

Dear members of the ELCA Church Council,

Grace and peace from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We are pleased to present to you this proposed declaration of the ELCA to the American Indian and Alaska Native people.

**Background**

This declaration is intended as part of the implementation of the action of the 2016 Churchwide Assembly on the [Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery](#). The declaration was prepared by a task force appointed by the presiding bishop. The task force members are:

- Pastor Richard (Dick) Magnus, (co-chair), retired, living in Savage, Minnesota, Former Executive Director of the Division for Outreach.
- Vance Blackfox (co-chair), Desk Director for American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal Nations, Service and Justice Home Area
- The Rev. Amy J. Odgren, Bishop of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod
- Kelly Sherman Conroy, Ph.D. Candidate, Luther Seminary, Secretary of the ELCA American Indian/Alaska Native Lutheran Association
- The Rev. Jessica Crist, Bishop Emeritus ELCA Montana Synod, current co-chair of the ELCA Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery Table
- The Rev. Dr. Carmelo Santos (Staff), Director for Theological Diversity and Ecumenical & Inter-Religious Engagement, Office of the Presiding Bishop
- Jennifer de Leon (Staff), Director for Racial Justice, Office of the Presiding Bishop
- Christine Mangale (staff), Program Director, Lutheran Office for World Community

**Process:**

The process consisted of prayerful discernment and deliberation among the task force members. That was followed by consultations with the president of the ELCA AIAN Lutheran Ministry Association and its board. The task force also heard from some of our ecumenical partners on their experiences doing the work of healing relationships with Indigenous communities. They were chosen because of the high regard in which their work is held among Native leaders across various churches including our own. We heard from: Rev. Susan Johnson, National Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and Rev. Paul Gehrs, Assistant to the Bishop, Justice and Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations of the ELCIC also presenting on behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada. We also heard from the Rev. Katerina Friesen and Ms. Sarah Augustine from the Mennonite Church and the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery [Anabaptist Network].

After that process of intentional listening, a writing team was designated and members of the task force shared with them the key elements that they felt needed to be included in the declaration. The writing team wove those elements together into a draft which the task force then reviewed and revised until consensus was reached. The draft was then shared with the larger Table coordinating the implementation of the Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery (co-chaired by Marlene Whiterabbit Helgemo and Rev. Jessica Crist). The result is the declaration that is now before you for your consideration.

We present this declaration for your consideration with the humility and boldness of faith, in the hope that it will serve as an invitation for deeper relationships and new partnerships for the sake of the gospel.

Sincerely,  
AIAN Declaration Task Force  
September 16, 2021

## **A Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to American Indian and Alaska Native People**

In 2016, the Churchwide Assembly of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), its highest legislative body, adopted a Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery. The Doctrine of Discovery originated with a Papal Bull in the 15th century and codified both colonialism and religious intolerance into international law.

As Native theologian George "Tink" Tinker (Osage) explains:

"We need to understand that the Doctrine is explicitly theological and christian legal discourse, firmly predicated on a global pronouncement made by a catholic pope more than two decades before the Lutheran reformation. Nevertheless, it was also the legal principle used by every protestant christian group who made claims to Native land in north America, from the episcopalians at Jamestown to the puritans and pilgrims in new England -- and lutheran immigrants who swept across the northern tier of the U.S. claiming Indian land as their own properties."<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the Doctrine of Discovery created a theological framework that supported racism, colonialism, and the annihilation of Indigenous people. It continues to support those evils and injustices today found in our church, US law, and legal interpretation. The Doctrine of Discovery has been pervasive throughout the world and has benefited the Church and ELCA Lutherans in every way, which requires us to address our own context in the United States and the Caribbean as well as how our US economic interests have exacerbated life internationally. Further, the Doctrine of Discovery is not simply a historical document and is not only about the past. Rather, it is indeed about our present and impacts the future.

The theological witness upon which the ELCA is built includes an implicit critique of colonial understandings of how we stand in relationship to others. In "The freedom of a Christian," Luther spoke of how "by faith" Christians are "lord of all, subject to none," but he also immediately qualified that premise by adding that the Christian is completely "servant of all, subject to all." In the same treatise (and in many others) he sternly warned against the misuse and abuse of spiritual authority as if it somehow granted political or civil power to the church or Christian rulers. The Doctrine of Discovery is an example of such abuse, an ecclesial manifestation of being "lord of all" which the Lutheran movement and the Christian church in general, must intentionally repudiate.

This *Declaration to American Indian and Alaska Native People* is presented as part of the implementation and in obedience to the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly mandate:

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<sup>1</sup> [George "Tink" Tinker, "The Doctrine of christian Discovery: Lutherans and the Language of Empire," Journal of Lutheran Ethics, \(march 2017\), Volume 17, issue 2, ¶6.](#)

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.<sup>2</sup>

In this Declaration, we humbly address three groups: ELCA American Indian and Alaska Native communities; the broader Indigenous community in the US; and the non-Indigenous communities of the ELCA.

### **Our Confession:**

#### **To the American Indian and Alaska Native communities of the ELCA:**

We confess that we have not listened to the stories of Indigenous people and have not taken the time to understand history. We have devalued Indigenous religions and lifeways and have not challenged the invisibility of Indigenous people in American society. We have treated American Indians and Alaska Natives as a “minority group” rather than as sovereign nations. We have not taken seriously the importance of land and how complicit we are in accepting the benefits of stolen land. We confess that in our church life we have failed to keep promises about funding and autonomy made at the inception of the ELCA. We confess that we have underfunded and over-interfered in the workings of Indigenous congregations and ministries. While we adopted the Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery in 2016, we have not yet taken action to live out the Repudiation.

