

Mennonite Church USA includes over a dozen active Native American congregations and in September 2006 our Executive Board issued a collective statement supporting the “apology bill.” Along with nearly 1,000 Mennonite congregations in the U.S., I support this resolution of our governing body.

The resolution would “*acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the United States government regarding Indian tribes, and offer an apology to all Native Peoples.*”

A brief summary of the resolution:

1. Tribes have a special political and legal relationship with the United States.
2. Native peoples have been stewards and protectors of the land for thousands of years.
3. The United States has broken treaties and covenants, made ill-conceived policies, and deprived Indian tribes of their rights.
4. Apologizes to all native people in the United States, “for instances of violence, maltreatment, and neglect inflicted on Native Peoples by citizens of the United States;”
5. Expresses regret and a commitment that the United States will build upon positive relationships with native people so that all people will live harmoniously with one another and the land;
6. Urges the United States President to acknowledge the offenses committed by the United States against Indian tribes; and
7. Commends current state governments’ reconciliation efforts and encourages other states to develop a healing process with Indian tribes.

This Joint Resolution is only a small step toward reconciliation. More importantly, the United States government must stop mistreating Native Americans, stop misusing promised funds and begin to adequately fund Native American programs in health, housing and education.

I ask you to work not only to pass this bill, but to ensure that its passage is not a token apology. This bill must be the first step toward respecting the rights of tribes.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important bill.

Sincerely,  
(your name and address)

## Credits

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<sup>i</sup>Juhnke, James C. and Hunter, Carol M. “The Original Peacemakers,” *The Missing Peace: The Search for Nonviolent Alternatives in United States History*. Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2001.

<sup>1</sup>From Friends Committee on National Legislation website

<sup>ii</sup>Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup>“Indian Trust: Cobell vs. Kempthorne”. [www.indiantrust.com](http://www.indiantrust.com).

<sup>iv</sup>Erb, Paul. *South Central Frontiers*. Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1974.

<sup>v</sup>Sharp, John E. “Mennonites and Native Americans: Reconciliation?” *Mennonite Life*, June 2006. [raven.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2006June/sharp.php#N\\_3\\_](http://raven.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2006June/sharp.php#N_3_)



# Congregational Resources

## Support for Bill to Apologize to Native Americans

### San Jose 2007 Delegate action:

**We, the delegates of Mennonite Church USA, gathered in San Jose, California in July, 2007, support the joint U.S. Senate and House bills that “acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the United States Government regarding Indian tribes and offer an apology to all Native Peoples on behalf of the United States.”**

Our Native sisters and brothers asked our delegate body to officially support this bill currently before the House and Senate of the United States government. The joint bill does not include any material restitution; it only acknowledges some of the injustices and oppression suffered by First Nations peoples of North America at the hands of white immigrants and the United States government.

### Introduction of Resolution at San Jose 2007

During the Tuesday morning adult worship session, the congregation saw a video about the United States government’s forced relocation of Native peoples and the stealing of their land (download available [www.nativeres.org](http://www.nativeres.org)). Then Steve Cheramie Risingsun spoke:

My name is Steve Cheramie Risingsun. I’m of the Muskogee confederation group known as the Huoma Chitimacha of Louisiana.

I speak today that the people may live. I’m here today to speak for those children who were forced against their own desires and against the wishes of their parents into government boarding schools or church-run boarding schools. I speak on behalf of the children whose stories will never be told in a book or a magazine, in a movie or television program, yet their stories ring true today.

I speak on behalf of those who were beaten with switches across the face, those who were locked in a closet all night long where there was no air and no light and they had to put their noses to the bottom of the door to get fresh air. I speak on behalf of those children whose story won’t be told but their lives were filled with fear from being separated from family and friends and community and from a way of life that they’d known. They were put in a new setting and they were forced to cut their hair real short and forced to wear tight leather shoes. I speak on behalf of those who because of that fear and that separation became bedwetters. The people disciplined them by making them sit on the ground with the hot sun shining upon them with that urine-filled sheet over their head. The children locked in a dark closet all night and the children with the sheet over their head didn’t know who to pray to. Who would save them? Their tribe and their family gave them up. Who would save them? How could they call upon the God that they’d come to know because the people who were doing this to them were God’s representatives. And so how could they go against God’s representatives?

