

Seeking Reparative Action for the Closure of the Memorial Presbyterian Church

Written by Lillian Petershoare with input from the Overture Subcommittee

In 2019, the Council supported a recommendation from the Native Ministries Committee to undertake a request to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to address the closure of the Memorial Presbyterian Church (MPC). The process for requesting action by the General Assembly is to submit, through a presbytery, an Overture, which is much like a resolution, with a rationale. The Native Ministries Committee established an Overture Subcommittee, which has been working for the past few months. This article summarizes the Overture Subcommittee's learning and work to date and outlines the steps in the Overture process.

In 1962, the year of the Juneau's MPC's 75th anniversary, the Presbyterian Board of Missions announced that it would cease funding the MPC. The following year, the Alaska Presbytery closed the MPC directing its members to join the Northern Light Presbyterian Church (not to be confused with NLUC). Dr. Soboleff had been pastor of the MPC for 22 years. The closure was not made public until early in 1963 even though the Alaska Presbytery decided to close it in the fall of 1962. The Presbytery offered Dr. Soboleff a job as a missionary to the Southeast Villages. Neither Dr. Soboleff nor the MPC Session (board of governing elders) had an opportunity to negotiate funding options with the National Mission Board, and the Presbytery did not heed the MPC's objection to the closure.

The Alaska Presbytery decided it wanted a "strong and united church of all races and classes" in Juneau disregarding the fact that the MPC was already a multiracial, multicultural church. The Presbytery did not consult with MPC about the closure nor did the Presbytery propose merging MPC and Northern Light as a union of equals. Nor did the Presbytery consider closing Northern Light. Rather, the Presbytery closed MPC and told its members to join Northern Light; less than half of the MPC's members did so which meant presbyterian ministry in Juneau was weakened rather than bolstered. It also meant the abrupt end to the thriving ministry of the MPC congregation, and a disrespectful and disingenuous reporting about Dr. Soboleff's departure. The forced closure has caused enduring trauma and anger for MPC members and their descendants and for Juneau's Native community. The manner in which these unilateral decisions transpired created confusion and a lack of clarity about the closure within the community at large. Neither the members of the two congregations, nor the larger Juneau community learned of all the behind the scenes machinations of the of the Alaska Presbytery leaders, nor were they told the whole story.

Memorial (previously known as "the First" or "the Tlingit") Presbyterian Church was established in 1887 in the Juneau Indian Village as a mission to Alaska Natives. The missionaries practiced segregation and established a separate church, Northern Light, for whites. Dr. Soboleff was the first (and only) Native pastor to serve MPC; his pastorate coincided with the change of the church's name to MPC, and its relocation to the 8th and Glacier site where the fire station currently sits. Under Dr. Soboleff's leadership, MPC had grown to be a vibrant congregation, not

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9/29/20 with edits by Phil, Myra, Maxine and Lillian

only ministering to its membership, but serving as a vital hub for the whole Native community as well. Dr. Soboleff asked his all Alaska Native congregation if they would welcome non-Natives, and they agreed. His community leadership and pastoral presence attracted many non-Natives to the church.

In March 2011, two months before Dr. Soboleff's death, former NLUC pastor Phil Campbell talked with him about the closing of MPC. Phil was struck by how pained Dr. Soboleff was about the closure – almost 50 years after it happened. It was obvious the wound had not been healed, nor had the injustice been addressed. With the support of the Native Ministries Committee and the Church Council, Phil began scouring the historical records of the Alaska Presbytery, the National Mission Board, Northern Light, and MPC to learn more about the circumstances that led to the shuttering of the MPC. He presented preliminary findings at Sealaska's Walter Soboleff Day observance in 2015, and he began talking with the NLUC Church Council about how to repair the damage caused by the MPC's closing.

