

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF HISTORY

The Lutheran witness with Indigenous peoples of North America has more than 350 years of history: It is a history filled with hope and broken promises, solidarity and injustice, affirmation and paternalism, strategies and inaction, grand goals and lack of funding, conflicting legacy entering into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). In the early era of the ELCA, American Indian Alaska Native membership was 6,685. During the 1990's, the general members of the ELCA declined 1.7%. However, between 1987 and 1994, American Indian Alaska Native membership increased 18.1% with 21 congregations reporting 10% or more American Indian and Alaska Native members. Today, the ELCA has 33 congregations reporting 20% or more American Indian/Alaska Native members across seven synods. In 2018, these 33 congregations represented approximately half of the American Indian/Alaska Native membership in the ELCA. (There are 9,091 congregations in the ELCA.)

Some 350 years ago, the first Lutheran mission to serve Native communities was established. In 1645, John Campanius was called as pastor of the congregation along the Delaware River at Fort Christina, the first Swedish settlement in North America. Pastor Campanius extended his call to include the Delaware people. He learned their language and later translated Luther's Small Catechism for their use.

During the next 150 years, several other attempts at ministry in American Indian and Alaska Native communities were made. All were short lived or failed in their original intent and later abandoned. It wasn't until the late 1800s that Lutheran mission attempts began to take hold. Some continue today.

In 1734, the Rev. John Sargeant began a congregational mission in Massachusetts for the Mohicans. Two years later, converts gathered into a regular mission town, named Stockbridge. The Rev. John Sargeant Jr., continued the mission after his father died. Wars and westward expansion diminished the Stockbridge Tribe, which moved to New York. Samson Occom, an Indian minister and outstanding poet, was one of many tribal members who served the Mohicans as pastor and wrote Hymn 538 in the blue Lutheran hymnal, "Now the Shades of Night Are Gone."

In 1821, the tribe moved to Wisconsin. Originally served by the Methodist and Presbyterian missionaries, the Stockbridge appealed for funds to support a pastor, but their appeals were refused. So, the tribe approached a Lutheran pastor at Shawano, Theodore Nickel. Pastor Nickel held his first service in April 1898. The next year, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod called a pastoral candidate from Springfield Lutheran Seminary. The Lutheran Indian Mission Church was built in 1901 on what is now called Mission Lake. Soon a Christian school opened, followed by a boarding school. In 1933, the boarding school closed, though a day school continued. Today, the original mission has grown to three congregations:

- Immanuel Mohican Lutheran, the oldest, still holds worship in the original mission church;
- St. John's Lutheran Church of Morgan, begun in 1931;
- and the largest, the Lutheran Church of the Wilderness, organized in 1937 in memory of the first mission church at Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

The Danish missionary Niels L. Nielsen went to Oklahoma to start a mission with the Cherokee in 1892. Six years passed before he performed his first baptism. The Moravians, who had begun ministry to the Cherokee in 1842, asked the Danish Lutherans to continue their work. Oaks, Okla. currently has two strong Lutheran communities—Eben Ezer Lutheran Church and Oaks Indian Center.

John Plocher, of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, began work with the Apache in Arizona in 1893. He, too, needed six years before his first baptism, but his years of extensive work in the southwest have resulted in three Lutheran communities in the state today—House of Prayer Lutheran Church in Rock Point, Navajo Lutheran Church in Many Farms, and Southwest Indian Ministries in Phoenix.

In 1894, Tollef L. Brevig arrived in Teller, Alaska, on the Seward Peninsula. He came as a school teacher, but his missionary efforts had a lasting impact. In 1917, the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America took over his work. The peninsula now boasts five active congregations in Teller, Brevig Mission, Shishmaref, Wales, and Nome, with a new mission start in Anchorage.

