

## *Phil's Thoughts – March 2018*

With the support and encouragement of our congregation's Native Ministries Committee, I recently spent two days at the Presbyterian Historical Society researching the 1963 closing of Juneau's Memorial Presbyterian Church. It is a story that reveals the negative (albeit to some degree unintended) consequences of an otherwise admirable commitment to end segregation. These negative consequences were fueled by the obliviousness to white privilege that continues to infect race relations, and stymie the possibility of establishing a genuinely multiracial community of love, justice, compassion, and respect.

What follows is a snippet of my research. A fuller accounting of Memorial's closing, and its impact on ministry and mission in Juneau, especially as it relates to NLUC, will be forthcoming.

Memorial Presbyterian Church was the last name of a Juneau Presbyterian congregation that was organized in 1887. It previously was known as First Presbyterian, and was referred to informally as the Tlingit Presbyterian Church. The initial reason it was organized was that the Presbyterian Church practiced segregation. White Protestants who had migrated to Juneau worshipped in the Log Cabin Church – the congregation that was to become Northern Light Presbyterian in 1891.

The Tlingit Church was organized for the Auk Kwáan and other Alaska Natives that the Presbyterian missionaries had converted to Christianity. Despite missionary zeal that too often disrespected Native ways and contributed to the decimation of Native cultures, many Tlingit people in the area responded positively to the Christian message. God's love made known through the life and ministry of Jesus resonated with Tlingit values of respect, reverence, peace, harmony, care for one another, and stewardship of creation.

Over the years, the Tlingit Presbyterian church served as a focal point of spiritual sustenance and community engagement. Many church leaders were active in the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, and worked tirelessly for civil rights for Alaska Native people. In 1940, the church changed its name to Memorial Presbyterian and constructed a new building in the 800 block of Glacier Avenue, where the fire station currently sits. Also in 1940, the congregation called, for the first time, a Tlingit pastor, the Rev. Walter Soboleff, Sr. Dr. Soboleff served the church for twenty-two years, until December of 1962, shortly before the church's closing. Under Dr. Soboleff's leadership, the church flourished, and despite the ongoing prevalence of segregation in wider church structures and attitudes, the Memorial Church membership grew as both Native and non-Native Juneauites affiliated with the congregation.

In 1955, in the wake of the Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision that declared segregated schools inherently unequal, the Presbyterian Church's General Assembly formally denounced its segregationist ways. This led to the merging of formerly segregated presbyteries and synods in southern U.S. states (African American and white) and the Dakotas (Native American and white). The national church also urged congregations to open their doors to people of all races. In light of these national developments, conversations began in Juneau regarding how the Presbyterian

churches could work together across racial lines. In 1959, the Council of the Alaska Presbytery recommended that the Northern Light and Memorial congregations “be encouraged to continue cooperative efforts and to hold common meetings and combined enterprises, so that mutual understanding and respect and good will may be nurtured.” Then, in the fall of 1962, the Alaska Presbytery’s Strategy Committee determined that “the witness of the unity of the...Presbyterian Church demands a strong and united church of all races and classes.” It went on to state “in light of this spirit of oneness, that we may we may become perfectly one, we recommend that Presbytery dissolve the Juneau Memorial Church...and respectfully request each member join one of the two Presbyterian Churches in the Juneau area [Northern Light and Chapel By the Lake]...”

The resolution was opposed by the Memorial Church session that voted to instruct its “Elder delegate, Carl Marvin [father of Northern Light members Wally and Reggie Marvin] to tell the Presbytery that we reject the proposal...”

Due, at least in part, to Memorial’s objection, action on the proposal was delayed until the spring 1963 meeting. That spring, Memorial was closed, and the Memorial Session encouraged its members to join Northern Light Presbyterian Church (this was 11 years before Juneau United Methodist merged with Northern Light Presbyterian to form Northern Light United Church). Half of Memorial’s membership united with Northern Light; half did not. The Presbytery’s dream of a “strong and united church of all races and classes” was not fully realized.

There is more to the story that I look forward to sharing. And, it is true that most towns the size of Juneau (less than 7000 in 1963) cannot support three Presbyterian congregations. But it is also the case that our country’s advocacy for integration, necessary and appropriate as it was in light of its segregationist past, *also perpetuated a dominant culture belief in the superiority of white ways*. In addition, white people were the primary decision makers regarding to integration, as they had been with segregation.

Among the questions I have regarding the decisions are:

- Why did the Presbytery recommend closing Memorial instead of Northern Light (both were downtown churches)?
- Why wasn’t the Memorial Church session consulted prior to the announcement of the proposed closure?
- Why did the Presbytery recommend dissolving the Memorial congregation rather than proposing that the two congregations merge as equals, as was the case a decade later when Northern Light and Juneau United Methodist united?

The vibrant and vital seventy-six year ministry of Memorial Presbyterian ended without these and other related questions being addressed, and the resultant sorrow and bitterness remain 55 years later. It is time to answer the questions and to face the legacy of racism and disrespect that linger. If we face it, learn from it, and repent of it, I believe that space for healing can be created, and the dream of a “strong and united church” that is committed to gospel values of equity and inclusion may finally reach its full potential. I pray that it may be so. I look forward to continuing to tell the story, and to exploring with you the way forward toward justice and healing for all God’s children.