

NACP Snapshot of Native Ministries in The United Methodist Church

Introduction

Goals

To gain an understanding of the current state of Native American churches, ministries and fellowships in The United Methodist Church.

To make informed recommendations on how to strengthen and grow Native American churches, ministries and fellowships in the future.

About Native Americans in the United States:

- Total American Indian/Alaska Native population: 2.9 million or 0.9 percent of the U.S. population
- Federally recognized tribes: 573 (six tribes in Virginia recently added)
- State-recognized tribes: approximately 61

Disproportionate Statistics among Native Communities Due to Historical or Intergenerational Trauma

Historical trauma includes genocide, slavery, forced relocation and destruction of cultural practices. These experiences, shared by communities, can result in cumulative emotional and psychological wounds that are carried across generations.

- Native people die at higher rates than other Americans
 - Tuberculosis – 600 percent
 - Alcoholism – 510 percent
 - Diabetes – 189 percent
 - Suicide – 62 percent: Indian youth have the highest rate of suicide among all ethnic groups in the U.S. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for Native youth ages 15-24 (National Congress of American Indians).
 - In some tribal communities, American Indian women face murder rates more than 10 times the national average (U.S. Department of Justice).
- Native Americans account for less than 1 percent of the national population, but they make up nearly 2 percent of all police killings (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).
- In states with significant Native populations, Native Americans are wildly overrepresented in the criminal justice system.
 - South Dakota – Native Americans make up 9 percent of total population but 29 percent of the prison population.
 - Alaska – Native people account for 15 percent of the total population but 38 percent of the prison population.
- Native peoples suffer from high rates of poverty and unemployment.
 - Twenty-seven percent of all self-identified Native Americans and Alaska Natives live in poverty ([US Census Bureau](#))

About Native Americans in The United Methodist Church

The United Methodist Church has 32,148 congregations in the U.S.

Total number of Native American churches in The United Methodist Church in the USA – **157** (+/- 4) – (0.47 percent)

Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference (OIMC) – 87 churches (GCFA 84):

Most are circuit churches with two- and three-point charges.

- Pastors serving churches: 57
 - Elders: 17
 - Licensed local pastors: 9
 - Lay people serving as lay missionaries: 28
 - Retirees from the Oklahoma Conference: 3
- Average pastor's salary: \$31,000
- One-third of clergy and lay missionaries are bi-vocational.
- Currently, five Native students are enrolled in course of study; four are in seminary. Of these seminary students, two are younger than age 35.

Outside of OIMC: 70 Churches (Native American Comprehensive Plan 1):

- Chartered (official with structure and payment of apportionments): 51
- Mission (excluded from apportionments): 16
- New church starts: 3

Native American pastors serving non-Native churches: 71

Committees on Native American Ministries (CONAMs)

- U.S. annual conferences: 56
- No CONAM:
 - Memphis Conference
 - North Texas Conference
 - Northwest Texas Conference

Data Challenges for Native American Ministries Study

- Little or no additional data was available.
- GCFA data
 - Although GCFA keeps digital files back to 1974, it is difficult to get a historic picture of the number of Native pastors; if the pastor did not have an ethnicity submitted by the church, he or she was automatically listed as white.
- Consulted with United Methodist Communications and Wespath (formerly General Board of Pension and Health Benefits) for existing research

- In the 2017 clergy well-being study, only 18 clergy identified as Native American. This number didn't make the threshold of 25-30 to tabulate as a separate group; therefore, no data was available.
- Consulted other ethnic plans, but no comparison report existed

Native American Ministries Survey Methodology

Telephone interviews: 29

- North Central Jurisdiction – 4
- Northeastern Jurisdiction – 3
- South Central Jurisdiction – 2
- Southeastern Jurisdiction – 5
- Western Jurisdiction – 5
- OIMC – 10

Online surveys (anonymous): 20

Historical Events that Shape Ministry Today

Impact of Historic Trauma on Ministry

Since the 1700s, United States leaders have focused on westward expansion and put into place a system to assimilate or remove Native Americans from their homelands. Chief Justice John Marshall, in an 1823 Supreme Court ruling, declared that, "based on the Doctrine of Discovery, the European states, and the United States as their successor, secured a superior legal title to Indian lands." (Minnesota Historical Society)

The government's policy of assimilation would drastically alter traditional Indian cultural identities, and its effects continue to be felt today.