Lutheran churches entered an historic era of finding a common voice in the fight for American Indian sovereignty and self determination after the 1950s, when the U.S. Government terminated its partnership with many Indigenous nations; this was a decade of a dramatic rise in “Indian consciousness.” American Indians and Alaska Natives wanted to protect their traditions, strengthen their sovereignty and end the eras of oppression of Indigenous people.

In the late 1960’s, the American Indian Movement (AIM) was starting to rise out of incidents of violence from police toward American Indians in Minneapolis, Minnesota. LUCHIP—Lutheran Church and Indian People— was also taking shape at this time. Members of AIM confronted participants at a LUCHIP meeting and, later, those attending the ALC’s 1969 convention to urge Lutherans to help American Indian Alaska Natives help themselves. What resulted from these confrontations was the National Indian Lutheran Board (NILB), formed in 1970 between the bodies and leadership of the American Lutheran Church, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, and the Lutheran Church in America, and housed under the Lutheran Council in the USA. While most people during the 1970’s saw the activists of the AIM, what was building strength were the organizers and the national network to work on Indian issues and direct resources. Church bodies that didn’t work together in other ways, partnered to fund and strengthen the NILB.

Eugene Crawford, Sisseton, Wahpetan Sioux, served as executive director. The board’s diversity was its strength. It included both Lutheran clergy and lay leaders, not all of whom were Lutheran; 75% of the members were American Indian and Alaska Native. The work of the NILB strengthened the social ministry of the church bodies responding to needs from hunger, poverty and long term income project in communities through small grant investments. During its 17 year history, NILB distributed about \$200,000 each year to American Indian Alaska Native communities, including funding used to organize for the passing of meaningful policies at the federal level for American Indians and Alaska Natives to move toward self determination and strengthened sovereignty. The NILB also held seminars for tribes going through the Federal Acknowledgment Program.

When the Lutheran churches merged in 1987, the ELCA absorbed the NILB and formed the Commission for Multicultural Ministries (CMM). CMM's role was to inform, consult, and provide a resource to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for ethnic groups. CMM established ministry programs for each ethnic group. These were originally called "desks," and Rose Robinson, Hopi, was the first director for American Indian and Alaska Native ministries, from 1988 to 1989. Gordon Straw, Brothertown Indian Nation of Wisconsin, served as director, then consultant, for the American Indian and Alaska Native Desk from 1990 to 1995. During his tenure, Straw maintained the American Indian and Alaska Native Grants Program and served as liaison between the ELCA structure and Native communities. The transition establishing the CMM resulted in the loss of an incredible network of organizations and resources; it also ended the church's financial commitment to funding efforts to strengthen tribal communities.

The new ELCA constitution also called for each ethnic group forming an association. The one serving American Indians and Alaska Natives is called the American Indian and Alaska Native Lutheran Association.

In 1995, the American Indian and Alaska Native Desk was renamed the department for American Indian and Alaska Native ministries by its new director, Kathleen Fleury, Little Shell Band of Chippewa Indians in Montana. The current director is Prairie Rose Seminole, Three Affiliated Tribes of North Dakota and descendent of the Sahnish/Arikara, Northern Cheyenne and Lakota Nations.

There have been many other faith groups who have come into Indigenous communities during the last several hundred years, having a long-term effect on Native people, both positive and negative. The Lutheran experience has been limited, with few ministries making it out of the long and complicated history of Christian engagement with Indigenous people. As Lutherans, we need to recognize that other denominations took more seriously the role to missionize and Christianize Indigenous peoples so that we acknowledge the unique history the Lutheran church has had and continues to have in and with Indigenous communities.

Information contained in this document resulted from the merger of historical accounts provided in the following:

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. (adopted August 18, 1997). *The American Indian and Alaska Native Strategic Plan* [PDF file]. Retrieved from http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ELCA_American_Indian_And_Alaska_Native_Strategic_Plan_Strategic_Plan.pdf.

Department for American Indian and Alaska Native Ministries, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *American Indian Alaska Native Ministries* [brochure]. Obtained August 2019.