

Quaker Indian Committee disavows Doctrine of Discovery, affirms Declaration

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PHILADELPHIA – Inspired by the actions of the Episcopal Church, a Quaker group has disavowed the Christian [Doctrine of Discovery](#) and voiced its support for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Indian Committee of [Philadelphia Yearly Meeting](#) of the Religious Society of Friends issued a Minute – analogous to a resolution – at its September meeting.

The committee “renounces the Doctrine of Discovery, the doctrine at the foundation of the colonization of Indigenous lands, including the lands of Pennsylvania. We find this doctrine to be fundamentally inconsistent with the teaching of Jesus, with our understanding of the inherent rights that individuals and peoples have received from God, and inconsistent with Quaker testimonies of Peace, Equality, and Integrity,” the Minute reads.

The Doctrine of Discovery was a principle of international law developed in a series of 15th century papal bulls and 16th century charters by European monarchs. It was a racist philosophy that gave white Christian Europeans the green light to go forth and claim the lands and resources of non-Christian peoples and kill or enslave them – if other Christian Europeans had not already done so.

The doctrine institutionalized the competition between European countries in their ever-expanding quest for colonies, resources and markets, and sanctioned the genocide of indigenous people in the “New World” and elsewhere.

As a spiritual corollary of the renunciation, the Indian Committee also expressed its support for the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was adopted by the General Assembly Sept. 13, 2007. The Declaration presents indigenous rights within a framework of human rights.

Only the U.S., Canada, New Zealand and Australia – countries with large populations of indigenous peoples with huge aboriginal land claims – voted against the Declaration’s adoption. Australia has since adopted it.

The action by PYM’s Indian Committee was initiated by Elizabeth Koopman, who said she was inspired by the Episcopal Church’s resolution, called “Repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery.” The resolution passed unanimously by the Episcopal House of Bishops and by an overwhelming majority of the House of Delegates during the church’s 76th

General Convention held July 8 – 17 in Anaheim.

Within weeks, Koopman had amassed a packet of materials, including her own writings, on the Doctrine of Discovery, and sent it out to her circle of Friends.

“Friends have had a long relationship with Indian country,” Koopman said. “But Quakers were colonizers under Charles II’s Doctrine of Discovery when William Penn came here. We have been a people who have been of good intention and not always of such good works.”

But there is a growing understanding of the history and its ramifications, Koopman said.

“Our Committee understands now a history that none of us ever fully appreciated and we understand that we are the beneficiaries of a very unjust policy.”

Koopman, who has lived in Maine and now lives near Philadelphia, said she has discussed these issues with and read the writings of Steven Newcomb, indigenous law research coordinator in the education department of the Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation, Indian Country Today columnist, and author of “Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery.” She also has had lengthy conversations with her longtime friends Wayne Newell, a Passamaquoddy elder and teacher, and John Dieffenbacker Krall, the executive director of the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission.

It was Dieffenbacker-Krall who started what has become a movement to have predominantly non-Catholic Christian churches renounce the Doctrine of Discovery. He spearheaded the effort that led Maine’s Episcopal Church to pass a resolution in 2007, calling on Queen Elizabeth and the Archbishop of Canterbury to rescind the 1496 charter given to John Cabot and his sons to go forth and claim possession of all the lands in the “New World” that weren’t already claimed by Spain and Portugal. That action led to a similar resolution in New York state and ultimately to the national resolution last summer.

A movement to persuade the Catholic Church to repeal the papal bulls has been in the works for years.

Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the [Onondaga Nation](#) (Haudenosaunee), co-signed a letter in 2005 urging Pope Benedict XVI, to revoke the papal bulls. There has been no response from the Vatican.

Koopman was surprised to receive a phone call from Lyons, whom she has never met, in early December before he, Newcomb and others in the indigenous community were leaving for the Parliament of the World’s Religions meeting in Melbourne, Australia, Dec. 3 – 9.

“We had a long conversation and I sent him a copy of the materials and, meanwhile, people are taking (the Minute) to other monthly meetings and we’re hoping it will get to the Yearly Meetings in the different areas,” Koopman said.

The circle is definitely widening, Koopman agreed.

“A lot of people are coming to this light. I think something’s happening and I feel it’s going to be good if we let these moments be beginnings and not endings. You can’t say, ‘I’m sorry, now it’s over.’ It has to be a beginning: ‘I know this now, I embrace this now and I will use this to move forward in better ways.’”