

Becoming a dismantling community

Sheri Hostetler

I first heard the words “Doctrine of Discovery” on a bus coming back from a border tour with other Mennonites during the Mennonite Church USA general conference Phoenix 2013. I was sitting beside my friend and pastoral colleague Weldon Nisly, with whom I had worked on LGBTQ justice in the church, helping to found what is now called Inclusive Mennonite Pastors. We had done good work together, but I felt it was time for me to step back and let others lead on those issues. I was open to where the Spirit would next lead me. Weldon, not surprisingly, had ideas.

“The Doctrine of Discovery is the basis for so much of the oppression we’re fighting against in the United States and worldwide,” he said passionately. “You really must meet Sarah Augustine and hear her talk about this.” Sarah, he explained, was an Indigenous woman who worked with Indigenous people around the world suffering from neo-colonization.¹

I trusted Weldon, but I was also skeptical. I struggled to understand why a five-hundred-year-old church doctrine mattered today. It seemed abstract, even esoteric. Little did I know that I would help found the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition a year later with Sarah and Anita Amstutz, then pastor at Albuquerque Mennonite Church. I didn’t realize this dismantling work would become a significant ministry within my congregation, within Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference, and within the wider church. Weldon was right about the Spirit’s leading!

Originating sins

Driven by Weldon’s enthusiasm, I began reading up on the Doctrine of Discovery. A few months later, my friend Anita met Sarah at a Women Doing Theology Conference, and soon the three of us were animatedly talking on the phone together. I learned that the Doctrine of Discovery was a five-hundred-year-old heresy that justified the seizure of lands from Indigenous people, their enslavement and domination, and the Portuguese slave trade from West Africa (the latter is often not as well known). I learned that these doctrines weren’t a relic of history because colonization isn’t a relic of history. There are Indigenous peoples right now

1 See the Suriname Indigenous Health Fund (SIHF) at <http://sihfund.org/>.

in Suriname, for instance, who are losing their ancestral homelands to US and Canadian mining corporations because they don't legally own these homelands. They don't own these homelands because the Doctrine of Discovery, five hundred years ago, said that any European discoverer

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could lay legal claim to lands inhabited by non-Christians. In the United States, it was enshrined into law in a landmark 1823 Supreme Court case and was cited as late as 2005 in another Supreme Court hearing.

I began to see how this church doctrine that had become encoded into law, policy, and worldview was *the* engine of domination, just as Weldon had said. I felt I was facing the “powers and principalities” head on. And this wasn't an abstract evil. This was an evil in which my family had actively participated. The Hochstetlers arrived in Pennsylvania in

the 1700s and settled on land bought from the Leni Lenape (Delaware) people by William Penn. I'd known about this for decades. But it was only as I was learning about the Doctrine of Discovery that I realized my Amish ancestors were the first Europeans to settle the part of Ohio where I grew up, on land that had been “cleared” of its Native inhabitants only several years before. My pacifist ancestors got their land as a result of military conquest.

The day I realized this was a day I did not get out of bed from grief. I have always felt a deep connection to the land I was born on in Ohio. My family has farmed that land since the early 1800s, and the hills and trees and creeks of that place form the terrain of my soul. I realized in a visceral way that other people had loved that land and found sustenance from it and that those people had been killed and removed so that my family could live there—so that *I* could live there.

Righting the wrongs of history

I might have been floored by paralyzing guilt after that realization, which could have kept me from working to right this historical wrong. Instead, I have been blessed to have been mentored in this work by Sarah, who once wrote:

I think that guilt is toxic and erodes authentic relationship—it is a subtle form of violence that has an effect that is counter-intuitive. If something makes us feel guilty, we tend to avoid conversations and encounters associated with the guilty feelings. I ask people everywhere I go to quit focusing on “guilt,” and to instead focus on dismantling the structures that manufacture inequity. Indigenous Peoples around the world are still under attack, specifically by policies that favor resource extraction over human rights and human health. We need allies in dismantling the laws and policies that lead to oppression and death. We must not let the fear of guilt stall and prevent us from accessing our mutual potential in genuine relationship.²

Toward that end, we founded the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition. Our church hosted the first gathering in 2014, and a grant from Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference partially funded it. (The Coalition is now a ministry partner of the Full Circle Project of PSMC, which serves as our fiscal sponsor and has provided additional financial support.) The Coalition focuses on educating the church about the Doctrine of Discovery and dismantling the laws and policies that remove Indigenous people from their lands, culture, and self-determination.

Educating the church has been the easiest of these two aims. Building on the good work that Mennonite Central Committee–Central States has done with its “Loss of Turtle Island” exercise and other resources, the Coalition produced a documentary about the Doctrine of Discovery,³ an accompanying Bible study and resource guide, and a historical exhibit that has traveled across the country. We partnered with Ted & Co. to bring the play “Discovery: A Comic Lament” (now called “We Own This Now”) to life. Many of our Coalition members have given presentations in churches, colleges, and conventions. Five years later, I hear the words “Doctrine of Discovery” used frequently in Mennonite spaces.

And yet, we still have so far to go in actively dismantling these oppressive structures, which will be the work of generations. This isn’t to say

2 Sarah Augustine, “Current and Historical Harms Fueled by the Doctrine of Discovery: Breaking the Chains of Indigenous Peoples,” Anti-Slavery Campaign Interview Series, March 29, 2013, http://www.breathingforgiveness.net/2013/03/anti-slavery-campaign-interview-series_28.html.

