



**Mennonite
World Conference**

A Community of Anabaptist
related Churches

**Congreso
Mundial Menonita**

Una Comunidad de
Iglesias Anabautistas

**Conférence
Mennonite Mondiale**

Une Communauté
d'Eglises Anabaptistes

Statement

Mennonite World Conference Declaration of Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples

***The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,
The world and those who dwell therein; (Psalm 24:1)***

In the Christian Scriptures, we encounter God who hears the cries of the dispossessed and suffering, feels deep concern for their welfare, and moves to save. In the Gospels, Jesus Christ, the living example for the church, embodies God's preferred presence with the neighbor who is excluded, oppressed, ignored, rejected or treated as alien. Jesus associated with people on the margins, listened to and respected their experiences, and collaboratively sought justice.

Mennonite World Conference desires to follow Jesus' example to respond to the cries of Indigenous Peoples worldwide. This response is not concerned only with caring for people suffering within unjust structures. It also includes efforts to disarm (Colossians 2:15) the structures of oppression themselves, in order that all of God's People and Creation might experience the Psalmist's hope that truth and mercy will meet, and justice and peace will kiss each other (Psalm 85:10).

And yet, we are all too aware that this hope of peace and justice sharing a holy kiss has not yet come to fruition. One example is the struggle of the Wounaan People of Panama, of which *La Iglesia Evangélica Unida Hermanos Menonitas de Panamá*, a member church of Mennonite World Conference, is part. They continue to suffer from oppression and injustice related to their struggle for ancestral lands. They continue to struggle to have their ancestral land recognized and legally established and non-encroachment rights enforced. Although there have existed constitutional guarantees of land ownership, the government is doing little to prevent illegal settlers from taking land, logging and selling trees – especially the cocobolo tree – and using the land for herding. The ongoing encroachment on Indigenous land is causing many to lose hope and patience because it seems to them that their pleas for help are going unnoticed.

Their voice and cry is loud and clear: "We are here screaming; we are crushed by injustice; we are at the point of believing that our voice does not count. We feel defeated." "Our lush, green lands have become deserts. But for us, land is life. This is not a question of action; it is a question of life."¹

We are saddened and pained when our fellow Indigenous sisters and brothers, who form part of our global communion of churches, as well as Indigenous Peoples who may not be part of our communion, are treated unjustly and are oppressed. Pain to one part of our body causes pain throughout the whole body. The Aboriginal Activists Group from Australia reminds us:

*"If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."*² Our being is interconnected. Their pain is also our pain; their cry, our cry. Mennonite World Conference stands united with our

Indigenous brothers and sisters for justice. The struggle of the Indigenous Peoples is our struggle. And we recognize that peace is not complete while some are still suffering.

The cry of our sisters and brothers has also been heard and has found support through the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples³ and its call for justice. The UN declaration affirms Indigenous Peoples' intrinsic human rights to life, dignity, self-determination, spirituality, education, health, conservation, redress, land, and freedom from persecution, militarization, and discrimination.⁴

The World Council of Churches also lends its support in these ongoing struggles in repudiating the authority and use of the Doctrine of Discovery⁵ as a legitimate basis for dealing with Indigenous claims for land and ancestral domains. The Catholic Church no longer endorses this doctrine as it undergirded the violent religious and legal traditions that justify the murder, removal, dispossession and enslavement of Indigenous Peoples.⁶ We declare that doctrine, and the theological foundations on which it stands, to be ill founded. We stand in solidarity with our sisters and brothers from a host of faith traditions in denouncing the Doctrine of Discovery as *“fundamentally opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and as a violation of the inherent human rights that all individuals and peoples have received from God.”*⁷

We exhort the Church at all levels – ecumenically, denominationally, and globally - to reject erroneous interpretations of the Bible that justify the mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples. We renew our commitment to embody the spirit of Jesus as indicated in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9).

16th century Anabaptists in Europe used Psalm 24:1 (see above) as a key biblical text. The Psalmist affirms that the “fullness of the earth,” the “world,” and “all those who dwell therein” are “the Lord’s.” The Anabaptists used this text to challenge cultural and political assumptions about unjust systems of land distribution and ownership. Today, as heirs of the early Anabaptists, we declare this also as wisdom of God for the issue of Indigenous land and claims for ancestral domains. In this light, we reaffirm our shared conviction that:

As a world-wide community of faith and life we transcend boundaries of nationality, race, class, gender, and language. We seek to live in the world without conforming to the powers of evil, witnessing to God’s grace by serving others, caring for creation, and inviting all people to know Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord (article 7 of MWC “Shared Convictions”).

