Acknowledging the land

The story of Houston Mennonite Church's land acknowledgment

Marty Troyer

Houston Mennonite Church worships in a place that for the time being we've agreed to call Houston, Texas. Space City, Bayou City, and the Energy Capital of the World are nicknames that give our country's fourth largest city some character. Today six million people have gathered from around the world to create our most diverse city.

But this has not always been the case.

The Karankawa, Atakapa, and other Native Peoples thrived on the land where our church building sits for more than twelve thousand years. Houston Mennonite has been on the land for fifty-two years and claims to "own" it. Here is their story and the story of how we came to acknowledge their history.

There are several reasons why we acknowledge the land on which our church sits as well as its stewards. Doing so offers recognition and respect to Native Peoples. It counters the Doctrine of Discovery with the true story of the people who have lived and thrived here for generations. It creates a broader public awareness of the history that has led to this moment. It begins to repair relationships with Native communities and with the land. It supports larger truth-telling and reconciliation efforts. It reminds people that colonization is an ongoing process, with Native lands still occupied due to deceptive and broken treaties. It takes a cue from Indigenous protocol, opening up space with reverence and respect. It inspires ongoing action and relationship. But there's one more surprising benefit as well: doing so can become a great Christian witness.

Their story—our story

Indigenous history in the Houston area began ten thousand years before the recorded migration of the Hebrews to Egypt. It was then that Indigenous Peoples began to, in the words of Genesis 1:28, "fill the earth" known later as North America. It took them another two thousand years to spread from sea to shining sea. The breadth of diversity of cultures,

habitation, and worship in this migration is one of the most beautiful stories in history. Each people group adapted to their environment and carved out sustainable communities that last to this day.

The Pueblo Peoples of New Mexico carved homes in cliffs and built cities with hundreds of adjoining rooms. Indigenous cultures in Ohio built geometric mounds that still make us wonder and long homes large enough to hold extended families. Where the Saint Louis Arch now stands was once the greatest city-state in North America. Cahokia was home to perhaps forty thousand people and was built up over hundreds of years, including the central structure likely forty-five meters high.

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The Karankawa and Atakapa followed the seasons as hunters and gatherers. They built boats to navigate the many bayous as if a superhighway system. They would have known every tributary, the best locations to ford and fish and hide, the quickest routes inland and to the coast.

They harvested abundant seafood that today makes Houston a foodie's paradise: shrimp, clams, red snapper, and craw fish. And they knew how to use the land's resources, using alligator fat to repel the swarms of mosquitos and as sun block. The people, the water, the land, and the sky were a living biosphere where everything both gave and received. I imagine them having a love and respect of the land that runs as deeply or deeper than my Mennonite ancestors who revere the land as farmers who receive far more than they could ever give to the land.

The Karankawa Native Peoples lived here for countless generations not primarily as stewards of the land but as recipients of the rich diversity of its gifts. Here they lived at one with their Creator and with all creation in what Indigenous theologian Randy Woodley calls the "Harmony Way."[1] This way of life connected them as a community of creation and empowered them to live in the truth that they are related to all. Sadly, early reports of European encounters with the Karankawa were riddled with stereotypes of "primitive," "savage," "uncivilized" people. Yet, evidence suggests the Karankawa lived mostly in peace with their Indigenous neighbors, the Lipan Apache and Tonkawa. It's possible to overstate their lives

1 See Randy S. Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

as carefree and utopian. They were not. Their lives were harsh and filled with struggle and incessant hard work. Their landscape infused them with resilience, creativity, empathy, and a necessary realism.

This is the history, and these are the characteristics we wanted to honor and acknowledge in our church statement:

> *Houston Mennonite Church acknowledges that this building stands on the ancestral land of the Karankawa and Atakapa Peoples.*
>
> *We honor their elders both past and present, who have stewarded this land throughout the generations.*
>
> *We know that Indigenous Peoples lived in what we now call Houston for millennia. And we acknowledge that for hundreds of years, the Christian Doctrine of Discovery has provided "theological justification and a legal basis for Christian governments to invade and seize Indigenous lands and dominate Indigenous peoples" (Erica Littlewolf).*
>
> *Since 1967, this land has been a place for Houston Mennonite Church to worship, learn, create, and grow in community with one another.*
>
> *Our hope is to live the Harmony Way, Indigenous theologian Randy Woodley's phrase for the ethic of living as one with creation and all people, or what our scriptures call shalom justice.*
>
> *We ask all people who come to this place to consider the ongoing impacts of the Doctrine of Discovery and the legacies of violence, displacement, migration, and settlement that bring us here today.*
>
> *Will you join us on the Harmony Way?*
>
> *#HonorNativeLand*

These were some of the very first words spoken at the grand opening of our new church facility in May 2018. They began as a conversation several years prior with an Indigenous woman I met at Houston's Apache

Museum. We conversed on several occasions, and I shared about the movement Mennonites are part of to dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery. Through our conversations it became clear she was surprised and appreciative to hear Christians had even heard of the Doctrine of Discovery. I shared my own powerful experience with Mennonite Central Committee's simulation, "The Loss of Turtle Island." She suggested that a good next step might be a public statement such as the one we ended up writing.

