

## **With Actions and in Truth: A Lament of the Doctrine of Discovery**

*“Let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”*

—1 John 3:18 (NIV)

### **IN TRUTH**

*“Truth can appear as disaster in a land of things unspoken.”* —Joy Harjo, Mvskoke/Creek Nation, US Poet Laureate

As people of God and followers of Christ, we are called to speak truth.

As Brethren:

- We believe in peace—living in right relationship with those around us.
- We believe in simple living—moving lightly on this earth, as we know it does not belong to us, but to God.
- We believe in being together—as we are always better when we are in community.

These core beliefs about who we are mean that we cannot be silent in the face of injustice, whether it is lost to history or fresh and new.

Therefore, this document names the injustices of the church’s history with Indigenous peoples, invites the members of the denomination to study and understand the complex relationship between the church and Native nations, and equip the Church of the Brethren with a foundation for future action.

**We, as members of the Church of the Brethren, lament and seek to repent of the Doctrine of Discovery—the written documents and the pervasive ideologies that followed—which has been used for hundreds of years to justify the brutal and violent subjugation of Indigenous peoples around the world and in North America.**

We lament the many ways in which white settlers, who historically have included members of our church, have removed Native people from their homelands and caused violence, harm, and death.

We grieve the loss of Indigenous life, culture, language, land, and stories.

At the same time, we celebrate the resilience of Native nations and the diverse, vibrant Indigenous cultures that persist amidst adversity.

We remember that, as Native people have persevered throughout history, they will continue to rebuild, create, rest, commune, love, and live far into the future.

We seek to unlearn the many myths we have been told about our country’s history and instead learn about the past through the eyes of Indigenous peoples.

We seek to undo those parts of our own institutions that act as barriers to justice.

We will explore our responsibility as a church with regard to reparations, the concept of returning what is owed to the original inhabitants of this land.

We commit to walk side by side with Indigenous peoples as we dream up a just future together.

## What is the Doctrine of Discovery?

*“The landscape of the late twentieth century is littered with bodies of our relatives. Native peoples in this country were 100 percent of the population a few hundred years ago. We are now one half of 1 percent. Violence is a prevalent theme in the history of this land.”* —Joy Harjo

The “Doctrine of Discovery” is the international law of colonialism.<sup>1</sup> It was not one document, but rather a series of writings and papal bulls or decrees developed by the Roman Catholic Church and subsequently adopted by the majority of Christian groups. The Doctrine of Discovery aided colonization of the world by establishing spiritual, political, and legal justifications for the subjugation of Indigenous peoples and the seizure of any land that was not inhabited by Christians. The foundations for this doctrine can be found in writings as early as the 1100s, but two papal bulls in particular are significant: “Romanus Pontifex,” by Pope Nicholas V in 1455, and “Inter Caetera,” by Pope Alexander VI in 1493. This doctrine instructs European monarchs to “invade, capture, vanquish, and subdue all . . . pagans and other enemies of Christ . . . to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery . . . and . . . to take away all their possessions and property” (Pope Nicholas V).<sup>2</sup>

These documents have been used for hundreds of years to justify the Christian European genocide and enslavement of Native peoples, and domination of land and water, in Africa, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and the Americas. While the original documents were Catholic, many different Christian churches and national governments adopted these ideas and used them in their own ways to subjugate Native peoples.

This Doctrine of Discovery has been affirmed by legal decisions and established in legislative and executive actions. It was used in 1823 by the US Supreme Court to take land from Indigenous peoples. It was used as recently as 2005 in a Supreme Court decision authored by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg to justify the restriction of the rights and sovereignty of Native tribes.<sup>3</sup> These sinister and prejudiced ideas have even made their way into media and school curriculums.

The ramifications of these beliefs of Christian superiority are not caught in the past. They reverberate from the past into the present, and unfortunately will continue to have effects into the future.

## The Church of the Brethren and Indigenous peoples

A common understanding of the Church of the Brethren relationship with Indigenous peoples is reflected in the 1994 statement “Community: A Tribe of Many Feathers,” which says that “since Brethren generally did not participate in the military, they were not involved in the direct destruction of native traditions, lands, and people.”<sup>4</sup> There are many ways to participate in such destruction, however. While Brethren may not have had as explicit a connection to the subjugation of Indigenous peoples as, perhaps, the denominations that ran boarding schools, Brethren are not free from blame. We must acknowledge and lament the ways in which we have caused harm.

