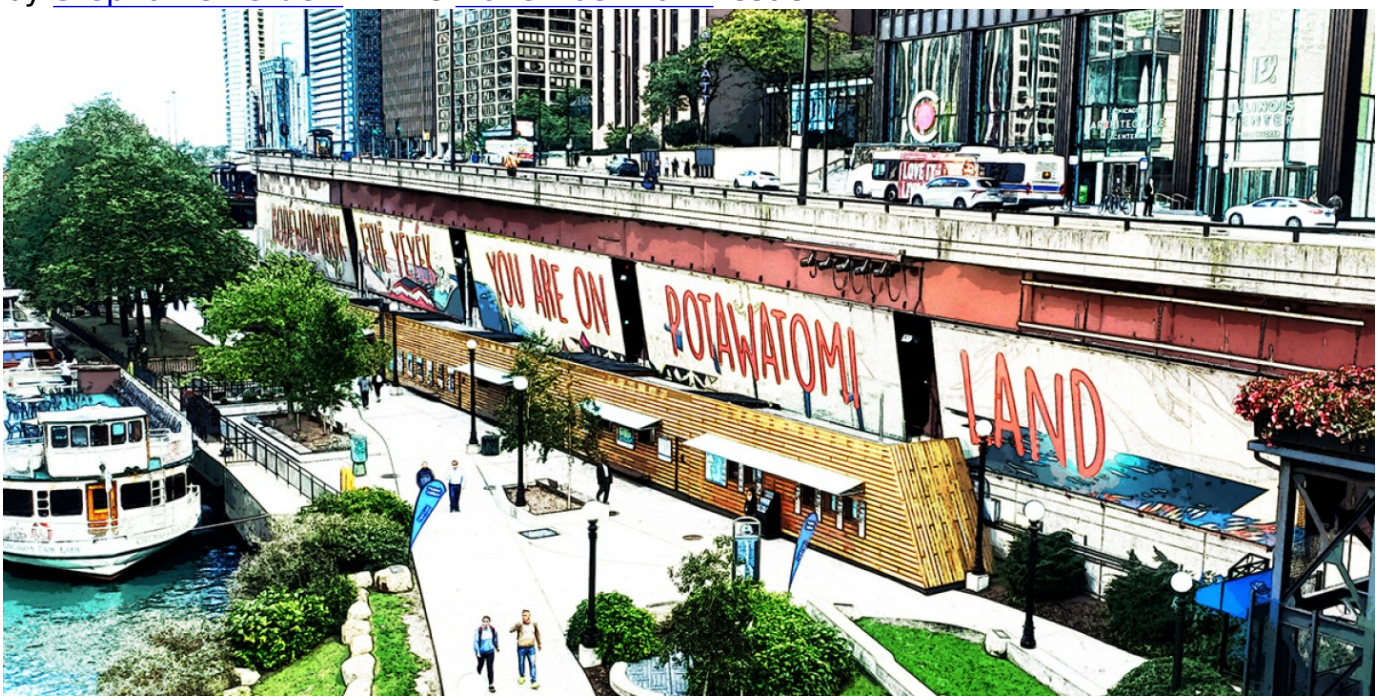
On Native land

Land acknowledgments can do a lot of good—if they’re rooted in solid process and relationships.

by Stephanie Perdew in the November 2022 issue



Grand Portage Ojibwe artist Andrea Carlson’s land acknowledgment mural hangs over the Chicago Riverwalk. (Photo illustration by Daniel Richardson)

Last fall I was invited to teach a course on Native American history for a mainline Protestant church in a Chicago suburb. The invitation came from the congregation’s antiracism task force, which noted that the group had never focused on Native issues and was eager to learn. This proved true.