"Historical trauma is something all Native people are impacted by, and all Native churches should work toward creating healing ministries around this issue," said The Rev. Allen Buck, Wilshire Native American United Methodist Church, Portland, Oregon.

Missionary Mindset

In Minnesota, a state with seven Anishinaabe (Chippewa, Ojibwe) reservations and four Dakota (Sioux) communities, Natives and the churches do not mix well because of historic traumas. Even though nearly 61,000 Native Americans live in Minnesota, the annual conference has one Native church in the northern part of the state and one Native pastor who is not appointed to the Native ministry. The conference does have an active CONAM to focus efforts on creating awareness about the needs of Native Americans. At the request of the CONAM, the conference has not done an Act of Repentance to Indigenous Peoples because members want the conference to be more educated about why they are repenting. An apparent "missionary mindset," where the dominant culture "knows best," has left Native members feeling unheard. For example, a "shoe-box ministry" works

well in the northern part of the state. Churches fill shoe boxes with toys and snacks to distribute at Christmas to children on the reservations. The urban areas lack a central gathering place for Native ministries, and the shoe-box ministry does not fit the needs of the large and growing urban Native population. When CONAM members have recommended a financial donation to the urban ministry instead of shoe boxes, donors and churches have not been responsive. The CONAM has redirected Native American Ministries Sunday dollars to support education for the conference to have a wider-reaching impact.

Separation of Christianity and Native Culture

The historical effort to “Kill the Indian and Save the Man” began in 1887 and launched the boarding-school era to strip away tribal culture and end traditional practices. By 1900, thousands of Native Americans were studying at almost 150 government and church-run boarding schools around the United States. The [Methodists](#) ran 14 agencies in the Pacific Northwest, with 54,743 Native students and the most schools compared to other denominations, according to the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. The deliberate policy of ethnocide and cultural genocide in boarding schools created additional complications for expanding Native ministry. Most students were taught that their culture and traditions were evil and sinful. Even today, pockets of Native churches and communities completely shun using Native practices in worship. The Four Corners Native American Ministry, a Navajo Cooperative Parish, based in Shiprock, New Mexico, does not allow any Native spirituality in worship. Most of the pastors are first-generation Christians who attended boarding school.

The OIMC experiences similar situations where church members or leaders, who are either boarding school-educated or descendants of parents who attended boarding schools, choose not to practice Native traditions in worship. This has resulted in a loss of language and tradition for younger generations. In many rural communities, Natives have had to choose between practicing Native traditions or “walking the Jesus road.”

“As Native people, we are trying to fit in a white model of Christianity that doesn’t work,” said the Rev. Clarence Yarholer, pastor at Wewoka Indian United Methodist Church, a rural congregation in the OIMC.

The disconnect from Native traditions hinders church growth, especially efforts to reach young people experiencing rebirth in their Native identity.

“We are living in an era when ... we are giving ourselves permission to claim who we are as Native Americans and Christians,” said the Rev. David Wilson, OIMC superintendent. “It’s a different era from when our parents and grandparents were told they had to choose. Young people are proud of who they are and don’t understand what the big deal is that they cannot live their lives as Creator called them to live inside and outside of the church.”

Leaders in the Upper New York Annual Conference CONAM say they also experience a strong distrust from Native American communities when it comes to the work of the church. They say it will take some time to repair relationships and build trust.

Impact of United Methodist Act of Repentance

The United Methodist General Conference held an “Act of Repentance toward Healing Relationships with Indigenous Peoples” on April 27, 2012, in Tampa, Florida. During this time, the United Methodist Council of Bishops pledged “to live differently, reversing the damage that has been done through our participation in violence, maltreatment and neglect of Native and Indigenous peoples so that we may bring about healing and restoration to all.”

The Act of Repentance highlighted the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre where a Methodist pastor was ordered by a Methodist governor to kill more than 160 mostly women, children and elderly Native Americans who were camped at the banks of Sand Creek near Eads, Colorado.

In 2012, Native leaders were cautious about the Act of Repentance, knowing that inaction by the denomination would cause further damage to indigenous peoples.

“It is my great hope European Americans will not turn from this moment,” said the Rev. Anita Phillips, director of the Native American Comprehensive Plan.

Six years later, one can see solid examples of how conferences have engaged in living out the Act of Repentance, but also indicators that the work to repair relationships is far from over for the denomination. According to the Rev. Chebon Kernell, executive secretary of Native American and Indigenous Peoples Ministries with the General Board of Global Ministries, 26 annual conferences have either held Act of Repentance services or have begun to engage with Native communities in some way.

