



Revisiting the Narrative: The Settler Narrative in Our Lutheran Stories

The Settler Narrative is the narrative most commonly told as history. When these narratives fail to include the stories of how encounters impacted Indigenous peoples, the settler narrative becomes a lopsided, half-truth that impacts our ability to form healthy, intercultural relationships. Lutherans arrived on Turtle Island (aka North America) fewer than 40 years after the Santa Maria., emboldened by Christian discovery doctrine. Authors of this document are descendants of Lutherans who immigrated to the “New World.” They hope to inspire other descendants to learn and share more widely the impact stories of their communities so that through these truths we can begin to form a common historical memory that might lead us towards healing and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples in the United States.

The [Christian Doctrine of Discovery](#) used Scripture, such as the book of Exodus, the Great Commission, and Romans 13, to authorize colonization of people living in lands unexplored by Europeans. Through a series of [15th century Papal Bulls](#), the Christian discovery doctrine systematically legalized the theft of Indigenous Peoples’ land, labor, resources, and bodies. During the Protestant Reformation, nation-states tied to the Lutheran church perpetuated this Doctrine of Discovery through legal codes that justified their participation in European colonialism across the world. These are some of the stories that resulted.

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1492 to 1820: Invasion, Slavery, & Resistance



Europeans began exploring Turtle Island as early as the 12th century. As foreign explorers contacted Indigenous people, populations dropped precipitously through enslavement, murder, and introduction of European disease, creating an illusion that lands were nearly empty of human inhabitants. Lutherans were among the first colonizers although they were often “secondary” settlers. They participated in the second expedition to Virginia as well as attempts to establish a Northwest Passage through Hudson Bay. They colonized both Manhattan Island and the Delaware River region. They participated in removal efforts, engaged in the treaty making process, and facilitated the slave trade at the Danish West Indies, where many [enslaved American Indian peoples](#) were sent.

In 1708, England’s Queen ordered German-speaking, Lutheran Palatine refugees be sent to colonize New York. Colonial governors encouraged Lutheran settlements in areas where they served as barriers against incursions. As colonies expanded, Lutherans continued to settle in contested areas, participating in treaty negotiations, skirmishes, massacres, and wars.

The oldest existing ELCA congregation, [First Lutheran Church in Albany, NY](#), was founded by Dutch settler colonists in 1649.

Conrad Weiser, a Lutheran Palatine refugee, orchestrated the [Walking Purchase in 1737](#). This negotiation swindled the Lenape out of much of their land in Pennsylvania. Weiser’s grandson, Frederick Muhlenburg, was leader of the Pennsylvania legislature and a Lutheran pastor. As Speaker of the Assembly, Muhlenburg called on Colonial General George Washington to destroy all “Indian Towns” in Western Pennsylvania; most of which were Moravian communities of Lenape. Muhlenburg later became the first Speaker of the newly formed U.S. House of Representatives.



Frederick Muhlenburg

European crowns and settler governments signed treaties with leaders of Tribal Nations. Negotiations occurred under duress in almost all situations. Settler encroachment on land, child removal, violence against women, decimation of local food sources, and warfare were tactics most commonly used against Tribal Nations as part of the settler negotiation strategy. For more information, visit [Tribal Nations & the U.S.: An Introduction](#).



1492 to 1820: Invasion, Slavery, & Resistance



Lutheran settler colonists moved southeast, after and during the enslavement and removal of many Yamasee and Muscogee to the West Indies. In 1732, Great Britain established the Georgia colony, offering Lutheran refugees from Salzburg (in modern day Austria) settlement in an area called Ebenezer, and Lutheran Pastor Johann Boltzius often served as a liaison between Indigenous leaders and colonial authorities. Settlement had been agreed upon by Tomochichi, a leader of the Yamacraw and Euchee, but over the course of Pastor Boltzius' ministry, the [relationship between Indigenous nations and the Salzburger deteriorated](#).

