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## Study guide

# Beyond a resolution

By Robert C. Blezard

Five years have passed since the 2016 Churchwide Assembly approved (912-28) a declaration repudiating the 15th-century Doctrine of Discovery. The doctrine, sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church, gave European nations license to “discover” undeveloped lands, annex them, exploit their resources and rule over the native peoples there. Many of the world’s Indigenous peoples, including those from the Americas, say Europeans used the doctrine to justify stealing their land and resources, and oppressing their people—crimes for which there has been no restitution and whose effects still linger.

### EXERCISE 1: COLUMBUS’ DISCOVERY

Though modern sensibilities are changing, it’s still often said that Christopher Columbus discovered America when in 1492 he sailed from Europe and landed in what is today the West Indies on Oct. 12. Columbus Day is the national holiday that recalls that event, although many prefer to use the term Indigenous People’s Day.

- In what sense did Columbus discover America? From whose point of view was it a discovery?
- Columbus arrived on land that was already settled by Indigenous people who had lived there for generations. From the natives’ point of view, was Columbus’ landing a discovery?
- What words might Indigenous people use to describe the experience of Europeans landing on their territory?
- So did Columbus really discover anything?
- In light of the revised thinking about Columbus’ discovery, can you understand why some refer to Oct. 12 as Indigenous Peoples’ Day? Can you articulate those reasons?

### EXERCISE 2: THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY

Pope Nicholas V issued a decree in 1452 that laid the foundation for the Doctrine of Discovery. His decree gave King Alfonso V of Portugal authority to enslave non-Christian peoples, thereby promoting his country’s slave trade in West Africa. Successive papal decrees solidified and expanded the doctrine by granting Catholic nations of Europe the authority to declare dominion over the then-unknown non-Christian lands they encountered in the Age of Discovery. The decrees also encouraged enslaving native peoples (“Papal Bull Dum Diversas 18 June, 1452,” [doctrineofdiscovery.org](http://doctrineofdiscovery.org)).

- As a 21st-century Christian, what do you think about the actions of Christians in the 15th century that led to the Doctrine of Discovery? What words come to



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mind? What emotions?

- Today, Christians are of one mind on the issue of human slavery. How would you characterize the current consensus viewpoint?
- How would Christians today view a nation annexing land that belonged to others?
- In Africa and the Americas, the Doctrine of Discovery provided cover for Europeans to seize land, exploit resources, and enslave and oppress the natives who lived on them. Would you consider those actions “Christian”? Explain.

### EXERCISE 3: AMERICANIZED DOCTRINE

In 1823, the U.S. Supreme Court incorporated the Doctrine of Discovery into U.S. law in the decision of *Johnson v. M’Intosh*. It ruled: “The United States, then, have unequivocally acceded to that great and broad rule by which its civilized inhabitants now hold this country. They hold and assert in themselves, the title by which it was acquired. They maintain, as all others have maintained, that discovery gave an exclusive right to extinguish the Indian title of occupancy, either by purchase or conquest; and gave also a right to such a degree of sovereignty, as the circumstances of the people would allow them to exercise” (“What is the Doctrine of Discovery,” [uua.org](http://uua.org)).

- As you learn of this ruling, what thoughts go through your mind? What emotions do you feel?
- By today’s sensibilities, is the ruling right and just? Explain.
- As a Christian, how do you respond?
- Looking at this ruling, can you extrapolate the thinking that went behind it? What does it indicate about how American Indians were regarded under the law? In civil society? By nonnative people?
- Knowing how American Indians were regarded by the government in the 19th century, can you understand how and why treaties signed by the U.S. with American Indians were broken again and again? How would you explain it?
- Given how American Indians were regarded, can you understand how and why the U.S. government forcibly relocated them from their lands to reservations that were usually more remote and less valuable? How would you express it?

### EXERCISE 4: LONG-TERM HARM

Indigenous peoples say the harm done to them by Europeans in the name of the Doctrine of Discovery includes the death of thousands of ancestors and loss of land, power, religion, self-determination, culture and language. American Indians and Alaska Natives say the effects continue today and are evidenced in statistics:

- The poverty rate for Native Americans (the government’s term) is 25.4%, compared to 20.8% for Black people, 17.6% for Latino people, and 10.1% for both white and Asian people (“Who Lives in Poverty,” [povertyusa.org](http://povertyusa.org)).
- While the overall poverty rate is 25.4% for Native Americans overall, it is especially high in female-headed households (54%) and on some reservations (40%) (“Fact

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Sheet: Hunger and Poverty in the Indigenous Community,” [bread.org](http://bread.org)).