We confess that we are complicit in the annihilation of Native peoples and your cultures, languages, and religions, and that we have refused to truly recognize the harm that we have caused our Native siblings. We confess that we must continue to learn more about our complicity and the roles our church played in dehumanizing Indigenous peoples, especially as it relates to the forced assimilation, abuse, and death in Indian Boarding Schools, adoption, and foster care; the ecological damages in Indian Country and beyond due to climate change; the breaking of sacred treaties meant to govern the relationships between Native sovereign nations and the US Federal Government; and missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and relatives.

#### **To the American Indian and Alaska Native community in the US:**

We confess that we, as a church with European and immigrant roots, have benefitted from and perpetrated settler colonialism. We have not, over the years, repudiated the underlying white supremacy that allowed European settlers to invade all tribal lands, and that presently allows for our church, our congregations, and white and non-Native populations to reside on

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<sup>2</sup> [ELCA Social Policy Resolution CA16.02.04, “Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery.”](#)

stolen lands that rightfully belong to Indigenous peoples. We have not challenged our own racism that has caused us to treat Native people as less than human. We do not understand the implications of the broken treaties that have benefitted settlers and decimated sovereign nations. We confess that we as an institution have not joined the struggle that Native youth are leading in the fight for climate justice, voter's rights, and protection from COVID-19. Nor have we honored and learned from their wisdom and courage.

**To non-Indigenous communities of the ELCA:**

We confess that we, as a church with European and immigrant roots, have benefitted from broken treaties, our participation and complicity in the annihilation of Indigenous peoples and culture, and our continued racist oppression of Native people and their sovereign nations. We confess that our congregations are built on the original homelands of Indigenous people, that we have continually refused to include the truth about our treatment and exploitation of our Native siblings and their lands as central to American history. We also confess that we have not learned our own church's history related to Indigenous peoples. We confess that we allowed for the effectiveness of the National Indian Lutheran Board--an organization that demonstrated historic solidarity and worked for justice for Indigenous people--to diminish when it was dissolved at the beginning of the church in 1988. We further confess that the church did not proactively support continued effectiveness through the work of the ELCA's American Indian Alaska Native Lutheran Association.

**Our Pledge:**

**To the American Indian and Alaska Native communities of the ELCA:**

We give thanks for the American Indians and Alaska Native Lutherans who have been present from the beginning of the ELCA and its predecessor bodies, sharing their wisdom, steadfastness, and leadership to help make our church better. Therefore, we commit to working toward the elimination of racism and white supremacy that exists in our church's governance, leadership, congregations, and membership that has always had and continues to have detrimental effects on Native communities and our ELCA Native siblings, congregations, and ministries. We commit to honor Native leadership, learn from them, and secure a place for that leadership at decision-making tables. We commit to developing a strategy with the American Indian Alaska Native community including a mechanism to grow the Native American Ministries Fund that was placed in the ELCA's care. We commit to consistently communicate American Indian and Alaska Native concerns across the church and to respond to those concerns accordingly, and we will begin celebrating holidays and anniversaries associated with Indigenous people appropriately. We commit to work for the inclusion of Indigenous history in all K-12 curriculum in public schools and to develop effective education opportunities for non-Indigenous leaders and membership of our church. We commit to supporting forms of leadership, education, and certification that are Native-focused and Native-led, and we commit to developing future Native leaders, pastors, and theologians. We commit to encourage and support wherever possible the buyback and

return of tribal land, and further commit to support creative programs resulting in reparations for stolen lands.

**To the American Indian and Alaska Native community in the US:**

We commit to better understanding the Doctrine of Discovery, identifying the ways in which it is still used to oppress Indigenous people, and how best to realize our church's repudiation of such a sinful ideology. Therefore, we commit to partnership with Native nations and with Native organizations that educate, support, and interpret the rights of Indigenous people, including the National Congress of American Indians and the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. We commit to national and international advocacy through our ELCA Advocacy Office in Washington DC, the Lutheran Office for World Community at the United Nations, as well as in state and local legislative bodies. We commit to learning about treaties, and to engage our members in advocacy for treaty rights as they affect current issues of justice.

**To non-Indigenous communities of the ELCA:**

We commit to strengthening our anti-oppression efforts with a greater focus on realizing justice and equity for Indigenous people. Therefore, we commit to providing educational materials and opportunities to help our church and our non-Indigenous members better understand our repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery and our complicity in its long-range implications. We commit to learning about the Church's role in and the century's long policy of the US Federal Government of family separation and to eradicate Native culture and identity through indoctrination and forced assimilation of Native children at Indian boarding schools, forced and illegal adoptions to white families, and foster care. We commit to supporting the healing of survivors of Indian boarding schools, adoption, and foster care and their descendants while advocating for policies that will bring both truth and justice. Similarly, we commit to advocacy for and being in solidarity with Tribal nations, MMIWGR organizations, families, and friends who have long been searching for their loved ones, Indigenous women, girls, and relatives who have gone missing or who have been murdered. We commit to supporting Tribal nations in their work to preserve their languages, and we commit to begin the practice of land acknowledgements at all expressions of the church.

**Our Declaration:**

We understand that no document, no matter how carefully crafted, will accomplish the actions of truth and the work of justice as it relates to our American Indian and Alaska Native siblings. We also understand that what has developed over hundreds of years will take enduring commitment to address. We are becoming increasingly aware of the ongoing evils of the Doctrine of Discovery, and by the actions we commit ourselves to herein, we now declare our allegiance to the work of undoing those evils, building right relationships with Native nations and Native peoples, and remaining faithful to our shared journeys toward truth and healing.