



Woven

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Depending on your calendar, Monday might have been Columbus Day or Indigenous Peoples Day. They are part of different, though intertwined stories. Both recognize the geographic magnificence of the Americas and the many Indigenous Nations who live here. One thread comes from the people whose cultures, family systems, religions, and languages were established here centuries before the first Europeans. The other comes from a tradition that claimed to “discover” America and then sought to civilize or eradicate the people in a quest to possess the land. The same story woven together, inseparable but incompatible.

In Wisconsin, the second Monday of October was designated in 2019 as Indigenous Peoples Day. Presbytery Moderator Nicole Farley encouraged us at the last Presbytery Gathering to seek out resources for honoring and supporting local Native peoples, such as those at Wisconsinfirstnations.org, the UW-Milwaukee College of American Indian Studies, and the PC(USA) office of Native American Intercultural Congregational Support.

The Presbytery of Milwaukee is situated on the ancestral homelands of the Kiikaapoi, the Peoria, the Hoocąk, the Bodéwadmi, the Menominee, the Sauk and Meskwaki, the Myaamia, and the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ nations. At the Presbytery Gathering, we acknowledged our complicity through our Presbyterian heritage in the erasure of native peoples and their cultures, in addition to their forcible removal and the taking of their lands.

For example, in 1839, Rev. Peter Dougherty was sent by the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Mission to establish a church and school for the Native Americans who inhabited the area known as the Grand Traverse Bay region in Michigan. Note again the agency that sent him: Presbyterian Board of *Foreign* Missions. In the ultimate twist of logic, work with Indigenous populations was considered “foreign” mission.

His work brought him to Wisconsin as well. In 1880, he [wrote a letter from Kenosha County to JC Lowrie](#), the Board Secretary, addressing “manual labor boarding systems” in which students were taught “habits of industry” as the most efficient means of “elevating the Indians.” Dougherty answered the question of whether Indigenous people should be employed in the schools: “The employment of natives is desirable if you can find such qualified and trustworthy, and who do not assume too much authority over the children.” A thread in the tapestry.

In some ways though, Dougherty wove in an honest self-reflection that was ahead of its time: “But the selfishness and wreckless [sic] spirit of our own people are great obstacle[s], in the way, to thwart the effort of Christian benevolence for the good of the Indian. A prevalent opinion is the Indian has no rights which the government or individual should regard and further that the wishes of white men dictate.” He urged instead that “A spirit of Christian love should gather in the heart and life inspiring the feeling of Paul: very gladly will I spend and be spent for you.” Mutuality in mission would take centuries more to appreciate, let alone embody. Truth be told, we’re still working on it. Our tapestry has a loose thread that, if tugged, will unravel the whole piece. For the sake of truth, unweaving the narrative of Columbus’ discovery may be our best option.

However you spent Monday, know that we have every other day to work on our appreciation and support of Native peoples in our congregations and communities. As we celebrate their spiritual gifts and holy image, may we also repent for the harms the church inflicted on them in the name of God.