- American Indians and Alaska Natives are more likely to suffer from ill health. The life expectancy of an American Indian or Alaska Native born today is 5.5 years shorter (73 years versus 78.5 years) than the U.S. as a whole (“Fact Sheet: Disparities,” [ihs.gov](http://ihs.gov)).
- Only 14.5% of American Indian and Alaska Native people have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared with 31.3% of the U.S. as a whole (“Higher Education Rates for Native Americans Remain Low,” [aigcs.org](http://aigcs.org)).

Discuss:

- What do you make of these statistics? What do you think? What do you feel? Are you shocked? Surprised? Upset? Angry? Motivated? Unmoved?
- What factors might explain these statistics besides the multigenerational effect of policies relating to the Doctrine of Discovery implemented since the founding of our country?
- As a community of Christians, what can ELCA Lutherans do to help?

### EXERCISE 5: ELCA DECLARATION

The 2016 Churchwide Assembly’s “Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery” called for the ELCA to follow up with a number of steps, including: “To repudiate explicitly and clearly the European-derived doctrine of discovery as an example of the ‘improper mixing of the power of the church and the power of the sword’ (Augsburg Confession Article XXVIII, Latin text), and to acknowledge and repent from this church’s complicity in the evils of colonialism in the Americas, which continue to harm tribal governments and individual tribal members” (search for the title at [elca.org](http://elca.org)).

In response, the ELCA Church Council approved on Sept. 27, 2021, “A Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to American Indian and Alaska Native People.” The entire document is worthy of extensive study, but here are some excerpts for discussion (search for the title at [elca.org](http://elca.org)):

- [T]he Doctrine of Discovery created a theological framework that supported racism, colonialism, and the annihilation of Indigenous people. Today it continues to support those evils and injustices found in our church, U.S. law, and legal interpretation. The Doctrine of Discovery has been pervasive throughout the world and has benefited the church and ELCA Lutherans in every way, which requires us to address our own context in the United States and the Caribbean as well as how our U.S. economic interests have exacerbated life internationally. Further, the Doctrine of Discovery is not simply a historical document and is not only about the past. Rather, it is indeed about our present, and impacts the future.
- We confess that we have not listened to the stories of Indigenous people and have not taken the time to understand history. We have devalued Indigenous religions and lifeways and have not challenged the invisibility of Indigenous people in American society. We have treated American Indians and Alaska Natives as a “minority group” rather than as sovereign nations. We have not taken seriously

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the importance of land and how complicit we are in accepting the benefits of stolen land.

- We confess that we are complicit in the annihilation of Native peoples and your cultures, languages, and religions, and that we have refused to truly recognize the harm that we have caused our Native siblings. We confess that we must continue to learn more about our complicity and the roles our church played in dehumanizing Indigenous peoples ....
- We confess that we, as a church with European and immigrant roots, have benefited from broken treaties, our participation and complicity in the annihilation of Indigenous peoples and culture, and our continued racist oppression of Native people and their sovereign nations. We confess that our congregations are built on the original homelands of Indigenous people, that we have continually refused to include the truth about our treatment and exploitation of our Native siblings and their lands as central to American history.
- We commit to working toward the elimination of racism and white supremacy that exists in our church's governance, leadership, congregations, and membership that has always had and continues to have detrimental effects on Native communities and our ELCA Native siblings, congregations, and ministries.
- We commit to better understanding the Doctrine of Discovery, identifying the ways in which it is still used to oppress Indigenous people, and how best to realize our church's repudiation of such a sinful ideology.
- We commit to strengthening our anti-oppression efforts with a greater focus on realizing justice and equity for Indigenous people. Therefore, we commit to providing educational materials and opportunities to help our church and our non-Indigenous members better understand our repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery and our complicity in its long-range implications.