I speak today on behalf of the lost generation of our people. You may see them in cities gathering aluminum cans and sleeping on the streets. You may see them as those who have serious alcohol and drug problems or you may read about them as they commit suicide. I speak on behalf of those whose story may never be told except in some way or other to generations at home.

I’m reminded of my own people. I’m from a peace village. The governor of Louisiana was afraid that if the native people ever gathered together and joined with the African slaves they would overcome the European population. There were about 25,000 Native People, 15,000 African slaves and only 5,000 Europeans. And so he told 100 of the African-American men that he would free them if they would attack this peace village. They attacked this peace village when most of the men were away

from the village out hunting for food. Only about 25 women and young girls, 15 children and a few old men were left in the village. The slaves attacked and killed every person in the village and earned their right to freedom. The only people who survived from that peace village were the men who were away hunting. Their peace village was located just outside of a fort there in Louisiana and they thought they would be protected and safe under a banner of peace. But the attack brought what the governor hoped to bring – division between the races.

And so I speak on behalf of those who through massacres, dislocation, dispossession of lands, a way of life, a culture, to those survivors of the mentality of both the government and the early missionary church “kill the Indian, but save the man.” I speak on behalf of all those who have been wounded and hurt and all those who have received a misrepresentation of God’s heart toward them.

The traditional native community of this county has joined with many of our native Christians and they’re saying we don’t want money, we’re not asking for land, but we’re asking for something that we feel will help bring healing among us – if we can hear those powerful words, “I’m sorry, will you forgive me?”

*Jim Schrag, executive director of Mennonite Church USA, responded and then led in prayer:*

I was privileged to have Steve take me to his homeland during a visit to the Gulf States soon after Hurricane Katrina. During that visit I was shocked to learn that even to this day, the people of the dominant culture – of which I am a part – have found loopholes in the law and technicalities in the law to continue the appropriation of native lands. I wanted you to know that this continues to this very day.

Please bow in prayer with me for a prayer of confession.

Our great and loving and forgiving God: We beg your forgiveness and the forgiveness of the people who many of us through generations have wronged and who we are still exploiting to this day. We thank you that your grace covers many, many sins but we ask also that we would understand the responsibilities that we still carry to this very day. That this is not only about our previous generations . . . this is about our generation. Accept our contrite hearts and lead us in the ways of peace. We pray in the name of Jesus, amen.

## Native American and European-American Mennonite Interaction

*Note: These words do not adequately represent either the Native American or European-American Mennonite experience. Each person’s and group’s story is unique. Our understandings grow only as our trust deepens. Please read these*

*words with openness to hearing difficult truths. Hold these words tenderly, knowing they are a first step and raise questions rather than provide solutions.*

Native peoples have lived on Turtle Island, the North American continent, since time immemorial. These First Americans inhabited and cared for all of this land for thousands of years before white Europeans arrived. Likely the American hemisphere had more inhabitants than all of Europe.

After 1492, Europeans’ lust for gold and land, along with their slave trade, warfare and diseases, devastated and demoralized the First Americans.

European-Americans (Mennonites among them) were drawn to the frontier by cheap land and manifest destiny—the belief that God ordained the spread of white culture and values from coast to coast. Europeans viewed the frontier as wasted land awaiting the plows of “civilized” farmers to make it productive. However, Native Americans had for millennia raised crops, developed trading networks, built cities—some large, elaborate, and intercultural—and maintained effective social and political organizations on this same land.

Following the dispossession of Native peoples, the government and church groups destroyed Native culture and spirituality through forced assimilation. Native spiritual practices and forms of government were outlawed. Communal land was forcibly divided into private allotments. Remaining Native land and resources were placed “in trust” with the federal government, whose mismanagement of these resources has cost First Nations people an estimated \$10-40 billion over the past century.

While Mennonites generally did not participate directly in the dispossession of the First Americans, they benefited from it just one step behind, purchasing land from the federal government or the railroads who did displace Native Americans. Neither did Mennonites develop a conscience against cultural and racial genocide. Writing from his 1974 vantage point, Paul Erb, grandson of Kansas pioneers said, “As we see it now, Mennonites do share a collective guilt for violating the tribal [relationship to the] land, for killing the buffalo upon which Indian life depended, and for breaking the treaties which were given to protect Indian rights.”