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Early in our church facility construction process, one of the leaders of Houston Mennonite raised the question of writing a land acknowledgement such as is widespread in her home country of Australia. When she suggested it, another leader who grew up in Canada immediately resonated, knowing the importance Canadians have placed on the practice. And that solidified our commitment to work at writing our land acknowledgement statement.

Writing our statement

We decided that we wanted a visual reminder in the form of a sign or plaque, which became our goal: to write a meaningful land acknowledgment concise enough to be printed as a plaque or sign. Our first step was researching existing documents from a variety of sources both in and outside the church. The best document we found to utilize is *Honor Native Land: A Guide and Call to Acknowledgement* on the US Department of Arts and Culture's website.[2]

I also spoke with Erica Littlewolf and Karin Kaufman Wall from Mennonite Central Committee–Central States, knowing that they have acknowledged land for years. Some of the questions they helped us think about were our audience, the events at which we would publicly acknowledge the land, how our church obtained the land, how this practice connects with other work we're doing, and what we are doing other than this statement to help honor Indigenous history and culture.

2 See https://usdac.us/nativeland.

They encouraged us to speak in present tense to combat the erasure of Indigenous Peoples. This was important for us in Houston, and it changed our language. In Texas it's not unusual to hear that the Native Peoples who lived on our land are now extinct or pushed to reservations. This accepted wisdom is simply not true.

Step two was clarifying who we were acknowledging. We kept in mind that we likely did not know all the tribal names, that people migrate over time, and that some tribes may have been pushed into the area as a result of colonization.[3] As we deepened our research, we discovered a lesser known tribe, the Atakapa, shared the land with the Karankawa.

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Step three was writing and editing our specific statement. We wrote as a team of three, with several other consultants. Someone wrote an initial draft, which we wordsmithed, narrowed, sharpened, and marinated in for several months before feeling comfortable with our statement. Writing as a church for a broad audience, we chose to write our content in a distinctly Christian way, including both Indigenous Christian voices and acknowledgment of the church's complicity over the centuries.

Finally, for our fourth step, we decided that we wanted not only to speak our statement but to have a printed plaque immediately displayed inside our front door. That meant finding an image and formatting a sign, which one of our church leaders did incredibly well.

A bold public witness

One important witness to our Houston community has been explicitly naming our originating sins. It's no secret that the church baptized the genocide and erasure of Indigenous Peoples, but we've often wished it were a secret. It is important for us to tell the truth, to break the silence, and to recognize the complexity involved.

Houston, like all regions, has a distinct story and ongoing reverberations of colonization. Our deepest national sins—the genocide of Indigenous Peoples, the enslavement of black bodies, the exploitation of peoples

3 A good resource for such information can be found at https://native-land.ca/.

for cheap labor, our wars for oil in the Middle East—all somehow flow into and out of this geographical point on the map we call Houston. It's in our cultural DNA.

At the same time that Texas's second president, Marabeau Lamar, worked to solve "the Indian problem" through an "exterminating war," the European population eagerly brought in black slaves to build their wealth. By 1860, 49 percent of the inhabitants of Texas were slaves of African descent. Indigenous Christian leader Richard Twiss writes, "For America to gain its freedom to become a 'Christian nation,' 'founded on the Word of God,' it cost our First Nations people the loss of our lands, the decimation of our populations, and colonization of our nations, all in the name of the glory of God."[4]

I have spoken our statement many times outside of our church setting in groups I participate in, speeches, or when leading public prayers. Someone has nearly always approached me to comment on how meaningful, surprising, or important it was to hear a Christian leader name our complicity and commitments. It's been our experience that the gospel of just peace remains as it always has been—a bold public witness to Christ.

About the author

Marty Troyer, aka the Peace Pastor, is pastor of Houston Mennonite Church and a peace promoter in Houston, Texas.

4 Richard Twiss, "Reading the Bible Unjustly: How Has the American Church Read the Bible Unjustly?" in *The Justice Project*, edited by Brian McLaren, Elisa Padilla, and Ashley Bunting Seeber (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 68.