

GA-1324
(Item for Reflection and Research)

**Reflection on Christian Theology and Polity, the Christian Doctrine of
Discovery, and the Indigenous Voice**

Proposal for Reflection and Research:

That the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, meeting, July 13-17, 2013, in Orlando, Florida, accept “Reflection on Christian Theology and Polity, the Christian Doctrine of Discovery, and the Indigenous Voice” as an Item for Reflection and Research during the 2013-2015 biennium. This reflection and research process would be accountable by report to the Administrative Committee, the General Board, and the 2015 General Assembly.

This process would encourage the church to engage in reflection, prayer, and education about the Christian Doctrine of Discovery and its effect on Disciples theology and polity, and explore how the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) might become accountable to indigenous persons. Such a process may include:

- 1) Discernment on how the Doctrine of Discovery influenced Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) theology, polity, missional outlook, action and the ensuing loss of indigenous voice within the movement.
- 2) A study of the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and how support of the document might enhance the physical and spiritual wellbeing of the North American landscape and her people.
- 3) Encouraging conversation with our religious neighbors to listen and share our common histories as affected by the Doctrine of Discovery.
- 4) Encouraging ministers, military chaplains, and seminarians to learn how the Doctrine of Discovery became embedded in their Christian teachings, theology, and polity.
- 5) Encouraging research and discourse as to why there are no American Indian or First Nations congregations within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Background

The Christian Doctrine of Discovery (Doctrine) is a body of work beginning in the 15th century with a series of papal bulls and theological statements justifying the Age of Discovery and the colonization, conquest, subjugation of lands and peoples around the world. During the next 500 years, religio-political empires fashioned edicts, court decisions, treaties, and laws enhancing discovery efforts.

For decades, North American indigenous scholars and theologians have asked North American Christians to examine the Doctrine of Discovery’s influence on Christian identity, theology and polity.¹ They have also urged Christians to explore how Doctrine-based theology and polity not only have impacted the North American landscape historically but also continue to do so at the present time. The need for exploration is manifest in the cultural, communal, and individual damage experienced

by American Tribal and First Nations people: American Indian and First Nations teenage suicides outpace all ethnic constituencies;ⁱⁱ reservation unemployment ranks among the highest in North America;ⁱⁱⁱ the incidence of Type II diabetes is extreme;^{iv} and poverty is excessive.^v

American Indian and First Nations voices are *chronically absent* from discussion in the United States and Canada.

Disciples of Christ have a particular responsibility to examine the presence of the Doctrine of Discovery because the Disciples began during an intense period of conflict with indigenous peoples. Writings of the church's founders (e.g., Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott) during this era indicate a social mindset similar to that of their peers. Therefore, the developing theology and polity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) may have aspects of the Doctrine of Discovery embedded.

Exposing the Doctrine of Discovery's entrenchment within a Christian religious structure has recent precedents:

- 2009—Episcopal Bishops repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery.^{vi}
- 2012—Unitarian Universalist Association and Quakers repudiate the Doctrine.^{vii}
- 2012—World Council of Churches Executive Committee denounces the Doctrine.^{viii}
- 2013—United Church of Christ Council for American Indian Ministry brings a resolution for repudiation of the Doctrine to the United Church of Christ General Synod.^{ix}

The weight of our peers' actions invites the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to thoughtful reflection concerning our theology and polity in the shadow of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery.

For these reasons, we call for the Administrative Committee to explore ways for the church to engage in reflection, research, prayer, and education so we might better become "a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world," and effectively respond to the brokenness of our society and our faith.

Yakama Christian Mission, White Swan, WA
Englewood Christian Church, Yakima, WA
First Christian Church, Mount Vernon, WA
First Christian Church, Bellingham, WA
Lake Washington Christian Church, Kirkland, WA
Open Gathering Christian Church, Bellevue, WA
(Congregation in formation)
Findlay Street Christian Church, Seattle, WA
First Christian Church, Puyallup, WA
Murray Hills Christian Church, Beaverton, OR

ⁱ e.g., Vine Deloria Jr. in 1972 wrote, *An Open Letter to the Heads of the Christian Churches in America*, which in part he said, "The Doctrine of Discovery has never been disclaimed by the governments of the Christian nations of the world or by the leaders of the Christian churches of the world;" *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding*

the Doctrine of Christian Discovery, by Steven T. Newcomb; *Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and Manifest Destiny*, by Robert J. Miller.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/suicide/statistics/rates03.html>, <http://www.sffa.sk.ca/wp-content/uploads/teensuicide.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.indian.senate.gov/public/files/January2820102.pdf>, <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-559/table/t7-eng.cfm>.

^{iv} <http://www.healthguidance.org/entry/6323/1/Native-Americans-The-Facts.html>, <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fniah-spnia/diseases-maladies/diabete/index-eng.php>.

^v http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/american_community_survey_acs/cb13-29.html, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2006/11/24/child-poverty.html>.

^{vi} *Episcopal Church*: <http://www.doctrineofdiscovery.org/episcopalrepud.htm>.

^{vii} Unitarian Universalists: <http://www.uua.org/statements/statements/209123.shtml>; Religious Society of Friends (Quakers): http://www.nyym.org/sites/default/files/Minute_Doctrine_of_Discovery.pdf.

^{viii} World Council of Churches: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/executive-committee/bossey-february-2012/statement-on-the-doctrine-of-discovery-and-its-enduring-impact-on-indigenous-peoples.html>.

^{ix} <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/gS29-1-DoctrineofDiscovery.pdf>

**The General Board recommends that the General Assembly
ACCEPT GA-1324 as an Item for Reflection and Research for
the 2013-2015 biennium.**