

Origin, Mission of the Episcopal Committee on Indian Relations & Its Work To Teach About and Undo the Damage of the Doctrine of Christian Discovery and Domination

Episcopal Committee on Indian Relations Origin

The Committee on Indian Relations (originally called the Native American Project) was created by a vote of the delegates assembled at the 172nd Diocesan Convention in May 1991.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that this 172nd Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Maine commends to all its members and congregations active efforts to get to know the Native American people of Maine; to learn about their histories, cultures, values, and yearnings, and join with them as we all share in the ministry of reaching out to all the people of Maine in the name of Christ; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Bishop appoint a Committee to assist in this effort and to work with other church bodies to help us move beyond the 1992 Commemoration as an historical remembrance to present and future sharing and action.

Additional resolutions were passed in 1992 and 1993. The 1993 Resolution #2 reads in part:

The Resolution of the 172nd Annual Convention of the Diocese establishing the Native American Project did not establish a term for the Project. Its wording, “to help us move beyond the 1992 Commemoration as a historical commemoration to present and future sharing of action” implies a continuing process.

The Native American Project has found that fulfilling the original intent of Resolution #7 of the 172nd Convention is a long-term commitment. Resolution of the 172nd Convention called for us “to get to know the Native American people of Maine; to learn about their histories, cultures, values, and yearnings, and to join with them as we all share in the ministry of reaching out to all the people of Maine in the name of Christ.” Further, the Diocesan Council, at its meeting of April 4th 1992, encouraged the Project to look beyond 1993.

We hope that this work will eventually be taken up by the congregations close to the various reservations, but that it will take our commitment to stimulate movement in that direction.

Episcopal Committee on Indian Relations Today

The Committee on Indian Relations agrees with the assessment of the 174th Convention that our work should be viewed as a “continuing process.” The Episcopal Diocese of Maine should not expect that it can undo the harm caused by 500+ years of settler colonialism, racism,

white supremacy, and genocide in 29 years. To fulfill the vision and aspirations of the delegates assembled at the 172nd Convention, the Diocese should anticipate a need for the Committee on Indian Relations and its work for many more decades if not centuries.

About a decade ago the Committee on Indian Relations adopted the following mission statement:

We are called by our Creator to deepen our relationship with the Wabanaki of Maine, to stand with the tribes in the pursuit of justice, to affirm their inherent sovereignty and to support the preservation of Native language and cultures.

Doctrine of Christian Discovery and Domination

The Doctrine of Christian Discovery and Domination comprises the worldview that Christians and especially Christendom have a right derived from God to invade non-Christian lands not claimed by other Christian nations and to seize the land and possessions of the non-Christian inhabitants and kill them if they do not instantly submit to the representatives of the Christian sovereigns. John Dieffenbacher-Krall preached a sermon at St. James' Episcopal Church on 10/15/2006 titled "Remembrance, Recognition and Reconciliation: The Episcopal Church's Call for Justice for Indigenous People" denouncing the Doctrine of Christian Discovery and Domination and calling upon all levels of the Episcopal Church to reject it. In the sermon, he called upon St. James', the Diocese of Maine, the Episcopal Church and the entire Anglican communion to renounce the 1496 Royal Charter of the Church of England in order for the Church to achieve some degree of reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. John worked with the Committee on Indian Relations to introduce Resolution #2 for consideration at the 2007 Diocesan Convention. It passed. It declares that the Diocese of Maine:

urges that the Archbishop of Canterbury for the Church of England and the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, the Queen of England, disavow and rescind the claimed validity of the doctrine of discovery against all peoples, specifically as it is set forth in the 1496 Royal Charter granted to John Cabot and his sons by King Henry VII,

The Committee on Indian Relations worked with the Diocese of Central NY in 2008 to pass a resolution modeled on Resolution #2. Then the Committee on Indian Relations proceeded to draft what became Resolution D035 passed at the Episcopal Church General Convention in 2009. The Committee worked closely with Lenape/Shawnee scholar Steve Newcomb on the language of the resolution. Resolution D035 states in part:

That the 76th General Convention repudiates and renounces the Doctrine of Discovery as fundamentally opposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and our understanding of the inherent rights that individuals and peoples have received from God, and that this declaration be proclaimed among our churches and shared with the United Nations and all the nations and peoples located within the Episcopal Church's boundaries.