The course took place over two Zoom sessions during the Omicron surge. About 50 very engaged people attended each one. None of the students were Native (save my mom), and most admitted they had been taught little to none of the history we explored. Some were genuinely shocked to learn about US Indian policy. Others were surprised to learn that sovereign Indian nations still exist within the territory of the United States. (Throughout this piece I will use the term *Indian* when referring to

US policies, which are enacted via the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Some of us refer to ourselves as Indians or American Indians; as Native, Natives, or Native Americans; or as Indigenous. Most of us more regularly refer to ourselves by the name of our particular tribe.)

On the first night I asked the participants to identify the tribal nations upon whose traditional homelands the church and its city stand. No one could do so, which was not a surprise. For the next session I assigned homework: find out. Find out whose homelands these are, where those tribal nations are now and why, and anything you can find about their language and culture.

The students did their homework. In the next session they correctly named the three tribal nations' lands upon which the church and the neighboring city and suburbs stood. They now knew that these tribal nations had been removed from the area through a series of treaties signed under coercion and subsequently broken. They knew that Illinois is no longer home to any land-based tribal nations, though it is home to a large, multi-tribal Native population.

In the class, they learned the history of US Indian policy and its evolving goals: Indian removal, the establishment of reservations and erosion of territory via treaties, the assimilation and "civilization" of Indians via federal and church boarding schools, the allotment of tribal lands to individuals, the termination of tribal governments, and the federal relocation of Indians to urban areas. They learned that only 3.8 percent of US land mass is now in the hands of tribal nations and that only 334 of the 574 federally recognized tribal nations have reservations recognized by state or federal government—an erosion of acreage that took place through promises of land mass that subsequently shrunk, through federal land claims for drilling and mining, and through the establishment of the national parks.

After the class, the congregation decided to write a land acknowledgment. The text is now used in their print materials and sometimes spoken in their worship services.

Land acknowledgment is a traditional custom among Native people in tribal and intertribal gatherings. People introduce themselves with reference to tribe, clan, land, and ancestors. Land acknowledgment recognizes human and nonhuman relationships and the responsibilities of mutual kinship.

Non-Native land acknowledgment has its origins in Canada's work to provide statements for government officials to convey upon official visits to its 11 treaty

territories. This kind of land acknowledgment has now made its way to the United States. In some settings, it is a matter of government policy that an agency makes an acknowledgment at the beginning of a forum or meeting. The US Department of Arts and Culture now has a statement calling on “all individuals and organizations to open public events and gatherings with acknowledgment of the traditional Native inhabitants of the land.”

Land acknowledgments have also made their way into the church. Many century readers will recall hearing or reading a land acknowledgment. I first heard one in a non-Native context at the opening session of a religious academic guild’s annual meeting several years ago in Vancouver, British Columbia: “We gather on the unceded traditional Coast Salish territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations.” It was a gathering of Christian and Jewish scholars, and the moment was solemn, holy, repentant, and prayerful.

More recently I heard a land acknowledgment given at an elegant dinner hosted by a new interfaith organization. As diners made their way to tables, glasses clinked, and chatter persisted, the executive director recounted a land acknowledgment that was barely heard—barely acknowledged—by most in attendance. Land acknowledgments can fall short of their expressed goal to be statements or moments of actual remembrance.

At their best, land acknowledgments are undertaken by faith communities as expressions of recognition, awareness, repentance, and calls to reparative action. Some faith communities see them as explicit commitments in the work of antiracism. Others seek to become more conscious of their own denomination’s participation in Christian missionary activity or as administrators of Indian boarding schools. Some seek to learn more about the series of papal pronouncements known collectively as the doctrine of discovery, which formed the basis for Christian conquest of non-Christian lands and peoples, the logic of which still undergirds federal Indian law in the United States.

The best land acknowledgments in faith-based communities are a process as much as a product, and the process itself is a pedagogy. The work is undertaken with intent, by a specific group or committee chosen to represent the diversity of the denomination or institution. If Natives are present within the institution, a question usually comes up about whether we lead, cochair, observe, or advise the process. Often, Natives are asked to educate or guide non-Natives, with little awareness of

the toll it takes to repeatedly recall removal and generational trauma. In the best cases, the community makes it safe for us to choose to do any or none of that work—or provides a budget for a consultant who is compensated to advise upon the process.