In 2014, the Rocky Mountain Conference turned its annual meeting into a two-day teach-in on the Sand Creek Massacre. Led by Bishop Elaine Stanovsky, 13 buses carried some 650 conference members and guests, including descendants of the massacre’s survivors, three hours to the Sand Creek Massacre site. The pilgrimage demonstrated a new level of commitment and seriousness to acknowledging wrongs of the past.

In the Upper New York Conference, CONAM representatives say since the 2014 Act of Repentance service there, they have witnessed a change in attitude by conference staff. Prior to the service, the CONAM worked to develop learning sessions in 12 districts to make sure people in the conference understood what the service was about and how to share it with the rest of their district. They also engaged the conference staff and bishop to attend Native churches and to listen to their needs. They say the Act of Repentance service was a huge driving force to improve conference relationships with the Native community.

The OIMC reports that a positive impact from the Act of Repentance can be seen financially. The conference saw an increase in giving in 2016 and 2017 through The Advance, the denomination’s second-mile giving program.

United Methodist Women created an Act of Repentance committee to continue to work toward healing relationships. A UMW study found that United Methodists are interested in learning more about Native communities. In response, the OIMC offers immersion experiences that include visits to the Washita Massacre site in Cheyenne, Oklahoma. The visit focuses on the events following the Sand Creek Massacre. The OIMC hopes to encourage continued interest in Native ministries.

Members of the Council of Bishops have also made efforts to support Native communities in new ways. When New Jersey took away the state recognition of the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape tribe, of which several United Methodists are members, Bishop John Schol wrote letters of support on behalf of tribal members. The tribe has battled for more than five years to regain recognition.

In Minnesota, Bishop Bruce Ough is working with the CONAM to return a sacred “Red Rock,” in the possession of the Newport United Methodist Church, to the Dakota people. The conference is meeting with Dakota tribal elders to create a thoughtful process for relocating the sacred object. In addition, Ough, along with bishops in the Western Jurisdiction, sent a letter to the president of the United States expressing support for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline. Ough also visited the camps occupied by “Water Protectors” in 2016. The California-Nevada Conference, under the leadership of Bishop Minerva Carcaño, passed a resolution in support of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe at their 2013 annual conference.

In the Oregon-Idaho Conference, staff were prepared to close the Wilshire Native American United Methodist Fellowship in Portland which had struggled for decades. Stanovsky, after visiting the fellowship and realizing it was the conference’s last connection to Native communities, decided not to close it. Instead, the conference invested in a Native full-time pastor. In just six months, the church attendance doubled. In addition to reviving the Portland ministry, Stanovsky and the conference are in conversations with the Nez Perce Nation about returning a section of the Wallowa River, owned as part of a United Methodist camp, for restoration of a historic salmon run.

In the Peninsula-Delaware Conference, the CONAM requested that, rather than selling churches that close, the conference give property back to the Native people in the area. In 2017, Union Wesley United Methodist Church in Crisfield, Maryland, which closed in 2012, was transferred to the Accohannock Tribe of Maryland. The tribe plans to use the site for a community center.

While many important strides are taking place regarding healing relationships, some CONAM members have expressed frustration about still not being invited fully to participated at the annual conference level. This sentiment was shared in several conferences. Some conferences still have not held an Act of Repentance service.

In the South Central Jurisdiction, an annual conference held an Act of Repentance service inviting OIMC members but excluded the local CONAM in the planning process. In addition, when the conference restructured, placement of the CONAM in the new structure was almost overlooked until Native members advocated for their place and reiterated the mandates in the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* for a CONAM.

One CONAM member said, “We are at the table but haven’t been invited to sit.” They described feeling like observers to the annual conference. Another blow to the Native United Methodist community came in 2012 and 2016 when the South Central Jurisdiction had the opportunity to elect the first Native American bishop but did not gather enough votes to do so.

Emerging Themes in Native Ministries

Conference Relationships Best Practices

The largest concentration of Native American ministries outside of the OIMC is in the Native

American Cooperative Ministry of the North Carolina Annual Conference. Established in 1978, the cooperative includes 14 Native American United Methodist churches, 11 in North Carolina and three in South Carolina. The cooperative has 2,400 members, mostly from the Lumbee Tribe. The largest Native American congregation is Prospect United Methodist Church with 1,000 members located outside of Pembroke. The cooperative has a strong relationship with both the North Carolina and South Carolina annual conferences. Lay and clergy members are involved in conference committees and provide resources about Native ministries to the conferences.

