

Street-Stewart to MN Council of Churches: “Acclaim the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”

Elona Street-Stewart, a leader in both the Native American community and the Presbyterian Church, issued a forceful challenge to the Minnesota Council of Churches and its new CEO Rev. Curtiss DeYoung:

Institutions — including religious ones — “are designed to maintain and protect systems of privilege,” Street-Stewart said, adding:

”Please disavow and repudiate all doctrines of domination, and acclaim the rights of indigenous peoples .

“Please learn from us, and do not preside over us.

“Please accept a place in the circle, but do not occupy the center of the circle.”

Street-Stewart is a member of the Delaware Naticoke Nation and the executive of the Lakes and Prairie’s Synod of the Presbyterian Church USA, which includes Minnesota. She was one of three people DeYoung asked to speak at his installation service Dec. 14 at Park Avenue United Methodist Church.

Here is the full transcript of her talk.

WE CAN DO GOOD, AND THAT IS A REMARKABLE THING.

By working together, we can be grounded in diversity and also aspire to integrate friendships and truth-telling into our mission and our presence.

Institutions are designed to maintain and protect systems of privilege but we can covenant to recreate a more just and sustainable culture- to reimagine, reinvest, retool, redistribute, reinvest in people and our world. In other words to be the good medicine of peace.

My charge to you is to find courage to affect organizational and cultural change, to determine what authority your privilege offers to change the dominant monoculture of conquest over place and time

A couple of years ago, just before I was installed in my position as synod executive, I visited an exhibit at the NMAI [National Museum of the American Indian] featuring eastern tribes and viewed the actual beaded representation of the first bilateral agreement between Europeans and Indigenous nations. The Two Row Wampum belt was so powerful that I cried when I saw it. This beaded image of a pair of dark bands across the middle of a white field, was created in 1613 when the Dutch began showing up to occupy land in New York. The Haudenosaunee said,

“They looked different, didn’t speak our languages, had a different culture and ideas.” But we saw them as a people. The tribes called a meeting about these people coming into our territory to decide how we were going to live together with “these people who had entered our house and were living in our rooms; they were uninvited and they were destructive.” We chose representatives to meet their people and discuss our concerns. Our leaders came to an agreement with them to commit to living together in peace. It declared that we would tolerate trading and sharing land as long as both of us agreed, and that we would support each other in case there was a shortage of food, and have the right to keep our own traded goods and if disputes arose we would bring it to the whole group. All of this is illustrated in the beaded image. One of the bands on the wampum belt represents the native canoe and the other the immigrant’s tall ships, both traveling in the same direction, different and yet mutual, parallel, co existing- never to impede on the other’s path to prosperity. The wampum belt is still intact and our word is still good. It is a living treaty. Sadly, the shared promises were soon shattered and the mutuality collapsed.

As native people we have always resisted the coercion of the white man’s dominate monoculture and religions that violated our values of respect, reciprocity and relations with the natural world. Here we are today in Minnesota, where treaties legalized settler occupation and the expulsion of the Dakota.

I charge you to remember we remain spiritual, indigenous people who have integrated traditional and Christian teachings into our self-determination and sovereignty. Acquaint yourself and the MCC with multi-tribal leadership and communities. Although America has told the same flawed narrative about hundreds of tribes, we do not have a uniform racial identity and are not a monolithic culture. Be watchful that your members and partners do not generalize us all together. Tribal diversity is real and prominent here in MN, cultivated by forced migration, relocation strategies, boarding schools and other government programs. See us in the fullness of our diverse languages, origins, relationships and identities.

Remember we are still here in spite of being hidden in plain sight. **Lament the absence of our presence** in the public domain. The erroneous perception in that false narrative is that we are the ones who disappeared, the “vanished”, not quite immigrants or refugees, void of citizenship, but that we are the “other”, like aliens appearing in unexpected places, in words like Minnesota, or Bde Maka Ska.

Curtis, challenge this cognitive dissonance between what has been taught and what has been left out. Reach for educational resources like Sacred Sites tours, the Dakota 38+2 ride, Doctrine of Discovery presentations, Native media and Native authors, the KAIROS Blanket exercise, and water protectors to move congregations and community partners forward with meaningful dialogue and interactive engagement. Invite direct input from a broad inclusion of American Indians to inform your mission outreach, development strategies, family and refugee services, financial investments and emerging coalitions, all those unexpected places, policies and practices where you need our wisdom and witness.

Speak boldly about necessary reparations –*you know*, those reconciling, repairing and redeeming acts – every time you acknowledge whose indigenous homeland it is wherever you gather to

meet. Be aware how other marginalized people are always watching and interpreting these manifestations into their oral histories.

Continue the work of liberation, but indigenize the anti-racism and anti-poverty programs. Start by validating that disease, enslavement, dispossession and genocide annihilated American Indians and as our population was eliminated and land confiscated, the equally horrific enslavement campaign brought indigenous people from Africa as slaves to build this country

You are called to build trust and credibility in the MCC. You also accept a responsibility for its history.

Please disavow and repudiate all doctrines of domination, and acclaim the rights of indigenous peoples.

Please learn from us, and do not preside over us.

Please accept a place in the circle, but do not occupy the center of the circle.

With the future in sight, remember we are still here where the Creator placed us, we have kept our agreement of friendship and respect. I pass on the sacred inspiration from my installation to you. Let your word be good medicine and honor the Two Row Wampum as we travel on this journey for *Peace* together