“At the 2016 churchwide assembly, the (ELCA) passed the [‘Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery’](#) resolution, which calls for the church to ‘explicitly and Clearly repudiate’ the doctrine and ‘to acknowledge and repent of its complicity in the evils of colonialism in the Americas.’ It also correctly requires the church to take action...” -Vance Blackfox, [Journal of Lutheran Ethics](#)

In 1734, the Anglican Church started Wnahktukuk ministry. Chief Konkapot, a Mohican, was one of the first to be baptized. Eventually, Christian Mohicans moved to Stockbridge, MA, and formed the Stockbridge Mohican Tribe. While Stockbridge Mohicans fought the British in the Revolutionary War, white colonists stole their lands, forcing them to relocate to New Stockbridge, New York. In 1785, Presbyterian Pastor Samuel Occom formed the Brothertown Indian community in New Stockbridge. The [Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohicans](#) and the [Brothertown Indian Nation](#) later were [relocated to Wisconsin](#) where the Stockbridge-Munsee approached Lutheran Pastor Theodore Nickel to lead their congregation after being denied pastors by their former denominations. The ministry is now three congregations, one of which is the [Lutheran Church of the Wilderness, ELCA](#).



1820 to 1850: Removal Era



The U.S. government acquired land through any means necessary, centralizing western worldview and land practices while eliminating Indigenous communities. Settler colonialism accelerated, especially in areas where gold, minerals, and other resources were found.

In *Johnson v. McIntosh*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the U.S. government had "ultimate dominion" over land since Tribal Nations retained only the right of "occupancy" when discovered. Citing Papal Bulls as precedent, the Court moved the Christian Doctrine of Discovery into law. Emboldened by *Johnson v. McIntosh*, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, resulting in countless death marches, including the [Trail of Tears](#) and [Potawatomi Trail of Death](#).



[Bethany Mission](#) was an Ojibwe-speaking farming community in Michigan started by German Lutherans. When members moved to [Isabella Indian Reservation](#) near Mt. Pleasant, they could not build a Lutheran church since the government had assigned the reservation to the Methodists. The congregation dissolved within a few years. In 1891, the [Mt. Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School](#) was built after local white settlers raised nearly 10% of the construction funding. It was run by the Methodist Church.

In 1859, German Lutherans went west. After the U.S. Army [Massacred Arapaho and Cheyenne at Sand Creek](#), missionaries abandoned the mission and shifted focus to white communities. When they returned to Wartburg Seminary in Iowa, missionaries took [three Cheyenne boys](#) with them - two died in childhood and the third wandered the region, supporting himself.



Lutherans in Alaska



Russian fur traders, as many as two-thirds of whom were Estonian and Finnish Lutherans under Russian control, reached Alaska in the late-1700s. The first Lutheran congregation was planted in [Sitka](#) in 1840. Russian decree only permitted European Lutherans to be members. In the 1890s, the U.S. government commissioned the Sami (Indigenous people from northern Europe) to teach reindeer domestication. Norwegian Lutheran Pastor Tollef Brevig was sent to the Teller reindeer station (now named Brevig Mission) at the Sami's request. Pastor Brevig became part of the Inupiaq community, learning the language while teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Brevig was known to the Inupiat as *Apaurak* - "father of all."

"I'm a Lutheran, born and raised. Attending church every Sunday has been part of my life...just as my heart is filled when I'm immersed in my Inupiaq heritage, I also feel a greater peace when worshiping through the familiar structure and doctrine of my Lutheran upbringing.

Qinuinaa Atanipta taimuḡa
(the peace of the Lord
be with you always)."

- [Suzzuk Huntington](#)

"So here I was, supposedly only a nurse by profession (recruited to work in the Teller Orphanage after the Flu Pandemic of 1918 decimated Alaska Native villages), but later finding myself preaching, teaching, baptizing, even giving communion privately, when we had no pastor...Many times I felt very inadequate, but...(with) God all things are possible if we are in His will."

- [Helen Frost](#)

Missionary efforts had lasting impacts in Alaska, including suppression of language, traditional dancing, and the drum. Yet, Alaska Natives often aided missionaries in acclimating to the land, and some Inupiaq noted that Lutheran beliefs mirrored values already present in the deeply spiritual Inupiaq culture. 70% of [Alaska Synod](#) congregations have members of Indigenous heritage and six congregations have predominantly of Inupiaq heritage. Today, Alaska Native people are actively reclaiming cultural pieces that were stolen through colonialism masquerading as mission.



1850 to 1887: Reservations & Boarding Schools



The U.S. government shifted Indian policy towards assimilation and sought the church to help do it. President Ulysses [Grant's "Peace Policy"](#) replaced federal agents with missionaries, and General Pratt's model to "kill the Indian, save the man" [partnered the U.S. government with the church through American Indian Boarding Schools](#). A recent study by the Department of Interior confirmed that "the federal Indian boarding school project deployed systematic militarized and identity-alteration methodologies in an attempt to assimilate American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children... Despite assertions to the contrary, the investigation found that the school system largely focused on manual labor and vocational skills that left (Indigenous) graduates with employment options often irrelevant to the industrial U.S. economy, further disrupting Tribal economies."

