

Maine Episcopalians move to back tribes

7/23/09 [By Judy Harrison](#) Bangor Daily News Staff

A resolution endorsed by Maine Episcopalians nearly two years ago that calls for England to rescind a 500-year-old charter was approved last week by representatives to the denomination's national convention in Anaheim, Calif.

The charter, called the Doctrine of Discovery, was used to justify the subjugation of American Indians in the Americas and the dispossession of their lands by European sovereigns.

Episcopalians from around the country on July 15 overwhelmingly approved a resolution that calls for the repudiation of the doctrine, Brenda Hamilton, 46, of Waldoboro said Wednesday.

Hamilton, who attends St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Newcastle, was a delegate to the House of Deputies, which is composed of clergy and lay representatives. The House of Bishops held its own meetings at the same time and unanimously approved the resolution, she said Wednesday.

The national convention is held every three years. This year, it was held from July 8 to 17.

The resolution, according to Hamilton, is nearly identical to one passed in October 2007 at the annual convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Maine held in Bangor. The Maine diocese was the first in the nation to call for the church to repudiate the doctrine that Episcopalians have agreed "is fundamentally opposed to the Gos-pel of Jesus Christ."

The Episcopal Diocese of Central New York passed a similar resolution in November 2008.

John Dieffenbacher-Krall, a member of St. James' Episcopal Church in Old Town and the executive director of the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission, introduced the resolution that passed in Maine but was unable to attend the meeting in Anaheim, Hamilton said.

The Doctrine of Discovery, set forth by King Henry VII in 1496, held that Christian sovereigns and their representative explorers could assert dominion and title over non-Christian lands with the full blessing and sanction of the church, according to Dieffenbacher-Krall.

It has been cited in U.S. Supreme Court decisions to justify "treating indigenous nations and Native Americans as second-rate citizens," he said two years ago.

The resolution passed in Anaheim asks each diocese “to reflect upon its own history, in light of these actions and encourage all Episcopalians to seek a greater understanding of the Indigenous Peoples” and “to support those peoples in their ongoing efforts for their inherent sovereignty and fundamental human rights as peoples to be respected.”

In her testimony last week, a copy of which was e-mailed to the Bangor Daily News, Hamilton challenged Episcopalians “to root out” of the church and society those institutional prejudices and assumptions that are based in the Doctrine of Discovery.

“I live in New England,” she told the House of Deputies last week. “I have stood in many Colonial meeting houses. I know that those churches stand on a foundation of genocide. This resolution asks us and our fellows in the [United Kingdom] who share this colonial history to acknowledge and to turn away from the unjust foundations on which we stand. History cannot and should not be rewritten, but the future can move forward to a new place.”

Hamilton also called on members of her denomination “to examine the complex social and economic reasons for the chronic underfunding and financial dependence of our dioceses and missions in Navajoland, the Dakotas and other indigenous areas of our church.”

She said Wednesday that passage of the resolution would allow the denomination to support efforts in Congress to expand the rights for self-governance sought by Maine’s American Indian tribes and to weigh in on issues pertaining to tribal rights and funding for tribes throughout the country.

The resolution also calls for the denomination to support the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The U.S., Canada, New Zealand and Australia are the only nations that have not signed onto the declaration, according to the Episcopal church.

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