christ. Spanning a city block, its flat summit held temples and the homes of chiefs. Ladies of Fort Brooke post held ice cream parties on the summit. In 1882, the mound was razed to fill the Jackson Street ditch.

On the Tampa Riverwalk, a memorial near the Tampa Bay History Center with a series of bronze plaques detailing the city's history with native tribes was commissioned by the City of Tampa in 2007.

"The venue itself is illustrative of all the problems that confront any perceptive American United Methodist," Sidorak said. "You can run, but you can't hide. Everywhere you turn, there's no escape of the tragic history that underscores the need for the Act of Repentance. Indigenous around the world

Another example of that tragic history is what became known as the Sand Creek Massacre. On Nov. 29, 1864, U.S. troops led by Col. John Chivington, a Methodist pastor, brutally slaughtered occupants of a Native American village in Colorado that was largely comprised of women, children and the elderly.

The Sand Creek Massacre National Historical Site, 160 miles southeast of Denver, opened to the public in June 2007. The 2008 General Conference voted to contribute \$50,000 to the development of a research and learning center for the historic site.

Indigenous people have been mistreated in many other nations, Tinker pointed out.

Under the leadership of a "staunch" Methodist "President William McKinley more than 1 million indigenous Filipinos were killed during the Philippine-American war, 1899-1902. That's just a piece of the history of the victimization suffered by native people around the world, he said.

Today, many indigenous Filipinos who once made their living fishing are now scavenging in garbage heaps for anything that can be recycled. What was once a small seaside village is now the infamous "Smokey Mountain," a smothering, stinking lagoon on the edge of bustling Manila.

Inside the capital city, street children beg while their families make their homes around the edges of garbage heaps and in the city's cemeteries. Gilead Center, a shelter founded in part by the Women's Division, United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, gives the children a safe place to sleep, food and an education. The church has also established a school and housing units for families who live around Smokey Mountain.

Feeling the suffering of others

How will United Methodists respond to the Act of Repentance? Phillips describes herself as a realist but also as an optimist. She knows not everyone will be open to hearing the stories of how indigenous people have been victimized and not every native person will be healed.

She is praying people won't turn away and let their defense mechanisms keep them from being open to feeling the suffering of others.

It is so easy to turn from that, to say, "That wasn't me! I am not an oppressor. I am a good person," she said. "When we do that, when we turn away, it is to the detriment of ourselves but also to the worldwide church."

Tinker said a simple apology is not enough; actions will have to follow repentance.

"That is the question that comes before the General Conference, what are you all going to do as a result of voicing this act of repentance? There are many possibilities; Methodists could take a whole new attitude toward indigenous people."

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