

Land Acknowledgement Statement for Waterford Mennonite Church

Presented at Joint Nurture Hour on August 7, 2022

Developed by the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Group
Waterford Mennonite Church
Goshen, Indiana

Scripture

I am saying that anyone who has been joined together with the Chosen One is now part of the new creation. For in the Chosen One the old creation has faded away and the new creation has come into being.

It is the Great Spirit who has done all of this! Through the Chosen One, Creator has removed the hostility between human beings and God, bringing all creation into harmony once again. The Great Spirit has chosen us to represent him in the sacred task of helping others find and walk this path of peacemaking and healing – turning enemies into friends.

2 Corinthians 5:17-18 *First Nations Version*

Our Prayer

Creator God, we confess the wrongs that we and those before us have committed against our fellow human beings and the land, and ask your forgiveness even as we seek forgiveness from those whom we have wronged.

Through Christ, the Chosen One, you have removed the hostility between human beings and yourself, bringing all creation into harmony once again.

We seek to walk this path of peacemaking to which you have called all your followers, and to restore right relationships with our Indigenous neighbors and this sacred land.

Amen

History

Waterford Mennonite Church was founded in 1959 by settler people along the banks of the Elkhart River, which joins the St. Joseph River, which flows into the Great Lakes. Our Anabaptist roots are in Europe and migration is central to our history. We need to understand how our history impacts the land and original people of the Great Lakes Region and commit to protecting the place and acknowledging those who are connected to it, both past and present.

The Elkhart River watershed is the homeland of the Potawatomi and Miami, who harvested wild rice, fished, hunted game, and collected medicinal plants. They also grew corn, squash and beans in prairie areas. The two groups were connected by the Potawatomi-Miami trail, which was a major route between the Maumee River and Lake Michigan. The trail passed diagonally through what is now Elkhart County and was about a mile east of the church. The Potawatomi and neighboring nations negotiated government-to-government with the United States Congress to preserve their land, rights, and privileges through treaties.

The United States government made a treaty with the Potawatomi in 1828 to free up land in Elkhart County for European settlers. The U.S. government broke the treaty and passed the "Indian Removal Act" in 1830, forcing Indigenous people west of the Mississippi River. One consequence of this was the Potawatomi Trail of Death. Over eight hundred people were forced to walk to reservation lands in what is now eastern Kansas in September 1838. More than forty died during the arduous journey on foot and many more perished after their arrival in early November. Families were separated, community cohesion disrupted, and Indigenous identity undermined, causing trauma to the land and people that is still evident.

The first Anabaptist settlers arrived three years later, in 1841, and recognized the goodness of this land, which included the fertile Elkhart Prairie. Just two miles upriver from Waterford Mennonite Church, the village of Potawatomi Chief Wanyanoshonya, commonly known as Five Medals, was burned to the ground by a troop from the U.S. Army in 1812. This is one of many examples of the United States government carrying out forced removal against Indigenous people as a way to acquire land coveted by the settlers. This includes places where we live, work and worship today.

Land Acknowledgement

Before God and our community, we acknowledge that this land on which we gather and worship was created by God and was home to the Potawatomi and Miami peoples, who lived here with respect and gratitude for the land long before European settlers arrived.

We affirm that we, members of a church founded by Mennonite settlers, have specific responsibilities in the journey of truth telling, reconciliation, and peace with Creator, with the original peoples, and with the eighty-four acres of woodland and wetland we occupy as a church body.

We recognize that settlers stole the land and forcibly removed the original inhabitants from it. This was overtly against the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ and dehumanized both the Indigenous peoples and the perpetrators, leaving wounds that continue to this day. We acknowledge that we benefit from this history of injustice.

We offer to Creator our thanks for the goodness of the land and our remorse for broken promises to the Potawatomi and Miami peoples. We accept responsibility for truth telling, stewarding the land, and honoring its original inhabitants in ways that bring healing and reparation.

We trust the Spirit to guide us on this path of justice, reconciliation and peacemaking.