

Messages from Downunder: Fifth Parliament of the World's Religions
Make a World of Difference: Hearing each other, healing the earth

Hard Lessons

“The government took our land; the church took our souls. “ This theme reverberates through one of the major subthemes of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, meeting in Melbourne, Australia, December 2-9: **Indigenous People.**

Groups of indigenous people in different lands lift up the same basic concerns, whether they are Native American, Australian Aboriginal, Zimbabwean, Maori, Carib, or Sami. The details of history and politics and missionary experience may vary some, but the deep story is the same. Whenever Western culture imposed itself, totally different ways of understanding the world, relationships with each other and connection to the land clashed.

People who believe the land and its resources belong to everyone and they are custodians of it will have different societies, economies and spiritualities than those who believe that land and its resources, including people, belong to those who claim it and develop it for the benefit of those living able to hold it by force or political power.

Simply summarizing a huge block of history, the “voyages of discovery” of the 15th and 16th centuries were exploitations of resources for the benefit of “Christendom,” authorized by papal bulls of the church. As the Protestant Reformation developed, the European mindset of that time continued the search for new resources for the benefit of empires, assuming that it was a divine right to do so and an obligation to ‘Christianize’ native, “inferior” populations.

In the process over the last four hundred years, original custodians have been killed, taken out of their homelands, transported to other places, confined, robbed of dignity, made to be dependent on governments, and robbed of their histories, social order, tribal government, traditions, languages, wisdom, and spiritual practices. No wonder some describe themselves as soul-less.

What is the church to do? How does The United Methodist Church apologize for its times of distorting the message of love and liberation in Jesus Christ? How do we atone for this soul thievery that happened in boarding schools, in cavalry charges, and social systems and that continues today in institutional abuse and degradation. Whether we like to look at it or not, historically our churches were active agents of the US campaign of governmental subjugation, and in our continuing ignorance of history and current realities, we currently perpetrate the on-going oppression. “Colonization” and lies about history are still happening.

As I listen to these people who are remarkably still about to love and forgive, these are some of their suggestions I have gathered:

- If you pray from a distance, your prayers will not reach us. Let us eat food from the same table.
- Words are not enough. They may be a starting point, but even then they must be clear.
- Don’t talk about “re-conciliation; there was never “conciliation.” Speak instead of “condolence,” which carries connotations of “renewing,” “revitalization,” “establishing relationships with all life,” “peace” and “power.”
- Tell your history honestly. Tell us why you did what you did to us.

- Guilt is not a useful emotion. Re-focus its energy into support of indigenous people and their causes. Be our allies.
- Action must accompany words. Reparation is intrinsic to healing. Find ways to encourage Native people, particularly the youth, to lift themselves out of the devastation of historical trauma.
- Apologies are nice, but it would be more helpful if the church put as much time, energy, and resources into helping us revitalize our languages as they did in destroying them.

Mandaza Kandedemwa, Svikiro dream-keeper from Zimbabwe, told me of his vision that a new baby is being born into the world. Its name is Love, and all people are invited to embrace the baby. This echoes in my heart as I John 4:16, "God is love and those that abide in love, abide in God and God in them."

I believe the God of love is inviting United Methodists---and all Christians---to take a journey of healing and condolence with those our ancestors have injured in the past and that we continue to injure. Let us be brave and "not love in word only, but in deed and truth." I Jn 3:18. What better time than Advent to prepare to embrace this baby?

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