

The Great Tree of Peace

To understand the importance of the Great Tree of Peace, one must become acquainted with the history of the Six Nations Confederacy of the Iroquois. “Iroquois” is the name given by the Europeans to the people who called themselves Haudenosaunee (pronounced Ho-den-oh-SHO-nee), meaning “People of the Longhouse.” The six nations are:

Seneca – In their language, Onondowahgah, “The People of the Great Hill”

Cayuga – “The People of the Great Swamp”

Onondaga – Onoda’gega, “The People of the Hills”

Oneida – “The People of the Standing Stone”

Mohawk – Onkwehónwe:we, “The Original People”

Tuscarora – “Hemp Gatherers,” incorporated in the confederacy in the late 1600’s.

The formation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, said to have happened as a result of the arrival of the Europeans around the Sixteenth Century, actually began 1000 to 3000 years earlier, according to the oral tradition held by the Keepers (tribal members responsible for the preservation of the oral traditions). The original five nations had been at war with each other for eons, wars fueled by retaliation and revenge. According to Haudenosaunee tradition these wars are interwoven with the creation of Turtle Island (North America) and its people.

After thousands of years of fighting, the Great Spirit sent Dekanaweidah—The Great Peace Maker. Dekanaweidah spent most of his life traveling between the five nations negotiating Kayanerehkowa—The Great Law of Peace (also known as Gayanashagowa or The Great Binding Law.) Representatives of the five nations met under The Great Tree of Peace—an eastern white pine planted by Dekanaweidah in the Onandaga territory. Each nation placed weapons in a hole dug underneath the Peace Tree to symbolize the formation of the confederacy and everlasting peace between the nations.

The second article of The Great Law of Peace gives us direction today. Called, “The Great White Roots of the Peace Tree,” it reads as follows: “Roots have spread out from the Tree of Great Peace: one to the north, one to the east, one to the south and one to the west. These are the Great White Roots and their nature is Peace and Strength. If any man or any nation outside of the Five Nations shall obey the laws of the Great Peace (Gayanerekowa) and shall make this known to the statesmen of the League, they may trace back the roots to the Tree. If their minds are clean and if they are obedient and promise to obey the wishes of the Council of the League, they shall be welcomed to take shelter beneath the Tree of the Long Leaves.* We place at the top of the Tree of Great Peace an eagle who is able to see afar. If he sees in the distance any danger threatening, he will at once warn the people of the League.” We seek to honor this tribal tradition as we continue our journey of reconciliation.

**Note: The translator from the Indian to English got his tree mixed up. Tioneratasekowa does not mean a Tree of Long Leaves, but a Great Tree with ever fresh leaves meaning evergreen or the Great White Pine. The Tree of Long Leaves could not be the White Pine.*

Act of Repentance Description

During the 2016 Annual Conference of the Peninsula-Delaware Conference, we opened our worship with a time of confession and repentance toward our Native brothers and sisters, and we promised to continue to walk this journey with specific actions. Although mandated by the General Conference of 2012 to hold a service of repentance, our Conference worship leaders wholeheartedly engaged in learning about various tribal cultures in our region and in listening to their pain-filled stories. Listening led to the design of the worship and conference leadership has attempted to remain faithful to our heart-made promises.

In this act of listening, we heard once again the pain which gets handed down from generation to generation that we have caused through our sinful spread of cultural norms as part of our Christian faith. We listened to stories of massacres, of cultural genocide, of kidnapping young tribal children and indoctrinating them and abusing them in boarding schools, and, locally, of forcing our Native tribes to be invisible, thus “hiding in plain sight.” We hope that this exploration and confession, as shameful and heartbreaking as they are, have set us on a journey to wholeness, where all of God’s people receive dignity and value, and where relationships become healed, through the power of our amazing Creator God.

As part of our worship, our Conference leaders made specific promises to walk in this path of repentance and reconciliation. Our Bishop, Peggy Johnson, promised to empower the presence of Native people in the life of our Conference. Our Director of Connectional Ministries, Rev. Dr. Vicki Gordy-Stith, promised to work with our Committee on Native American Ministries to strengthen our ministries and support indigenous ministries within the bounds of the Conference. Our Director of Business Administration, Mr. Bill Westbrook, promised to promote and support fundraising for Native American Awareness Sunday and other Native offerings. Our Dean of the Cabinet, Rev. Fred Duncan, promised to pursue developing relationships of mutuality with Native peoples in local contexts. Our Easton District Superintendent, Rev. Dr. Shirlyn Henry Brown, promised to promote education about the Act of Repentance throughout her District. Rev. Dr. Kyung He Sa promised to partner with Native ministry leaders and resource people throughout the Connection, so that the Peninsula-Delaware Conference can support developing new Native and indigenous leaders across the Connection.

We recognize that reconciliation involves a journey of a thousand steps. We continue to commit ourselves to healing and restoring these relationships. We pray that the Peace Tree, which will remain at Pecometh, will serve as a reminder that relationships take time and that they must be nurtured and fertilized and watered in order to grow. We recommit ourselves to building, healing, and restoring these relationships.