A land acknowledgment process starts with identifying the tribal lands upon which the institution is located, but it shouldn’t end there. The best processes ask participants to learn about the history of treaties, removal, relocation, and the present-day location of those tribal nations. Tribal nations are contacted to learn about how they would prefer to be identified or named in a land acknowledgment. Institutions may want to send a delegation to make a pilgrimage to these present-day tribal nations. Questions of future allyship and reparative and restorative actions should be addressed.

Institutions also need to be prepared for the possibility that a tribal nation may not be receptive to a conversation or visit and may be suspicious of commitments of allyship or partnership. Regardless, the work may proceed with a commitment to acknowledge the tribal nations’ history on the land in the most accurate terms possible, as well as a commitment to advocacy on behalf of Native communities.

Then an acknowledgment is written, naming the tribal nations, alluding to their present-day location and any acts of removal, noting present-day tribal presence in the area, and articulating the institution’s future or ongoing commitments to these relationships. The work is reported, taught, commemorated, and disseminated. Once written, the acknowledgment may take a prominent place on a faith community’s website, letterhead, or worship bulletin. The acknowledgment may be read at the beginning of meetings, gatherings, or worship services. An acknowledgment is the first step in an ongoing commitment to further learning and relationship building.

But the truth is that in many faith-based communities a land acknowledgment fails to emerge from these best practices. The process is rushed, or there is no process at all. A map is consulted, but the names of the tribes are inaccurate or anglicized. No attempt is made to forge relationships or consider further actions. When land acknowledgment efforts fail at good process and stop short of difficult engagement with hard questions, they don’t simply result in innocuous statements. They have the potential to do real harm and erode trust, particularly with Native members or employees of the institutions known to have undertaken them half-heartedly.

When land acknowledgments stop short of acknowledging present realities and keep Native lives situated solely in the past, they become statements of absence, to play on the title of historian Andrew Denson's book *Monuments to Absence: Cherokee Removal and the Contest over Southern Memory*. Denson researches public monuments that bear witness to the Cherokee removal from the Southeastern United States, known as the Trail of Tears. He notes that "removal commemoration" often involves expression of regret for tribal loss, or even apology for injustice. But the apologies and regrets are not necessarily made to or for living Native nations. Rather, they illustrate the "moral sensitivity of contemporary white elites, while requiring little from white communities but the apology itself."

What Denson writes about material monuments applies as well to many land acknowledgments undertaken by predominantly or historically White institutions. He notes that even with a plethora of removal commemoration, the public memory of Native history and knowledge of contemporary Native lives remain largely unchanged. Indians can still be thought of as creatures from the past when land acknowledgments note and apologize for what was but fail to reckon with what happened, why it happened, and what now is.

As Denson argues, simple statements of commemoration or remembering "tend to define Indian removal as a tragic error"—an act inconsistent with American ideals rather than a systemic goal of federal Indian policy. This

> minimizes the significance of Native American dispossession to the history of the United States. Remembering a policy like removal as an aberration suggests that the United States, as we know it, could exist *without* the coercive acquisition of Native American land. It suggests that the roots of American nationhood lie only in a set of liberal political values, rather than in a physical territory constructed from indigenous peoples' homes.

When land acknowledgments are undertaken without conversation with or reference to living contemporary Native nations, and when they acknowledge only land lost or Native lives lived in the past, they signal that all Native Americans are removed or gone. They define Indian removal as a tragedy of the past and indicate that there is nothing left to be done about it except offer a well-scripted apology. While some might argue this outcome is inadvertent, Denson suggests that the intent is to

assuage a need for absolution without exacting ongoing actions or commitments from those being absolved.