Members of the Church of the Brethren, as a historically white church, are settlers on Native land and have benefited from the removal of Indigenous peoples. Brethren have been complicit in violence against Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> “The Doctrine of Discovery: The International Law of Colonialism,” Robert J. Miller, 2019. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3cj6w4mj>

<sup>2</sup> “Romanus Pontifex,” Pope Nicholas V, 1455.

<sup>3</sup> City of Sherrill vs. Oneida Indian Nation of New York, 544 US 197 (2005).

<sup>4</sup> “Community: A Tribe of Many Feathers,” Church of the Brethren statement, 1994. [www.brethren.org/ac/statements/1994-community-tribe-of-many-feathers](http://www.brethren.org/ac/statements/1994-community-tribe-of-many-feathers)

populations in ways we rarely discuss—for example, in the mid-1900s, Brethren Volunteer Service sent volunteers to Native boarding schools, including the Phoenix Indian School and the Intermountain Indian School.<sup>5</sup> In line with the dominant ideologies of the time, boarding school staff and Brethren Volunteer Service workers attempted to smother the young students' cultures and traditions and replace them with white, Christian practices. The trauma of this erasure is intergenerational—it is felt in the minds and bodies of people for generations, and many Native elders and their families are still healing from boarding school traumas today.

## WITH ACTIONS

*“[The] creation story lives within me and is probably the most dynamic point in the structure of my family’s DNA.”* —Joy Harjo

There is no such thing as “undoing” the harm done against Indigenous peoples. However, we can name that harm, undo our systems that continue to cause violence, and create a better future with the guidance of Indigenous leaders. Speaking truth is vitally important, but it is not the same as taking real action to ensure that we do not continue the dangerous and brutal cycle of colonialism and white supremacy.

“From the beginning, the Church of the Brethren has found a biblical peace witness to be central to our life and faith,” says the 1991 Annual Conference statement, “Peacemaking: The Calling of God’s People in History.”<sup>6</sup> As people who believe in radical peacemaking, we already have the foundations for boldly speaking out against unjust institutions. The statement goes on to say, “We cannot retreat from the world. . . . We must become aware of the rampant injustice and subtle hidden violence in today’s world, examine our own involvement, and identify nonviolently with the oppressed and suffering. . . . We look toward a future that will be more peaceful, just, and respectful of God’s creation.”

Through the following actions, we strive to do just that—examine our involvement in both the rampant injustice and the subtle hidden violence that make up the marginalization of people indigenous to this land.

## Recommendations

1. That the Church of the Brethren commit to ongoing advocacy, dialogue, education, and relationship-building regarding Native American rights.
2. That invitations be extended to facilitators of the Blanket Exercise<sup>7</sup> from Kairos Canada to host sessions for Church of the Brethren leadership and staff and to present at relevant church events, such as Annual Conference.
3. That attendance of Church of the Brethren leaders and staff at the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition’s conference<sup>8</sup> be funded. Attendees may include Dine’ members from the community in Lybrook, N.M., Intercultural Ministries staff, and other denominational leaders.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Gospel Messenger*, various articles, 1950s.

<sup>6</sup> “Peacemaking: The Calling of God’s People in History,” Church of the Brethren statement, 1991. [www.brethren.org/ac/statements/1991-peacemaking](http://www.brethren.org/ac/statements/1991-peacemaking)

<sup>7</sup> [www.kairosblanketexercise.org](http://www.kairosblanketexercise.org)

<sup>8</sup> <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/>

4. That the Church of the Brethren consult with Indigenous organizations and tribes to develop a process for congregations, districts, and the denomination to consider land reparation following the leadership of Native nations or organizations.

*The Mission and Ministry Board at its meeting on Sunday, March 12, 2023, adopted “With Actions and in Truth: A Lament of the Doctrine of Discovery” by unanimous consent and forwards it to the 2023 Annual Conference for adoption.*