

11 FACTS ABOUT NATIVE PEOPLE IN SOCIETY AND THE CHURCH

BY BISHOP DAVID WILSON

1. We are a diverse people.

There are over 570 federally recognized tribes, nations, villages, clans and more across the United States, along with 61 state-recognized tribes. Each nation has its own language, culture, values, and history; there is no single culture or language among Indigenous peoples. The diversity among Indigenous peoples in this country is amazing and beautiful. No one person or group may "speak for" all Indigenous persons.

3. There are many names for Indigenous peoples in the United States and around the world.

There is no specific term that is suitable for all. Many tribal peoples prefer to be called by the tribe or tribes they represent. The United Methodist Church has used "Native Americans" for many years. Other acceptable terms include American Indians, First Nations, Indigenous, First Americans.



2. We are not a mascot.

Indigenous persons are not "honored" when our cultural image, symbols, and faces are stereotyped and used as sports mascots (or any other mascots) by non-Native people. In fact, such mascots are degrading and false representations of who Native people are. Numerous studies—including a 2005 study by the American Psychological Association—suggest Native mascots and behavior associated with fans of teams with such mascots harm Native people, particularly children and youth. These studies demonstrate that in colleges and schools with Native mascots, Native children and youth are more likely to live with lower self-esteem, increased rates of depression and substance abuse, and an increased likelihood of encountering anti-Native racism and discrimination.



4. Not all U.S. Native/Indigenous persons live on reservations.

Across the United States there are 326 reservations; yet, less than 30 percent of all American Indians and Alaska Natives live on them. More than 70 percent live in urban areas, with approximately 8 percent living in small towns and rural areas outside reservations.

5. Our regalia and dances have sacred and spiritual meaning.

Our ritualistic dances should not be mimicked for comedy, nor should our ceremonial clothing (e.g. feathered headdresses) be worn as costumes for Halloween or sampled as fashion. The regalia is sacred, and much prayer, time, and work go into creating each piece worn in tribal dances. Often, they are passed down from generation to generation. Please be aware that wearing indigenous regalia as costumes is cultural appropriation. Such actions contribute to the oppression Indigenous people face daily.



6. Native Americans serve in the U.S. military at the highest rate of any ethnic group.

American Indians and Alaska Natives serve in the U.S. Armed Forces at five times the national average. Native veterans have served with distinction in every major conflict for over 200 years. Native persons have the highest per-capita involvement of any population to serve in the U.S. military. Indigenous code-talkers from 33 tribes were recognized by Congress in 2013. Many of them are from United Methodist churches.

8. Indigenous persons have made significant contributions to the world's culture.

The constitution of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy was used as a model for the Articles of Confederation, later incorporated into the U.S. Constitution. Corn was cultivated by Indigenous peoples over 10,000 years ago, who in turn taught the first European immigrants how to grow the crop. The earliest Indigenous doctors identified plants that provided anesthetics and ointment for healing of the skin. Make time to further research the contributions of Indigenous persons on modern culture and society.

7. Native Americans as United Methodist leaders date back to the early 19th century.

The first Native American District Superintendent in the denomination was the Rev. Samuel Checote, a Muscogee, who was appointed in 1868 after he was relocated to Indian Territory in the 1820s.

In 1992, the Rev. Dr. Lois Neal, a Cherokee, became the first Native American woman appointed District Superintendent.

Rev. Dr. Neal and the Rev. Everline "Tweedy" Sombrero, a Navajo, were the first two Native American women to earn a master's degree in theology in 1988.

The Rev. Dr. Thom White Wolf Fassett, a Seneca, was the first Native American to be named General Secretary of a church-wide agency of the United Methodist Church.

Dr. Fassett was elected and served in that position with the General Board of Church and Society from 1988 to 2000.

In 2022, Rev. David Wilson, a member of the Choctaw Nation, was the first Native American elected as bishop.



9. Indigenous persons play a vital and important role in the life of The United Methodist Church.

Even so, they represent the smallest racial ethnic group in the denomination, at 0.47 percent. According to the latest study by the United Methodist Native American Comprehensive Plan and Path One (a church-planting initiative of Discipleship Ministries), there are 157 Native American United Methodist congregations in the United States. The largest concentration of Native churches is in the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference, which comprises parishes in Oklahoma, Kansas, and Texas.

10. Tipis are not the typical housing for modern U.S. Indigenous people.

Today, tipis are used mostly in Native American ceremonies and cultural gatherings, and the majority of tribal people have never lived in tipis. Traditional housing for U.S. Natives has ranged from longhouses in the Northeast and hogans in the Southwest, to igloos in Alaska. Today, most Indigenous persons live in contemporary homes, condos, apartments, tribal homes in urban areas, towns, rural, reservations and more. The new First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City features a soaring glass and steel half dome as its entrance hall modeled after a traditional Wichita grass lodge.



11. Indigenous persons are the only racial-ethnic group that must constantly "prove" who we are.

To gain U.S. federal-government recognition and protection, Native Americans must document their racial identity. This federal recognition began with the Dawes Commission in 1887, which required every Native American person in the country to register. Tribal peoples from federally recognized tribes must register with their tribes to show their lineage to these tribes. Each tribe issues tribal cards and the government issues a Certificate Degree of Indian Blood to individuals. The cards are often used by tribal nations to prove eligibility for government services.