The CONAM in Alaska reports a great working relationship with the Alaska United Methodist Conference. For the last four years, the conference has included a Native Elders Address at its annual meeting. Alaska CONAM members gathered recently with CONAM chairs from across the Western Jurisdiction to discuss the creation of a Western Jurisdiction Committee on Native American Ministries. It would be the first jurisdiction-wide CONAM to collaborate on Native ministries. The Native American Comprehensive Plan, as well as Carcaño, participated in the inaugural meeting.

Training and Leadership Development

Several survey participants voiced the need for additional training for Native leadership as well as resources to train non-Natives in their annual conferences. Care must be given to cost and location of training events so the greatest number of people can attend.

Training topics include:

- Technology training (using PowerPoint presentations and video in worship)
- Increased participation in the Native course of study
- Creation of Native course of study unique to the OIMC
- License-to-preach school specific to the Four Corners ministry
- Native American Ministries Sunday certified training
- Lay missionaries training
- Cultural awareness training for non-Natives
- Native advocacy training (action items to support Native Americans today)

Reaching Young People

The need to reach young Native Americans is critical for the survival of Native ministries. As mentioned, the entire United Methodist Church has only two Native seminary students younger than 35. Many survey recipients listed reaching young people as a top priority for the NACP moving forward.

Many Native churches consist of older members who are very set in their ways in terms of style of worship and church practices. Pastors of rural churches and reservations say the distance to attend church often makes it challenging for young families. A few pastors said if they had better transportation such as a church van, they could automatically increase attendance just by being able to pick up children and families and bring them to church on a regular basis.

At Dallas Indian United Methodist Church, reaching the 25-45 age group is the biggest challenge. The urban ministry competes against very busy family schedules.

The Ponca Mission in the OIMC says the resurgence of Ponca songs in worship has led to an increase in young people's participation. The Rev. Jim White says the songs were almost gone, and the ministry has worked to bring them back. He says the youth are coming to learn the Ponca songs.

Native American Ministries Sunday

Native American Ministries Sunday is one of six churchwide special Sundays with offerings of The United Methodist Church. Native American Ministries Sunday serves to remind United Methodists of the gifts and contributions made by Native Americans to our society. The special offering supports Native American outreach within annual conferences and across the United States and provides seminary scholarships for Native Americans. United Methodists celebrate Native American Ministries Sunday on the Third Sunday of Easter. As required by the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, 50 percent of receipts stays within the annual conference to develop and strengthen Native American ministries within the annual conference.

2016 Native American Ministries Sunday Receipts

- Giving to Native American Ministries Sunday reported by churches: \$595,685
- Kept by annual conferences: \$270,000
- Sent to GCFA: \$325,674 (A few annual conferences choose to give 100 percent to GCFA, citing they have no Native American population.)

The current challenge of the Native American Ministries Sunday offering, for the amount sent to GCFA, is that only three or four students apply for the seminary scholarships. A large portion of the money remains unused.

At the conference level, Native American ministries often lack the membership size to afford a full-time pastor or the cost of maintaining a church. Native American Ministries Sunday offerings are sometimes used to pay insurance and building repairs. CONAMs have also distributed funds to cover the cost of travel expenses for Native United Methodists to attend NACP and other church events. In the Four Corners ministry, Native American Ministries Sunday funds support the day care center, training for pastors and purchase of Sunday school supplies.

Many CONAM members report being very busy during April, promoting and speaking on behalf of Native ministries.

Conclusion

Native American ministries are in a crisis. The origins of Native ministry in The United Methodist Church continue to have a crippling effect on growing and expanding Native ministries. The Act of Repentance was a step in the right direction, but considerable work is left to help educate conferences and bishops on the impact of historic traumas and the need to continue a process to heal relationships.

Traditional practices to expand ministries do not necessarily apply to Native communities. With the history of the Methodist Church in western expansion and assimilation of Native peoples, the denomination must first build trust in Native communities to be successful. Given the total number

of Native churches and ministries in the denomination, the entire U.S. Native population of 6.6 million (2015 U.S. census) is currently underserved.

The NACP and CONAMs have the opportunity to reshape programs to improve the way they address the needs of Native ministries nationwide. Providing immersion experiences for non-Natives, developing personnel and material resources to Native American congregations and targeting areas for new church starts in Native communities are a few possibilities.