

R-4: Repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery

WHEREAS, we confess with our Native siblings that the whole of creation is God’s work, that God declares it all as good, and that God’s spirit dwells within it; and we as the church confess that Jesus Christ became incarnate in human form to show God’s love and mercy to all humanity, in all its variety, and to every race and people on every continent of the earth; and in the service of Affirmation of Baptism in Evangelical Lutheran Worship, we commit to “serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth,” and

WHEREAS, when European explorers came to the Americas, it is estimated that somewhere between 50 and 100 million native peoples inhabited North and South America, and that within several hundred years, those numbers declined by approximately 80%, due to warfare, massacre, disease and other factors, and

WHEREAS, we acknowledge with pain and regret that native peoples were removed from lands they had occupied for hundreds of years, often forcibly, and their children were placed in boarding schools, resulting in the division of families, the loss of language, culture, and religion in an attempt to colonize them, resulting in profound social, emotional, and spiritual crisis in native communities, and

WHEREAS, these practices were undergirded by the Papal bull issued by Alexander VI in 1493, called the “Doctrine of Discovery,” that any land not inhabited by Christians was available to be discovered and claimed by Christian rulers, so that the Christian religion could be spread throughout the new world, and was incorporated into U.S. federal law in the 1823 case of *Johnson v. McIntosh*, establishing that the United States inherited all rights to lands conquered by the English and this law was further strengthened by the belief that God had ordained all American land be claimed as the “manifest destiny” of the United States to grow and expand across the continent, and

WHEREAS, the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted the social policy resolution 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, and

WHEREAS, the Northern Illinois Synod occupies land originally inhabited by Native American peoples, ceded to the U.S. in the 1842 treaty, and has yet to join other ELCA synods in acknowledging the church’s part in this conquest and express support for the sovereignty of Native American tribes, by joining them in speaking out for just treatment, promoting harmony, reconciliation and mutual understanding within and among our communities;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Northern Illinois Synod 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 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; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Northern Illinois Synod request that the Racial Justice subcommittee of the synod, with the help of tribal members, if possible, help promote advocacy for treaty and other rights of Indigenous Peoples within the synod territory and foster relationships between our communities; and work to further understand and appreciate the history, heritage, culture and spirituality of our Indigenous neighbors; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Northern Illinois Synod affirm with the ELCA that this church will eliminate the Doctrine of Discovery from its contemporary rhetoric and programs, electing to practice accompaniment with native peoples instead of a missionary endeavor to them, allowing these partnerships to mutually enrich Indigenous communities and the ministries of the church.

Submitted by: Social Ministry Committee
Contact person: Pr. Jacob Gawlik, chairperson

Action of the Resolution Committee: Recommend adoption of the resolution

Date of Action: May 3, 2022