We confess that at times the Church has denied the experience and witness to wholeness of our Indigenous sisters and brothers. There have been times when the Church has failed to recognize the dignity and cultural heritage of our Indigenous sisters and brothers. Indeed, there are times when we have forgotten that some of our Indigenous brothers and sisters also form our Church.

We confess that the Church has benefited from the strategies of empires that have included violence, unsustainable extraction of natural resources, stolen land, colonial mission, genocide, environmental and water destruction, segregation, assimilation, imprisonment, and ongoing racial marginalization in health, housing, employment and education.

We confess that some Anabaptists, as global migrants and settlers, have, in some places, gained access to land and benefits that have been withheld from Indigenous Peoples. And we confess that we still continue to participate in systems and mechanisms that perpetuate current economic inequality and oppression, which has often resulted in the loss and dispossession of land.

As a global family of Anabaptist churches, we repent of our participation in this violence and ask for forgiveness from our Indigenous sisters and brothers. As we commit to walking with our Indigenous sisters and brothers, we commit ourselves to seek justice through challenging the beliefs and systems of domination. We embrace God’s call to renounce this ongoing violence and are grateful for and humbled

by the witness of some of our Anabaptist churches and agencies and their work with Indigenous groups towards restoration and reconciliation.

As Mennonite World Conference, our purpose is to enable and encourage a more just, liberated, holistic world that reflects the Triune God's intention for the whole and wholeness of all of creation. We want to tell and live out a story that leads to human harmony, peace and flourishing. As a community of churches we yearn to hear God's voice in the world, including the voice of God that is heard in and through the lives and experience of our Indigenous sisters and brothers.

We pray to God for the power of the Spirit to lead us on the journey towards repentance, transformation, and reparation.

Mennonite World Conference Peace Commission

Endnotes:

¹ These are words spoken by leaders of the Wounaan People in Panama during a Mennonite World Conference delegation visit in February 2015.

² *Aboriginal Activists Group, 1970s.*

³ The United Nations declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2007: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf

⁴ This UN declaration, morally and materially, supports the struggles of indigenous alliances that are courageously defending their land against the resource-extraction assaults of global corporate powers, against the government military/police forces that back those powers, and against the resource demands of the global techno-consumer economy. Some of these alliances are REMA (*La Red Mexicana de Afectados por la Minería*, the Mexican Network of Those Affected by Mining), M4 (*El Movimiento Mesoamericano Contra el Modelo Extractivo Minero*), and KAMP (Kalipunan ng mga Katutubong Mamamayan ng Pilipinas, the indigenous peoples, alliance of the Philippines). To this list we would want to include the struggle of the Wounaan People of Panama (and the Iglesia Unida Evangélica Hermanos Menonitas de Panamá), and the Indigenous struggle for dignity and land in North America. This list is not exhaustive.

⁵ One of the oppressive tools that has been used by governments and churches globally and throughout the last 5 centuries is a series of edicts now known as the **Doctrine of Christian Discovery** (beginning with Pope Nicholas V - The Bull Dum Diversas, 18 June, 1452, others include The Bull Romanus Pontifex - Nicholas V, January 8, 1454, and The Bull Inter Caetera - Alexander VI, May 4, 1493).

Aspects of this doctrine have been used all over the world, and continue to exercise authority in attitudes and laws that govern Indigenous life (This is documented in the United Nations foundational statement and research "*Preliminary study of the impact on indigenous peoples of the international legal construct known as the Doctrine of Discovery*").

⁶ See for example the statement issued by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops "*The 'Doctrine of Discovery' and Terra Nullius: A Catholic Response*"

(<http://www.cccb.ca/site/images/stories/pdf/catholic%20response%20to%20doctrine%20of%20discovery%20and%20tn.pdf>) as well as "*Church considering request to rescind the doctrine of discovery*"

(<http://aptn.ca/news/2016/06/01/church-considering-request-to-rescind-doctrine-of-discovery/>).

⁷ The World Council of Churches "Statement on the Doctrine of Discovery and its Enduring Impact on Indigenous Peoples", 7A: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/executive-committee/2012-02/statement-on-the-doctrine-of-discovery-and-its-enduring-impact-on-indigenous-peoples>. The WCC Executive Committee adopted this statement in February 2012.

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