Given Mennonites’ own experiences as aliens and strangers in European lands, one might think they might have felt a kinship with the dispossessed Native peoples. We can find scattered references to cordial encounters between Swiss German Mennonites and Native Americans. But settlers of European origin more typically saw the First Americans as “wild people” and “savages,” augmented by the repeated retelling of the attacks on the Jacob Hochstetler family in Pennsylvania in 1757 and the John Roads family in Virginia in 1764.

## Intentional relationships

Sustained and intentional relationships began with the General Conference Mennonite Church’s mission to the Arapahos at Darlington, Indian Territory in 1880. Subsequent missions and schools extended to the Cheyennes, Hopis and the Navahos.

Those of us who are White Mennonites understand these relationships from our perspective. We remember the good we intended and are often oblivious to the realities experienced by the Native peoples. However, our relationships have been far from perfect and we have participated in the colonization process. We have treated Native peoples as inferior, in need of our White, Christian help. We added to their pain with our involvement in establishing boarding schools which led to loss of culture and language and caused family disruption. Boarding schools have been proven to be places where sexual, physical and emotional abuse was experienced by Native children.

MCs and GCs formed partnership groups in 1968 and 1987—Mennonite Indian Leaders Council (MILC) and United Native Ministries Council (UNMC). These groups were formed in recognition of the spiritual kinship of European American Mennonites and Native Americans—now also Mennonite.

In 1991 and 1992, anticipating the quincentennial of Columbus’ so-called “discovery” of America, both Mennonite groups issued formal statements of apology for their complicity in “the displacement and oppression of Native populations.” They pledged “to refrain from a triumphalist spirit,” and to work toward “an accurate understanding of the past 500 years.” And further, “as God, through his love and mercy, adopted us as children, we promise to adopt one another, Native and non-Native, as brothers and sisters in Christ.”

Fifteen years later, we can ask whether these statements of repentance led to a change in our hearts and our actions. What does it mean to “adopt one another, Native and non-Native, as brothers and sisters in Christ?” What acts of true justice are Mennonites prepared to take to live up to our word and to our calling in Christ? Apologies not only say “sorry” but work to restore the relationship through the pursuit of justice.

We want to be truly repentant as God teaches and we understand that unless an apology goes hand in hand with restitution and a change in behavior, it is meaningless. At this time, we see our support of this federal apology as a first step in our white Mennonite journey toward repentance. We hope that we will also be able to commit ourselves to walking this long road together toward a place of justice and true reconciliation.

When we acknowledge historical mistreatment and offer public apology for horrendous wrongs done to First Nations people, we are recognizing their past experiences, which contribute to their current tribal self-understanding and identity. This apology might offer a path to mutual healing. We are also doing the work of God’s people – truth telling. We acknowledge that apology is only a very small beginning to reconciliation among Native peoples, descendents of European settlers and the United States government.

## What you can do

***Be willing to take time*** to listen to the stories of First Nation peoples and, if you are white, to acknowledge the benefits you have received by centuries of their mistreatment.

***Whose land do you worship on?*** Research which Native Americans originally lived in your community, how they were dispossessed of their land and their current living conditions.

***Return to the Earth*** is a restorative act that goes beyond confession. Initiated by Lawrence Hart, a Cheyenne peace chief and Mennonite pastor in Oklahoma, this project is endorsed by MCC and supported by an ecumenical effort of more than 80 faith-based groups. The project “supports Native Americans in burying unidentifiable ancestral remains now scattered across the United States and enables a process of education and reconciliation between Native and Non-Native peoples.” You can help by using the congregational study guide and helping construct burial boxes, sewing burial cloths and making monetary contributions. Restorative justice recognizes “the interconnectedness among people,” and invites the church to “support the return of Native American remains so that they can be buried with dignity on their land.” See the following website for congregational study materials, [www.rfpusa.org/returntotheearth/index.html](http://www.rfpusa.org/returntotheearth/index.html).

***Write your senators and representative.*** Please write and send e-mails or faxes to both of your senators ([www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)) and your representative ([www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov)), encouraging them to help this bill come to the floor and to vote for it. (Please do not send letters in the mail because they are delayed by postal anthrax inspection.)

Your message to your senators and representative might say:

Dear Senator/Representative (*Name*):

As a member of your constituency, I ask you to support the **Native American apology bill** (S.J.RES.4/H.J. RES 3). This bill is a small but vital first step toward acknowledging past abuses of Native Americans by the United States government and moving toward true reconciliation.