

An Historical Context For Methodist/Native American Relations in NM

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Roughly 10% of the population of New Mexico is Native American. They are not one people. They comprise 22 different tribes each of which is culturally unique.

The Spanish settlers arriving in New Mexico in the 1600's utilized the pueblo people as forced labor resulting in the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and much suffering. Later interactions were sometimes peaceful but often contentious, leading to an uneasy relationship based on the fear of retaliation. The selling of Apache slaves captured by the Spanish was not unknown. In this climate the gospel that was shared created more superstition than shared faith.

The westward expansion of the United States brought new threats to Native Americans in New Mexico, as forts were established to protect travelers and enable territorial expansion.

The Dine or the Navajo as they were called first came into contact with American troops in 1846, who established a treaty with the tribe. It was not honored by either side.

In 1861 Colonel Kit Carson was ordered by Brigadier General James Carleton to lead an expedition into Navajo Land with the goal of achieving their unconditional surrender. Systematically destroying dwellings, crops, and livestock as well as killing all those who resisted, the Navajo were forced to gather at Fort Defiance, and in the Spring of 1864 nine thousand Navajo were force marched three hundred miles to Ft Sumner for internment at the Bosque Redondo. Hundreds died on the way and during their four year encampment there, before they were permitted to return to a portion of their former land in northwest New Mexico.

To the north John Dyer, our first true Methodist Circuit rider in New Mexico, was present when John Chivington, the presiding elder, said of Native Americans, "I am fully satisfied, gentlemen, that to kill them is the only way we will ever have peace and quiet." They all agreed. Chivington later led a regiment of Colorado Volunteers to the Sand Creek reservation where they slaughtered 200 Cheyenne including women and children.

As Dyer began to travel into New Mexico, he noted of the Apache, "If sighted by them it was necessary to outrun them, kill them, or get scalped." Later he declared, "It is impossible to have a sinner converted unless he is first convicted; and it is just as impossible to tame and educate an Indian until he is subdued. My prayer is that all wars may cease, and that the red men of the forest may be civilized and Christianized."

Of the Navajo he encountered at Fort Defiance, he added, "We can but desire the Navajo tribe to become enlightened and as perfect in religion as their squaws were in weaving blankets."

Thomas Harwood, who noted several frightening encounters with small groups of Native Americans, said of them on one occasion, "While I have always been his friend my eyes have not been closed to his meanness." Nevertheless he believed that the war waged by the government against the Native Americans was not justified.

In 1882 W. W. Welsh, the presiding elder of the MECS in Colorado, spoke about the 10,000 Pueblo Indians in New Mexico, saying, in words repugnant to us now, "They are feeble in intellect, unable to originate, but can imitate like monkeys." As a consequence of this attitude we have had few dealings with the Pueblo people.

The Women's Home Missionary Society of the MEC began work in NM in 1888. They saw the need for education and established schools among the Jicarilla Apache in Dulce, and later on the Navajo Reservation. The work by Maria Clegg and Sarah Moore at Dulce prospered so much that Thomas Harwood was able to organize a church class, and by 1894 they could report fifty Anglo, Spanish, and Native American members worshipping together.

On the Navajo reservation the arrival of Mary Eldridge and Mary Raymond in 1891 lit another candle in the darkness. They were able to provide medical care, and working with other organizations they sought to improve the life and wellbeing of the Navajo people. In time their work resulted in the creation of the Navajo Mission School.

That early boarding school brought a downside that cannot be ignored, however, as noted by Frank Hanagame, "The things we were not provided were the love and care you would get from a parent. There was not that relationship." Unity was broken.

This family tie was often further strained if these students became Christian. Fred Yazzie noted how his family did not approve, "My dad just looked at me so mean and he said 'What have you done. You are a Navajo. And your Navajo religion is over here.'"

As more Navajo graduated from the Navajo Mission School and began to embrace Christianity, they desired Methodist churches on the reservation. After five years of trying to obtain the right permits, First Methodist Church in Shiprock began in 1963 as a mix of Anglo and Navajo members.

In 1968 the NM Conference started the Navajo Mobile Ministry, buying a truck with a side that dropped down to form a sort of traveling chapel. The effort failed. There was little interest in listening to Larry Kent, an English speaker, and the truck itself fell apart after traveling the rough roads on the reservation.

Fred Yazzie went to Asbury Theological Seminary returning as the first Navajo to be ordained. Because he had grown up speaking only English, he needed to learn Navajo to begin preaching in that language.