In 2017, the NLUC congregation engaged in visioning exercises; appropriate ways to address MPC's closure was one of the topics discussed. In reviewing the vision plan, the purple group (Discussion Activity 1.1) recommended pursuing the house post ideas for the church lobby. In the August 2017 Council minutes, the Council went on record supporting the house posts ideas and reported that Phil expanded the idea to include official reconciliation over the closure of the MPC.

With Council's support for the house posts, the Native Ministries Committee decided to further investigate the closure of MPC realizing that learning this history would pave the way for developing pertinent themes for the house posts, including the story of the MPC. Joaqlin Estus, a recognized Alaskan journalist, a Tlingit and a former member of NLUC was recruited to interview MPC members. Native Ministries directed Joaqlin to ask members about their remembrances of the MPC and the circumstances surrounding its closure. Joaqlin wrote an article, "Segregation of Faith," for the Alaska Federation of Natives Annual Meeting edition of First Alaskans magazine (October 2019) that summarizes her and Phil Campbell's research on the closure of MPC, and speaks to the resulting pain experienced by the many families who attended MPC.

Native Ministries also funded Phil's travel to the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia to access the Alaska Presbytery and MPC records. Phil summarized his research on the MPC closure in the March 2018 NLUC newsletter.

Pastor Faith, upon reviewing Joaqlin's article about Dr. Soboleff and the MPC, consulted with the Northwest Coast Presbytery Executive Corey Schlosser-Hall about submitting a formal overture regarding the closure of the MPC. Native Ministries met with Corey about writing an overture, and Corey whole heartedly supported the idea. Native Ministries Liaison and Council Member Lillian Petershoare recommended that Council support Native Ministries in their intention to prepare an overture to address the closure of the MPC. The NLUC Council voted

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unanimously to back a Native Ministries Committee recommendation to seek reparative action, through an overture requesting an apology and other reparations, from the national Presbyterian Church for the closure of the MPC.

The Overture Subcommittee of Native Ministries is tasked with writing the overture/resolution for seeking an apology. The consideration of an overture requires many clearances before being considered by the Presbyterian General Assembly. The current goal is to have all reviews, clearances, and revisions completed in time for a July 2022 consideration by the General Assembly.

Members of the Overture Subcommittee include Lillian Petershoare (co-convener), Tim Lash (co-convener), Maxine Richert (Secretary), Myra Munson and Phil Campbell (research consultant). The subcommittee has had several meetings and has begun a working draft. Early on, the Subcommittee adopted the following mission statement:

Call upon the Presbyterian Church USA to issue an apology to the late Doctor Walter Soboleff and his family and to the Alaska Native membership of the Memorial Presbyterian Church for the unwarranted and unilateral closure of the church. This closure inflicted spiritual, cultural and emotional suffering among the members of the MPC and Alaska Natives throughout Southeast Alaska and that trauma continues to resonate.

The Overture Subcommittee is responsible for writing the overture and recommending the steps necessary to improve the likelihood of passage by Native Ministries, the Council, the Northwest Presbytery and the General Assembly.

Subcommittee members are gaining a better, and sometimes troubling, understanding of the role of the Northern Light Presbyterian Church and the context in which these related events contributed to the closure of the MPC. We anticipate at least one congregational meeting to review and consider the meaning of the Overture for our Church and others. The Subcommittee will revise the draft overture as warranted. Once approved by NLUC, the Overture will be forwarded the Presbytery of the Northwest Coast for consideration at its October 2021 meeting where NLUC may also offer to conduct a workshop to share more of the background. Presbyteries are the bodies that may submit Overtures to the General Assembly.

Numerous follow-up tasks will need to be completed, such as preparing the congregation for the overture, determining how to package and present the overture, and preparing for hosting the proposed apology and reparative action ceremony. If you are interested in helping the Council and Native Ministries with this work, please reach out to Council Moderator Mary Gramling and Native Ministries Chairperson Barbara Searls.

Either the Council and/or Native Ministries will keep the congregation informed of developments and opportunities to support this social justice initiative.