Steve Newcomb discussed the significance of Resolution D035 in an op-ed published in Indian Country Today on 8/8/09. He wrote:

In 1972, Vine Deloria Jr. wrote “An Open Letter to the Heads of the Christian Churches in America,” in which he challenged the Doctrine of Discovery... The problems that continue to afflict Indian country, said Deloria, are the result of the Doctrine of Discovery never having been “disclaimed either by the governments of the Christian nations of the world or by the leaders of the Christian churches of the world. And more especially [it has not been disclaimed] by the leaders of the Christian churches of this country.”

Finally, 37 years later, the recent Episcopal Church resolution “Repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery,” signals the beginning of the kind of shift that Deloria was advocating from church leadership.

Robert Miller, another leading Indigenous scholar on the Doctrine of Christian Discovery, speculated in Indian Country Today on 8/9/09:

But what would be involved in ending the Doctrine of Discovery and removing its vestiges from American Indian law? In other words, what does the Episcopal Church’s call to action entail?

Some people are hoping the Supreme Court will reverse Johnson v. M’Intosh. (Note: 1823 US Supreme Court decision stating Indian Nations enjoy a mere right of occupancy, not title to the lands they had inhabited for millennia.) That is highly unlikely. Instead, I have called for Congress to work in cooperation with American Indian nations to seriously consider the Doctrine; how it developed and how it injured the Native peoples and tribal governments of the U.S. Congress and tribes could then draft various laws and take actions that would in essence reverse Johnson v. M’Intosh and undo or ameliorate the Doctrine of Discovery. It will obviously take very careful planning and consultation to change federal policies and laws that are up to 200 years old, and to perhaps alter tribal and Indian property rights under federal Indian law.

Maine Indian Land Claims Settlement Act

In 1972, the Passamaquoddy Tribe and the Penobscot Indian Nation compelled the Dept. of Justice to sue the Dept. of Interior on their behalf claiming they were entitled to their homelands that had been taken from them. Initially, the State of Maine dismissed the lawsuit as another of the occasional protests mounted by the Wabanaki over the colonial relationship. The State of Maine drastically shifted its view of the lawsuit in January 1975 when Federal District Court Judge Edward Gignoux agreed the lawsuit had merit. A multi-year negotiation ensued with the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians becoming involved during the final year. The negotiations resulted in the Maine Implementing Act, a State of Maine law (30 MRS §6201 - §6214), and the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act, a Federal law (25 USCS § 1721 - §1735), adopted in 1980. The two-part agreement was necessary because of the State of Maine’s

insistence it regain much of the authority it lost with Judge Gignoux's decision and the fact that the Federal Government, not the states, hold ultimate authority with Indian Tribes. The Maine law would not have taken effect without the ratification of Congress.

The Maine Indian Claims Settlement resolved the land claims of the three Tribes. But it also imposed limitations on Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot self-government not experienced by any other federally recognized tribe within the United States. The three Tribes have continually protested the injustice of the two acts since shortly after their enactment, and they have sought meaningful amendment of them through a variety of diplomatic and legal means, all of them thwarted.

The Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission, an intergovernmental body comprised of Wabanaki and State of Maine representatives created by the Maine Implementing Act, cited the provisions of the acts as a source of Wabanaki human rights violations.

MITSC requests an investigation into the impact of the implementation of the aforementioned MICSA and MIA. These Acts are in serious nonconformance with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) both in the process leading up to their enactment and in how they have been implemented. The Acts have created structural inequities that have resulted in conditions that have risen to the level of human rights violations. (bold in the original Letter of the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission to James Anaya, Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations, 5/16/2012)

The latest attempt to undo some of the colonial oppression involves the Task Force on Changes to the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Implementing Act. This body was created by a joint order of the Maine Legislature in June 2019 with the input and consent of the Wabanaki Tribal Governments. It met during the summer, spring, and early winter of 2019 and produced a report and recommended legislation, LD 2094 An Act To Implement the Recommendations of the Task Force on Changes to the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Implementing Act. The Committee on Indian Relations and 136 other groups and individuals testified on the bill during two days of public hearings held in February 2020. The bill is being considered by the Legislature's Judiciary Committee. It represents the best opportunity during the last 40 years to address some of worst provisions of the Maine Indian Claims Settlement.