When Fred Yazzie was sent to start a new church at Crownpoint he was given a mobile doublewide chapel for them to use. The congregation he formed continued until a decision was made by the Albuquerque DS to move that chapel to Window Rock. The congregation at Crownpoint felt a deep sense of betrayal and ceased to be Methodist.

In 1975 Maurice Haines helped set up a Consultation on Ministries with the Navajos. Yazzie advocated for the need to develop and train Navajo Leaders. Paul and Dorca West were recruited to begin this effort. The General Board of Global ministries first agreed to pay their salary, and then withdrew their support while they were still on their way to NM. It fell to the Bishop and the NM Conference to fund this new ministry.

The result was the creation of the Four Corners Native American Ministries, which provided a new process and certification for lay pastors on the Navajo reservation and created churches and vital ministries throughout the reservation.

As this organization flourished, there was conflict with the more liberal Native American International Caucus of The United Methodist Church. Many felt strongly that all that they had accomplished was threatened whenever they were asked to mix the cross and the feather. On the other side, Eveline Sombero and Shirley Montoya, both ordained Navajo pastors, believed that there was no harm in honoring their Native American traditions. They were eventually made to feel unwelcome in the Four Corners and left to serve elsewhere.

At the mission school meanwhile, the alumni grew concerned that the spiritual dimensions of the school were being neglected. Their concerns were ignored. Ultimately the school board was dissolved and religious education of any kind was no longer allowed. By 1989 the nation division was forced to cut all ties with the now secular Navajo Mission School that now longer shared their values. In 1995 the 3 million dollar main campus was sold for a mere 514 thousand.

Some small buildings at the north end remained and were used for a program called New Beginnings. At first that program chose to use the Navajo Yei deity in their logo, which the Navajo United Methodists considered offensive. Their requests to change this were ignored.

It is clear from all of this that from the beginning our relationship with Native Americans in New Mexico was characterized by cultural misunderstanding and fear.

Promises were made and broken by both sides. Provocations became excuses to punish the many for the actions of a few. Countless lives were needlessly lost. American policies of pacification and relocation were ill conceived and poorly executed, as were many of the efforts to try and integrate Native Americans into American Society. Land and property were taken illegally never to be returned. Great harm was done, and even our Methodist church leaders were themselves complicit in many of the atrocities that occurred especially among the Apache and the Navajo.

Later interactions have continued this pattern of cultural misunderstanding and fear, coupled also with bigotry and disdain.

Some examples of cooperation and Christian fellowship can be found, however, in the mission schools at Dulce and in the Farmington area during the turn of the twentieth century and beyond, proving that barriers of fear can be overcome in time. Cultural awareness and understanding can be increased.

As the report to General Conference acknowledged "Something more must be understood. The misunderstanding and disrespect that lay at the heart of the process was more than a simple division into good and evil...The easy answers are words like greed and prejudice and hatred, but beyond those flaws, something more subtle was always at work...that is fundamental to understanding tragedies like the Sand Creek Massacre. *Not every culture sees the world in the same way...*The western way of seeing reality is man-centered and time centered...By contrast the American Indian way of seeing is cyclical rather than linear...Both the past and the future are but aspects of the present."

That is why it is important for us to acknowledge the past, so that we may share the future together. As the report noted for the American Indian, "Faith, morality, and ethics are about understanding the right ways of maintaining the unity of all things because that unity is the Great Good intended by the All-Father."

Although active ministry by United Methodists among Native Americans in New Mexico continues now only among the Navajo, it may be that there are important lessons we should learn from them. As noted in the report to General Conference, "Westerners may think that the Indian way of seeing is naïve...It is not. In fact, it may well be better attuned to the essence of life than the self-absorbed, computerized, insensate world that characterizes the West. It is...attuned to the world in ways that the Western way of seeing left behind long ago."

Many among us admire the Navajo who have now chosen the Lord's way above all others. Their faith inspires us. We must acknowledge with much regret, however, that a climate of distrust still remains to this day. The Navajo have reason to be skeptical of our ability to hear their concerns and our willingness to support them in ministry *because we do not yet see each other clearly*. We must each try harder to do so.

Perhaps the best way to end therefore is with the words of Fred Yazzie, from the introduction to Stan Sager's book on the Four Corners. Fred Yazzie summed up all their hopes and dreams for a better relationship with the United Methodist Church and with all those within the boundaries of the New Mexico Conference with whom they share a common faith. "Think about whether you view us, and other racial groups, through your own eyes, or through the eyes of God," he said, "and love us as God loves all His people. May heaven bless you... and may your heart be 'strangely warmed.'"

As the Navajo people continue to experience the forgiveness and grace of God, we hope and pray that they will also continue to love us, "as God loves all His people."