### EXERCISE 6: NEXT STEPS

The ELCA is working to formulate a strategy to fulfill promises made in the repudiation and statement. Following the 2016 repudiation, Vance Blackfox, who helped draft it, expressed the hopes of American Indians and Alaska Natives in *The Journal of Lutheran Ethics*. A member of the Cherokee Nation, Blackfox is ELCA desk director for American Indian Alaska Native Tribal Nations.

Below, for discussion, are excerpts from his article. What do you think?

- Will the task of repudiation put before the church at present be taken as seriously [as pre-ELCA initiatives]? Or will it be—not unlike the countless gestures that churches, schools, corporations, cities, states, and even countries have made to Native peoples in the past—all apology and no action? They happen. They are meaningful. There may even be a ceremony performed or a letter written, but then there is ... nothing. The good feeling subsides, and the work goes with it. The apologizers feel absolved and believe that actual progress has been made. Meanwhile, nothing changes for Native people. The daily oppression and brutal conditions that we are forced to survive remain the same. As a result, we become

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even more disillusioned by the failure of our allies and missionizers—the brothers and sisters in Christ who were supposed to begin loving us more.

- We lift up how responsible the church is, exhibited by the many justice statements the church has made over time, but whom do those statements serve? Those for whom we seek justice, or those voting on them? We proudly lift up Lutheran Social Ethics as a model worthy of being followed by others around the world interested in doing social ethics, yet we mold and manipulate language for the sake of not offending the bound conscience of those who would sit in opposition to a differently worded statement. Because of such carefulness, it often seems that we can never say what really needs to be said. As a result, we cannot do what really needs to be done.
- We are still suffering from the traumas experienced by generations of our ancestors. ... This trauma is witnessed in the diseases we live with and die from, the elimination of our languages, the deletion of our traditions and cultures, the dismissal of our lifeways, the high levels of addiction, the large number of suicides, the disappearances of our women, our imprisonment on reservations, or our isolation due to a forced and lonely diaspora.
- The repudiation resolution could serve as another good start in the history of Lutheranism in Native America, but we must remain vigilant in our work to assess two critical pieces. First, does this repudiation *do* enough, challenge us enough? Second, what might Native people *really* want from the church, aside from the activities listed in the sanitized resolution regarding repudiation?

### EXERCISE 7: YOUR INVOLVEMENT

As the ELCA struggles with its next steps, brainstorm as a study group ways that you and your congregation might be able to help.

- How might you and your congregation learn more about the Doctrine of Discovery? The treatment of American Indian and Alaska Native people in the past and their living conditions and challenges today?
- What are ways you and your congregation could educate others about these matters?
- How could you work to involve your synod in this vital work?
- What are ways you could advocate for justice for American Indian and Alaska Native people in your congregation? In your community? In your synod? In your state? Nationally?
- Devise an “action plan” and share it with your pastor or congregation council for action.

The 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly began with a Native American call to worship. In the service, Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton acknowledged the tribal land in Milwaukee on which the assembly met. A task force is now determining the next steps the ELCA could take to further its repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery.



# BEYOND A RESOLUTION

*By JN Shimko*

**LUTHERANS CONSIDER HOW TO TRANSFORM THE “REPUDIATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY” INTO AN ACTIVE DOCUMENT**

In 1494, the Spanish and Portuguese empires reached an agreement that split up possession of the New World along a meridian near the Cape Verde islands. Though ignored by most European nations at the time, the Treaty of Tordesillas became the legal foundation for the Doctrine of Discovery, which allowed European, and later American, nations to claim lands occupied by Indigenous or other non-European, non-Christian people as federal property.

The Doctrine of Discovery laid the foundation for the United States of America, among many other nations on the American continents. But it has meant heartache, disease, death and loss of land for millions of Indigenous people living as far north as Greenland and as far south as Chile and Argentina.

The ELCA Churchwide Assembly formally repudiated the doctrine in 2016, citing the Augsburg Confession's prohibition against "the improper mixing of the power of the church and the power of the sword" and laying out seven objectives for the ELCA. Some were straightforward, such as stating repentance and seeking reconciliation with the many Native American nations throughout the United States.

Other objectives require more work and consideration, such as correcting the centuries-old colonial mindset that approved of seizing land from Indigenous peoples without any agreement or compensation.

As the church prepares for its 2022 assembly, a task force composed of American Indian Lutherans, Alaska Native Lutherans and allies will determine the next, most actionable, steps the ELCA could take to further its repudiation of the doctrine.