3 *Doctrine of Discovery: In the Name of Christ*, <https://dofdmennonite.org/movie/>.

that there hasn't been success. In 2016, the Coalition began organizing people of faith across the United States to support the Miskitu people of Nicaragua, at the request of Miskitu elders in exile. Delegations traveled to Washington, DC, educating lawmakers about the connection between economic development and the suppression of human rights for the Miskitu. The Nicaragua Human Rights and Anticorruption Act of 2018 is a result, tying dollars issued by the US government to Nicaragua for economic development grants to human rights standards.

Bringing it home

Righting the wrongs of history will mean educating and activating congregations and communities to be active agents of healing and hope. What might it mean to be a dismantling community? Here are some ideas of where to begin:

- Know the history and the current impacts of the Doctrine of Discovery. In my experience, people sometimes know the former and rarely know the latter. Our congregation has tried to come up to speed on these realities by hosting the “Loss of Turtle Island” exercise, watching the documentary together, and hearing this preached about in sermons. A land acknowledgement listed in our order of worship reminds us every Sunday of whose land we are on.
- Build relationships humbly with local Indigenous people. Thanks to Beth Piatote, a Nez Perce scholar in our church who works on language revitalization for her people, our church got connected to two local Ohlone men who work on language revitalization, food sovereignty,⁴ and traditional cultural practices. Louis Trevino and Victor Medina have twice come to our church to speak. We learned how much they love this land that has cared for them and how they continue to have a deep and precious relationship with it. We learned of the inspiring and amazing resilience of the Ohlone people, who endured decades of the harshest colonization. We also learned that they need allies in seeking federal tribal status, which has been consistently denied them. Developing relationships with local Indigenous people must be done with awareness of the fraught history between Native people and set-

4 See <https://www.makamham.com>.

tlers. Native American people do not owe us relationship, but we can humbly reach out and see if there are ways that we can support what local Indigenous people are doing.

- Learn to be a more faithful follower of Jesus from Indigenous spirituality, stories, and cosmology. The worldview of Jesus is much closer to that of Indigenous peoples than that of Christendom. Just as I believe we cannot understand Jesus without understanding his Jewishness, I also believe we cannot understand Jesus without seeing him through Indigenous eyes. Beth has preached illuminating and life-giving sermons that have opened up ways of looking at Jesus and Scripture. We recently concluded a series on the book *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus* that did the same.⁵ We are excited as a community to continue to learn.
- Show up, speak up. Six months ago, twenty members of my church held a vigil outside the Oakland Federal Building, asking people to support the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), a landmark law governing the adoption of Native American children that was designed to keep them within Native American families. This law was struck down in October 2018, and the National Indian Child Welfare Association reached out to our Coalition to ask faith communities to be allies with them in upholding ICWA. These vigils were a first step in doing that. I have also been on a delegation to the US Treasury to talk about the impact of economic development grants on Indigenous and vulnerable people who are often removed from their land in the name of economic development. This kind of political activism does not come easily to many Mennonites, nor did it to me when I first started. Many of us are uncomfortable wading into political arenas. I think it's important that we push ourselves past this discomfort. We must use our voice and our privilege to advocate for justice. The Christian church created the Doctrine of Discovery and the laws and policies that uphold it to this day; these structures have to be undone by us also.
- Engage in reparations. Repentance without reparations is like saying "I'm sorry" after you stole someone's house but not doing anything to give it back. As Coalition member John Stoesz, who

5 Steven Charleston, *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus* (New York: Morehouse, 2015).

works on land return, says, “It is impossible to give back all the land taken from Native Americans, but it is immoral to give none of it back.” Shalom Mennonite Church in Tucson, for instance, has designated a line item in its budget for “reparations and repair.” They give a percentage of what they would pay in property tax to this line item, in recognition of the fact that their church is on Tohono O’odham land. Monies in this fund will be distributed to Indigenous groups. Engaging in household reparations is a key part of my personal discipleship, how I atone for what my ancestors did almost two hundred years ago when they came to Ohio. When my father sold his house there a few years back and divvied the earnings among my family, I gave 30 percent of my proceeds to causes working for Indigenous justice and land return. Retired Mennonite pastor Florence Schloneger did something similar in Kansas.⁶ In the end, the way of reparations is not about retracing our steps and somehow magically going back to the way things were. Reparations is a repaired relationship that looks forward to what can be. Being “repairers of the breach” (Isaiah 58:12) will take creativity and collective action.

I am finishing this article at the Kansas City 2019 convention. As I staff our Coalition booth, most of the people coming to us already know what the words “Doctrine of Discovery” mean, and many of them are eager to take next steps in dismantling this Doctrine. I stand in awe of what the Spirit has already accomplished among us in five years, and I await, with eager anticipation, what the Spirit will continue to do among us.⁷

About the author

Sheri Hostetler is pastor of First Mennonite Church of San Francisco and one of the co-founders of the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition. She and her family (husband, son, cat, and dog) live on the homelands of the Chochoyeno Ohlone people.

6 Tim Huber, “Land of the Kanza: Descendant of immigrants gives portion from sale of family land to indigenous heritage society,” *Mennonite World Review*, March 4, 2019, <https://www.makamham.com>.

7 I would like to thank Sarah Augustine and Jonathan Neufeld, co-chairs of the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition, for their contributions to this article.