

# **General Synod 2010 (Resolutions Form A086 R1):**

## **Repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery (carried)**

**Subject:** Repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery

**Moved by:** The Ven. Larry Beardy, Diocese of Keewatin

**Seconded by:** Mrs. Freda Lepine, Diocese of Brandon

**Be it resolved that this General Synod:**

1. Repudiate and renounce the Doctrine of Discovery as fundamentally opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and our understanding of the inherent rights that individuals and peoples have received from God;
2. Request that every diocesan bishop of the Anglican Church of Canada cause this declaration to be proclaimed in every parish and shared with all the nations and peoples located within their dioceses and request the Primate to share this declaration with the United Nations;
3. Commit to undertake a review of the Church's policies and programs with a view to exposing the historical reality and impact of the Doctrine of Discovery and eliminating its presence in its contemporary policies, program, and structures;
4. Encourage each diocese to reflect upon its own history, in light of these actions and encourage all Anglicans to seek a greater understanding of the Indigenous Peoples within Canada and to support those peoples in their ongoing efforts for their inherent sovereignty and fundamental human rights as peoples to be respected;
5. Request that the General Secretary inform all relevant governmental bodies in Canada of its action and requests that a similar and equivalent review of historical and contemporary policies that contribute to the continuing colonization of Indigenous Peoples and, to write to Queen Elizabeth II, the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, requesting that her Majesty disavow, and repudiate publicly, the claimed validity of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery.

**Source:** The Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples

**Submitted by:** Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples

Does this motion contain within it any financial implications? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

If yes, has the General Synod Expenditures Committee considered the implications?

Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

**EXPLANATORY NOTE/BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

## *The Doctrine of Discovery and the Churches of the West*

Although it has touched every aspect of life in North America for centuries, most people are unaware of The Doctrine of Discovery. The Doctrine continues to be the central animating factor in the dispossession and oppression of Indigenous Peoples, in the Americas and around the world. All the Western institutions that now govern so many aspects of Indigenous life see the People of the Land through the distorted lens of the Doctrine of Discovery. This is especially true of the churches that are a part of the Western Cultural framework. Beyond its direct influence on Indigenous Peoples, we can see that this way of thinking is a contributing part of the Western attitude towards Creation and our environment, giving permission to treat this sacred gift as a human storehouse that can be plundered without restraint.

In this Resolution the Church “repudiates and renounces the Doctrine of Discovery as fundamentally opposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and our understanding of the inherent rights that individuals and peoples have received from God.” The Church pledges to proclaim the Resolution among its congregations and dioceses. Further, the Church promises to “review its policies and programs with a view to exposing the historical reality and impact of the Doctrine of Discovery and eliminating its presence in its contemporary policies, program, and structures.”

At least three major church bodies in North America (The Episcopal Church, Quakers, and the Unitarians) have been inspired to promote similar resolutions. Google “General Convention and the Doctrine of Discovery” or “The Episcopal Church and Indigenous Rights” and you will see some of the general excitement of a theologically broad range of commentators.

At the 2001 General Synod of The Anglican Church of Canada we spent a half day of learning about The Doctrine of Discovery and accepted a report and the suggestions from the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples about renewing the relationship between the Church and its Indigenous members. The result was *A New Agape*, a work-plan and vision for this new relationship.

The Doctrine of Discovery, a description of a systemic evil that is both well hidden and tenacious, precludes, by its nature, easy comprehension or prompt effective action. The unveiling of the Doctrine of Discovery reveals a camouflaged, pervasive, and damaging strain of thought in Western institutions and culture. The recognition of its presence helps us understand the continuing incapacity of modernity to understand and fruitfully engage Indigenous Peoples.

## *Unveiling the Doctrine of Discovery*

The Doctrine of Discovery is a phrase describing a consistent set of judgments and acts by colonizing Western societies over the past 500 years. It begins with the idea of *Terra Nullius*, an uninhabited land. If such a land is “discovered,” the persons or powers that make the discovery have the right of discovery, meaning that they may own, rule, and exploit this land as they see fit. Indigenous Peoples, in the Doctrine of Discovery, are not seen as inhabiting the land. Since they have none of the institutions of civilization, especially the Church, they are judged to be similar and with the same status as other products of the land. They now are under the jurisdiction of civilized institutions who, “for their own good,” may now order

**their lives as they see fit. Their “primitive” nature is seen to have robbed them of the right to control their lands, their communities, or their destinies.** This point of view is still being used against Aboriginal legal claims in court cases around the world. The pace of all of this has been increased in recent years, as Indigenous Peoples Aboriginal use and occupation of land comes into conflict with the accelerated demands of globalizing economic expansion.

Church practice is also influenced by the Doctrine. The capacity of Indigenous Peoples for progress and success in matters of religion and faith is equal to their capacity to mimic the institutions, values, and cultural practices of the West. Proclaiming its desire to help Indigenous Peoples, the Church took a lead role in promoting and overseeing the project of civilizing them along Western lines. There was little engagement of their cultural or religious ideas and practices; their manifestly rich spirituality and religious traditions were treated as impediments to their well-being and progress, even though they were largely monotheistic. The churches persisted in this civilizing project despite the obviously destructive and deadly results. For most of the past 500 years, the underlying assumption appears to be that it is better to be dead than to not be Western. The Church committed itself in earnest to seeing that any trace of Indigenous culture and life would be erased. Without hiding or disguising it, the Church, along with the other colonizing institutions, was committed to the disappearance of Indigenous life in any form (This proposed disappearance was, we admit, less violent than those who called for immediate extermination. The relative moral merit of the different approaches is difficult to evaluate competitively).

