



## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

October 12, 2020

*In the name of the God who creates every human being out of love, this church teaches human dignity is God's gift to every person and that the commitment to universal rights protects that dignity.*

—ELCA social message "[Human Rights](#)," 2017 (p. 2)

*We cannot advance justice today by forgetting injustice yesterday.*

—Rev. Dr. R. Guy Erwin, Osage Nation

While so many in our country endure a time of suffering and despair, God is present with us as we seek to see more clearly, heal from unrest and renew ourselves and our relationships. The way we talk about people matters. Names matter. Renaming a day matters. Recognizing the original people who have been here for time immemorial matters. Indigenous Peoples Day matters. We join states, cities and towns across the country to celebrate Indigenous Peoples Day in place of Columbus Day and honor the people whose lands we walk, whose Indigenous voices have always been spoken here and who share their gifts and contributions throughout our society.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's churchwide office sits in an Indigenous place. What is now known as Chicago remains the home of many Native nations. Historically and now, the Ojibwe, Odawa, Potawatomi, Miami, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Sac, Fox, Kickapoo, and Illinois people have congregated and lived at these crossroads along the banks of what is now known as Lake Michigan. The places where every synod has its offices, where every congregation built its place of worship, and where every Lutheran college and seminary was established belonged to a people. Indigenous Peoples Day is a time to acknowledge and recognize them.

Today there are nearly 5,000 American Indian and Alaska Native members of the ELCA and 30 ELCA congregations in American Indian and Alaska Native communities. Alaska Native congregations occupy some of the oldest Lutheran places of worship. These Lutheran and Native places lie on the open tundra near the icy waters of the Bering Sea, on the rolling prairies of the Great Plains and in leafy woodlands. These places are their homelands.

*The historical and generational trauma experienced by tribal nations does not have its source in nostalgia, or a sense of loss of private property: its source is in the loss of their place of deeply rooted identity in a specific place. This is a place which was given to them by the Creator thousands of years ago, a particular place where the Creator covenanted with their ancestors to live in this specific place; relation to the land cannot be moved to a different place, since the knowledge is meant for the specific relations which abound in that specific place.*

—Rev. Dr. Gordon Straw, Brothertown Indian Nation

In 2016, the ELCA took steps to [repudiate](#) one of the most fundamental bases for colonialism, the “Doctrine of Discovery,” which pledges, in part,

*... to repudiate explicitly and clearly the European-derived doctrine of discovery as an example of the “improper mixing of the power of the church and the power of the sword” (Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII, Latin text), and to acknowledge and repent from this church’s complicity in the evils of colonialism in the Americas, which continue to harm tribal governments and individual tribal members.*

—ELCA Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery

This alone will not suffice. As a church, we must sustain our efforts to educate ourselves and the wider community on the consequences of the Doctrine of Discovery\* on Native peoples.

We must continue to do this, repudiating racism, white supremacy, and logos, mascots and stereotypes that perpetuate prejudice against Native Americans. We must learn and tell the stories. We must educate ourselves and everyone within the sound of our voices about all the corners of our country’s dark and shameful past. We must build and strengthen relationships anew. Today and every day we commit to do our part to understand, respect and celebrate American Indian and Alaska Native people, their congregations and communities, and the church.

As we celebrate our rich history as Americans, we should reflect on the reality that the arrival of Europeans to these shores is seen differently by those who have experienced great pain and suffered many broken promises. Naming and honoring Indigenous Peoples Day moves us all toward a better place.

In peace,



The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton  
Presiding Bishop  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

*\*The Doctrine of Discovery is a papal bull from 1493 validating the seizure of lands from Indigenous people and nations based on the false teaching that Indigenous people are not human nor Christian, and therefore do not have sovereignty or government. The Doctrine of Discovery undergirds the entire experiment of the United States and continues to inform and justify supremacist laws, policies and practices. Christ’s church, including the ELCA, continues to be complicit in its application today.*