To his point, 40 percent of Americans believe that there are no Native people left in the United States today. “There are no Indians anymore,” a former congregant once told me. In reality, the Native American population in the 2020 census stands at 3.7 million, up from 2.9 million in 2010. But for much of the American public, it would be more comfortable to believe that there are no Indians anymore. Land acknowledgments have the potential to disrupt that comfort and to teach us more accurate history. But they fall short of those goals if their process is not thorough or their articulation focuses only on the past.

Walking in Chicago recently, I noticed another kind of land acknowledgment. It’s in the form of a public removal commemoration, but unlike the monuments Denson researches, this is Native public art, created by Grand Portage Ojibwe artist Andrea Carlson. Her mural, executed on five banners, hangs over the Chicago Riverwalk and proclaims: “Bodéwadmikik ėthë yéyék / You are on Potawatomi land.” The mural will hang for at least another year while a monuments committee explores Chicago’s public art and statuary.

Carlson’s choice of language is intentional: not “this land was” but “you are on.” The land underneath the mural is reasonably contested—a human-made extension of concrete riverbank, it was not in existence in the 19th century and is thus unceded. It’s the subject of a 1914 lawsuit between the Pokagon Potawatomi and the City of Chicago.

Throughout the country, these kinds of Native-created land acknowledgments are proliferating. A few miles south of the Chicago River at the Field Museum’s new Native Truths permanent exhibition, an inscription on the wall reminds museum goers, “You are on Native land” as they enter the space. In Minneapolis, on the shore of the Mississippi River, a neon sign at Oglala Lakota chef Sean Sherman’s restaurant Owamni proclaims, “You are on Native land.” (Owamni is the Lakota name for nearby St. Anthony Falls, the “place of the swirling water.”) And in Anchorage, Alaska, a public acknowledgment on the facade of the Anchorage Museum proclaims “This is DENA’INA EŁNENA” (Dena’ina homeland).

The goal of these Native public land acknowledgments is ultimately not just historical but also political. Naming land as Native land in the present tense is not

just an act of raising consciousness. In the words of the contemporary Land Back movement, it is about getting Indigenous lands back in Indigenous hands.

It is fair to say that this is not the explicit goal of most land acknowledgments created by historically White institutions. Their goals may range from responsible remembering to repentance and reparation for church policies, missionary activities, or abuse via churches or boarding schools. Or the goals may in fact be self-serving. The goal of responsible historical remembering is commendable in and of itself, but responsible remembering also entails raising awareness of the needs and desires of living Native communities and recognizing what power the institution may have to improve the lives or further the goals of those Native communities via acts of repentance and reparation.

Some denominations have restored Indigenous land to Indigenous hands by handing deeds for missionary-created churches to the Native congregations themselves. Others have repudiated the doctrine of discovery or undertaken public investigations of their role in Indian boarding schools. But many Christian communities have further work to do. My own denomination has yet to grapple with the frequent use of “Pilgrim” and “Plymouth” as names for local churches, denominational places, and projects and with what this celebration of Congregationalist Pilgrims and the Plymouth Colony signals for Natives and non-Natives in a denomination that simultaneously claims to undertake “sacred conversations” on race.

Land acknowledgments in Christian communities are not just political but theological and liturgical. We might think about them as a form of Christian anamnesis: remembering which calls the past into the present for the sake of the future. They function as acts of confession and repentance: the gathered community confesses and remembers the painful, sinful actions which displaced tribal communities from their homelands in the name of the expansion of the state and with the blessing and collusion of the church.

When land acknowledgments undertaken by faith-based communities venture into this confessional territory, they speak truth—and when truth is spoken, it can be lived. We hear words of assurance, and we depart from worship being sent to do the work of repair and restoration. But when land acknowledgments leave Native lives only in the past—or when they are undertaken in such a way as to minimize serious engagement, maximize White comfort, or mitigate White guilt—they become an act of false worship. They leave the institution bearing the sin of confessing with their lips but not their hearts (Isa. 29:13).