Today, (2010) things have changed some, but not enough. For virtually all Western institutions, Indigenous life is still to be steered towards the imitation of Western life, though now Indigenous Peoples may be permitted to mimic other minorities as a means of access to the benefits of Western life. **The Doctrine of Discovery continues its influence in the myriads of ways that a colonizing culture sets the standards that control and limit the horizon of Indigenous life in our contemporary world.** Though the remedies that mass Western society developed and applied have been, at best, ineffective, and, quite a bit more often, disastrous in their impact on Indigenous societies – the more “help” administered, the worse things get – it is only very rarely noticed. Because the assumptions of the Doctrine of Discovery are so well hidden in the mainstream of Western thought the deadly incompetence of Western agencies and institutions remains astonishingly invisible to its perpetrators.

### ***The Doctrine and the Church***

For centuries, the Western churches have given a privileged status to the trajectory of the Word of God in their constituent traditions, cultures, and societies. Certainly respect is due to the path of Western Christian development, even the pagan philosophies which prepared the way for the Gospel in the Western Tradition. Yet, to demand that the overall path of development that the West has followed is to normative, or even a prerequisite of serious Christianity, is wrong. It voids the trajectories of other cultures. The absurdity expands with the continuing demand that Indigenous Christian leaders submit to contemporary Western patterns and standards of learning, including pagan elements from the past or anti-theistic sentiments from the secularized present. This priority remains even though Western institutions of learning and scholarship are no longer positively correlated with growing and vital orthodox Christianity.

Today, with very few exceptions, Indigenous Christians must place their churches within the trajectory of Western ideas, governance, and sovereignty if they wish to remain full members of churches of the Western cultural framework. This means that there is very little attempt to adapt to the unique cultural and social dimensions of Indigenous communities. The borders and boundaries of colonial occupation remain the enforced borders and boundaries of Indigenous Christians in Western churches, in governance, in theology, in faith. The trajectory of the Word of God in Indigenous life, the vibrant and surprising story of the Gospel's unlikely yet astounding progress among Indigenous Peoples is ignored, trivialized, or denied.

It appears that the Western churches are still saying, in order for the Word to become flesh and dwell among Indigenous Peoples, they must first abandon their culture. Jesus can only become living and real if you see him through Western values and institutions. Such an approach is absurd and heretical. **That it has such strong currency among Western churches is a testimony to the systemic power of colonialism and the on-going influence of the Doctrine of Discovery.**

### *A Preliminary Response*

A full response to this must unfold over time. We would do harm to predict its outcome and then act on the prediction. We can, however, outline some of the broad steps that would make a robust preliminary response:

- 1) **Promote and proclaim the repudiation and renouncing of the Doctrine of Discovery as the Resolution outlines.**
- 2) **Begin at every level, as soon as possible, an introduction to the damage caused by the Doctrine of Discovery.**
- 3) **Immediately recognize the primal and aboriginal authority of Indigenous nations, recognizing their right to exist and treating them with the respect and dignity that they deserve as the first and founding nations of North American life.**
- 4) **Recognize that the Indigenous Nations transcend the borders of colonial occupation. To enforce these borders on Indigenous social development and community is an endorsement of the Doctrine of Discovery (and a violation of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.).**
- 5) **The living relationship that Indigenous Peoples have with the environment means that the destructive pattern of colonial economic development creates a special risk for the life and life ways of the People of the Land and Seas. To honour and protect this special relationship must be a top priority for the advocacy of Western churches.**
- 6) **Leadership and congregational development within Indigenous Peoples must be designed with the hidden assumptions of the Doctrine of Discovery exposed and eliminated. Theological formation must include decolonization.**

7) The church must begin a process (2010) that will allow Indigenous church communities decide their own destiny on the basis of their full and aboriginal authority as peoples, tribes, and nations.

8) In Indigenous thought, Spirit animates matter. Separating the spiritual from the physical, mental, and emotional, especially in social life is deadly. The way that the West cleaves these cannot be imposed on Indigenous nations. Only the life of the spirit is transformative in Indigenous life.

9) Last and most important, The Gospel alone must be the centre point and the vehicle of **Indigenous church development**. The goal of the Gospel is the Word's incarnation in Indigenous communities.

The scandal of Indigenous poverty in their own lands is rarely given its due weight, even by those who would seek to help them. Poverty reduction, as praiseworthy a project as it is, is not likely to create real change until the real reasons for Indigenous poverty are addressed. The dispossession of their lands, the lack of compensation or reparation, and the continuing assault on their cultures, families, and clans is an injustice that cannot be remedied with well-meaning charity and Western sociology. If there is to be a positive relationship between Western institutions and Indigenous Peoples, it must be built on the foundation of the very real commitment that is imagined in the actions of The General Synod of The Anglican Church of Canada. Without such actions, the churches of the West will live in a prison of systemic evil that is the antithesis of the freedom and life that is promised in the Cross of Christ.

Despite the daunting nature of the struggle to dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, it is a path that promises much. If truly applied and followed, this could be the beginning of a spiritual reconciliation and awakening that would reach every particle of our spiritual and theological ecology.