Lutherans operated more day and mission schools than boarding schools. Mission schools collaborated with Indian boarding schools by "enrolling students" when boarding schools experienced overcrowding or epidemics. Poor record keeping in mission schools resulted in countless Indigenous children mislabeled as abandoned and placed in white settler homes.

In Minnesota, waves of settlers moved to lands ceded by the Dakota Nation. Areas reserved by the Dakota Nation in the treaties for hunting and gathering were severely encroached upon. Leaders from this Nation requested help from the U.S. government. Their requests were ignored. In 1862, [war erupted](#) between the two nations and the battles were fought in the Dakota Nation's reserved and ceded lands—areas where many Lutheran communities had been built. Civilian and combat casualties were high. Years later, Bethany Lutheran Church in Judson, MN, partnered with the [Dakota 38 Memorial Ride](#) to begin the healing process. Members of Bethany witnessed tribal resilience and cultural reclamation as the Sunktank Riders remembered those killed in [the largest U.S. mass execution](#).



1887 to 1968: Termination, Relocation & Adoption



The Boarding School Program expanded, and western understandings of stewardship and dominion, in which property owners work individual plots of land in order to reap a benefit, were seen as necessary for the advancement of Indigenous communities. The Homestead and Morrill Acts of 1862 and the Dawes Act of 1887 confiscated Tribal lands, making them available to [state universities](#) and settlers. At the Moravian Mission in New Springplace, OK, the Dawes Act justified shrinking their land from 160 acres to 4 acres. During the Cold War, the U.S. government attempted to minimize legal responsibility to Tribal Nations through the [Bosone Bill](#) and [American Indian Urban Relocation Program](#).

Lutherans expanded missions throughout the U.S. Danish Lutheran Missionaries established [Eben Ezer Lutheran Church](#) in 1903 and [Oaks Indian Mission School](#) in 1926. In Arizona, [The Navajo Evangelical Lutheran Inc.](#) (formerly known as House of Prayer Lutheran Church) was founded in Rock Point.

Lutheran Pastor Abraham Jacobson arrived in Dakota Territory in 1861. By 1911, over [120,000 Lutherans lived in South Dakota](#). When gold was discovered in the Black Hills, squatters stole land from the Great Sioux Nation. After years of legal battles, [the Supreme Court ruled the land seizures illegal](#). Instead of returning the land as requested, the Court ordered the government buy it. Since the land had never been put up for sale, the Sioux Nation refused the payment and continues to fight for return of the land.

Under the [Indian Adoption Project](#), removal of Indigenous children was justified for nearly any reason. The government sold the idea of white families adopting American Indian children in household magazines. Thousands of Indigenous children were adopted (exact number not known). Lutheran Children's Friend Society, one agency that placed Indigenous children, merged in 1969 with Lutheran Social Service, MN.



Today: Self Determination Era



Demanding change, Indigenous people are exercising sovereignty, reclaiming culture, celebrating resilience, and starting the long journey towards healing.

In 1969, members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) demanded Lutherans help Tribal Nations fight for sovereignty. [National Indian Lutheran Board](#) (NILB) was formed as a result. NILB testified on legislation, increased awareness, partnered with AIM to establish Indigenous urban ministries, and made grants for Indian projects and special requests. Unfortunately, the creation of the ELCA and tensions with other Lutheran church bodies terminated the NILB in 1987.

In 1978, Congress decriminalized practicing Indigenous expressions of religion with the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. That same year, the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) ended the Indian Adoption Era. However, ICWA continues to be challenged. [Adoptive Couple v. Baby Girl](#) and [Brakeen v. Bernhardt](#) are two examples.

In 2005 in the Black Hills of South Dakota, Woyatan Lutheran Church opened as the first Lakota ELCA congregation. Their mission is to be “the tip of the spear” that leads to a new understanding of living together. Living in the Lutheran tradition while retaining their Lakota identity and spiritual practices, Woyatan welcomes all people in the spirit of Creator.

In 2021, the ELCA released “[A Declaration of the the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to American Indian and Alaska Native People](#),” which acknowledges the Christian, theological foundation of the Doctrine of Discovery and how it has codified religious intolerance and colonialism as societal norms for more than 500 years.” In 2022, [Indigenous Ministries and Tribal Relations](#) was formed as part of the ELCA’s Service and Justice home area.

