

As an expression of worldwide Christian fellowship, the World Council of Churches calls on churches everywhere to walk together, viewing their common life, their journey of faith, as a part of a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. The United Church of Christ (UCC), the church in which I am ordained, and the Protestant Church of Baden (Ekiba), the church in which I serve as an ecumenical coworker, are active supporters and committed members of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. The invitation to pilgrimage, continues with these words, “To encounter the vulnerable, and to find oneself in a vulnerable place and becoming vulnerable to others, is to be purged of one’s own prejudices, preoccupations, and priorities – stripped down to face God and God’s own aim for the world.”¹

Upon my first trip (2014) to the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Reservation in South Dakota this invitation became real for me. I was there to plan a week-long volunteer experience for the youth of my congregation and I was told - within minutes of my arrival - that the use of the phrase “youth mission project” or “mission trip” was untenable.

My theological education and my lived-experience had not prepared me for what I would learn when I asked why? Why couldn’t we, or why shouldn’t we use the word “mission” to describe our work in partnership with the people of Cheyenne River and the Dakota Association of the United Church of Christ? I did not know, due in part to my white privilege, that this community (and countless others across North America) had been devastated by Indian Mission Boarding schools from as early as 1860 until as recently as 1978. Generations of historical trauma had been carried out in the name of “mission” and by missionaries from diverse Christian denominations.² I found myself in a vulnerable place as I attempted to understand my own prejudices, the gaps in my knowledge, and my own unspoken priorities for the work we should do or “needed” to do in this context.

Through deep listening it became clear that the word “mission” was inextricably tied, in this context, to injustice, repression, brutality, loss and colonization. If our United Church of Christ congregation was truly interested in mutuality, of placing itself at the side of the marginalized, in bearing witness to the love of Christ we needed to rethink our language with urgency. Therefore, the first step, on this ongoing pilgrimage, began with changing our language from “youth mission trip” to “youth service trip” or “immersion-learning service trip” and talking openly and honestly

¹ <https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do/pilgrimage-justice-and-peace>

² About one-third of the 357 known Indian boarding schools were managed by various Christian denominations. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/03/traumatic-legacy-indian-boarding-schools/584293/>

about *why* with all youth participants and adult leaders. As is noted in Thesis 8³ we needed to listen, not as a means of withdrawal, but rather as a means of finding solidarity and overcoming suffering.

I was proud of my denomination's resolution to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery at General Synod 29.⁴ This was now the opportunity for me, and the local congregation I led, to see that the resolution resulted in changed behavior(s). Prior to this realization, my congregation framed and defined all of our outward facing activity at home or abroad as being part of its "mission." As of today, the Mission and Service Board of the church has not changed its name, but our language has changed when it comes to partnership with the Cheyenne River Reservation and our expanded relationships with Native Americans locally at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas.

"Mission takes place - especially in critical reappraisal of its eventful history - dialogically and participatory." (Thesis 4) We learned this first hand as we sought a relationship with the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and our covenant partner organization Simply Smiles.^{5/6} This effort was also (unexpectedly) the first step in strengthening my congregation's evangelical profile (Thesis 2). Our relationships on the Cheyenne River Reservation made such a profound impact on a small group of committed leaders that new anti-racism ministries sprung from the fertile ground of these genuine encounters. Our congregation began to define and elevate its "evangelical profile" through anti-racism work. We welcomed the churched and the unchurched, the religious and the non-religious, into our classrooms, and fellowship hall and sanctuary to look at our spiritual autobiographies through the lens of race.⁷

Beginning with an examination of the word "mission" my community was able to not only better understand but also to better proclaim who we were and what we love (Fulbert Steffensky). We decided to fully embrace being an anti-racist church and have since influenced the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference UCC to make similar commitments to anti-racism education and transformation.

³ The Mission Understanding of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia -facing the challenges of the 21st century - DRAFT - Easter 2021 (page 11)

⁴ The [repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery by General Synod 29](http://uccfiles.com/pdf/g29-1.pdf) provides an invaluable teaching moment for our congregations to understand systemic and continuous impact of racism on the daily lives of indigenous peoples in the U.S. <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/g29-1.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.simplysmiles.org/ucc>

⁶ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wOA9KcVFoDvidTvEZLd5bZmj4bpjs6sM/view>

⁷ <http://privilege.uccpages.org/>

As we look at *Mission Today* I believe that our language needs more careful consideration. While this work makes us vulnerable, the opportunity to pause and reflect has in my ministerial experience brought out “the truth and beauty of the Christian message.” (EKD Synod Leipzig 1999) I wonder the following: How might the United Church of Christ more intentionally, faithfully and prayerfully consider the impact of language? Is changing our language a concrete step toward transforming injustice and violence? If we seek to repudiate the harm done under the banner of Christian mission must we find and use new language as a global faith community? How we might “pilger” together to begin a conversation about language?