The Doctrine of Discovery began to crack during the civil

rights movement of the 1960s and '70s, when white U.S. citizens began to examine the tragic histories of their nonwhite neighbors and question such ideas as manifest destiny, which argued that God favored white settlement of North America.

During this period, the Lutheran Council in the United States of America (LCUSA) partnered with members of the American Indian Movement to create the National Indian Lutheran Board, which raised funds, provided grants and lobbied on behalf of Native Americans and Native American entities. But the group was disbanded with the founding of the ELCA and the disbanding of the LCUSA.

At that time the ELCA hoped to take on the board's work, but this idea fell victim to the struggle of merging the ELCA's three predecessor bodies into one and navigating the new responsibilities of multicultural ministry. In the 1990s, the ELCA formally adopted a strategic plan and vision for Indigenous peoples, creating the American Indian and Alaska Native Lutheran Association. But more needed to be done.

### Toward active repudiation

"A lot of people think that all we need to do is apologize and it's done," said Vance Blackfox, "but a lot of Native American people need to heal." A member of the Cherokee Nation, Blackfox is ELCA desk director for American Indian Alaska Native Tribal Nations. Previously he was part in the team that crafted the church's statement of repudiation. "Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery' is, in my opinion, a movement," he said. "It's a process."

That process continues with the new task force, which will discern what actions the church needs to take to live up to the words approved by the assembly in 2016. Co-chairs



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Marlene Whiterabbit Helgemo, a member of the Ho-Chunk Tribe in Wisconsin, and Jessica Crist, bishop emeritus of the Montana Synod, have created small groups to develop various actions in time for the 2022 Churchwide Assembly as well as educational resources to shift the church's teaching toward repudiation and reconciliation.

Part of that is shifting people's ideas about land ownership and land acknowledgment (see also page 42). There are many Americans, especially Lutherans, whose ancestors arrived in the United States after the colonial expansion and westward migration, and who feel no culpability in the stealing of Indigenous peoples' land. But the Doctrine of Discovery has given us more than broken treaties and federal seizure of lands.

"Everyone is, to some degree, hurt [by the land theft], especially the Native Americans," said Guy Erwin, president of United Lutheran Seminary in Pennsylvania and a member of the Osage Nation.

Generations that followed were hurt by the rapacious capitalism of the late-19th and early-20th centuries, which encouraged western settlement.

"We're all entangled in this," he added.

"My dad [robs] a bank of \$2 million and dies a week later, handing me that \$2 million," Blackfox imagines. "If I don't turn it in, am I a criminal? It's a simplified example, but the concept is still there."

That concept, he explained, is part of a larger effort to understand what it means for an entire nation to lose the land they have lived on for centuries; the loss of that land and the spiritual implications of losing it are traumatic. Centuries' worth of ceremonies and rituals between the Creator and created have been lost.

### **Lutheranism from a Native American perspective**

Even as the task force searches for ways to move forward with repudiation, it's developing new initiatives in reconciliation.

One current project involves the language used to describe both Lutheranism and Native Americans. Another is a declaration to people of American Indian and Native Alaskan descent that, at press time, the task force had hoped to issue by Indigenous People's Day on Oct. 11.

Crist said the declaration will be aimed at three audiences:

Indigenous people outside the church, Indigenous members of the ELCA and their non-Indigenous fellow worshipers. "We confess to each of those and we make a promise to each of those," she said. "It's a stronger statement than we've ever made before, and I'm excited for it."

Finally, the task force is developing a new publication, *Luther's Small Catechism With a Native Perspective*. Inspired by earlier Lutheran catechisms from Asian-descent and African-descent perspectives, the project is being overseen by Erwin, who has started asking Indigenous Lutherans to write interpretive reflections on sections of Martin Luther's work. He hopes to have the book finished in time for Indigenous Peoples' Day 2022.

Ironically, this won't be the first time Native Americans contributed to the Small Catechism—its first non-European translation was in the language of the Lenape Tribe of Delaware. †

To learn more, search for "American Indian Alaska Native" at [elca.org](http://elca.org). Download a study guide at [livinglutheran.org](http://livinglutheran.org) by clicking on the "Spiritual practices & resources" tab.