

# **Summary of Overture on Directing the Office of the General Assembly to Issue Apologies and Reparations for the Racist Closure of the Memorial Presbyterian Church, Juneau, Alaska**

**as of February 23, 2021**

*The Native Ministries Committee of the Northern Light United Church (NLUC) is committed to addressing the unjustified closure of the Memorial Presbyterian Church (MPC). An Overture Subcommittee was formed to research the circumstances leading to the closure and to draft the Overture. The work proved to be deeply disturbing and hurtful, cementing the conviction that the Memorial Church had been wrongfully closed causing pain that reverberates deeply to this day.*

*Our intention is to shed light on the egregious acts that led to the closure of this vibrant multiethnic church which had just celebrated its diamond jubilee in 1962. In documenting the closure, we weave in Tlingit spirituality and passages from the Bible to pave the way for further understanding and for meaningful apologies and reparative actions.*

*The draft Overture has been reviewed by the Native Ministries Committee and is being forwarded to advisors from the Presbytery of the Northwest Coast (NWCP) for their input. The Native Ministries Committee will review the guidance that is offered and finalize the Overture for review and approval by Council for submission to the Northwest Coast Presbytery (NWCP) with a request from NLUC that it be submitted to the 225<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) for consideration at its meeting scheduled for July 2-9, 2022.*

*For further information, please consult the News/Events section on the NLUC webpage for additional articles on the Overture:  
<http://nluchurch.org/overture/>*

In 1963, the Alaska Presbytery, with the concurrence of the Presbyterian National Board of Missions, closed Memorial Presbyterian Church (MPC) in Juneau, Alaska. This forced closure of a thriving multiethnic, intercultural congregation was an egregious act of spiritual abuse committed in alignment with nationwide racism toward Alaska Natives, Native Americans, and other people of color. The deleterious consequences of MPC's closure reverberate to this day, and the resulting harm calls for confession, repentance, apology, and reparations by the Office of General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

For 22 years prior to its closure, Memorial Presbyterian Church (MPC) thrived under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Walter Soboleff, Sr., an eminent Tlingit minister, educator, advocate, culture bearer, and the first Tlingit individual to be ordained as Presbyterian clergy. For Dr. Soboleff, community involvement was an expression both of his Christian faith and his Tlingit spiritual practices; for him there was no contradiction between being Christian and Tlingit. In his endeavors, he lived the Tlingit value of Haa Shuká, of honoring ancestors and being responsible to future generations.

Along with Dr. Soboleff, Native parishioners of MPC infused church life with Tlingit spiritual teachings and traditional Tlingit values regarding living in harmony and serving the broader Native community. Key Tlingit spirituality concepts are referenced below:

Our Tlingit elders and culture bearers teach us that everything has spirit, both the inanimate and animate, with all things being worthy of respect. From a young age, we are taught to live in harmony, maintaining social and spiritual balance between eagles and ravens.<sup>1</sup> Tlingits belong to either moiety based on their maternal lineage; inland Tlingits belong to the wolf or crow moiety.

Tlingits practice Haa Shuká by recognizing that we are connected to our ancestors and to future generations.<sup>2</sup> Our traditional values instill responsibility for ensuring that our descendants know what it means to be Tlingit and to embrace our Tlingit lifeways.<sup>3</sup>

As Tlingits, we believe our ancestors' spirits are among us. In ceremonies to remove grief, we speak of our ancestors being with us in comforting ways, creating healing. For example, Jessie Dalton of Hoonah, in one of the finest recorded oratories, cried out, "Yes how very much it is as if they're [the ancestors] revealing their faces." Later in the same speech, she refers to the mourners' father's sisters (ancestors for whom the clan crest is the Tern) as being terns flying over those who are grieving, letting their down fall like snow (bringing peace) and taking the grief back to their nests.<sup>4</sup> Another elder, Dorothy Peters Coronell, maintained, "We never lose them; they are all here in our hearts."<sup>5</sup>

Explicitly or implicitly, White church leaders throughout local and global history have denied the contributions that Tlingit and other Indigenous spiritualities contribute to authentic multiethnic,

---

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence with Rosita Worl, President, Sealaska Heritage Institute, February 7, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer. *Haa Shuká, Our Ancestors*, pp. 28, 29.

<sup>3</sup> Sealaska Heritage Institute recognized that Dr. Soboleff was "a physical manifestation of Has Shuká and all the ideals he held dear." Sealaska named its stunning heritage center after him.

<sup>4</sup> Jessie Dalton, Hoonah 1968 as translated in Dauenhauers' *Haa Tuwunáagu Yís, for Healing Our Spirit*, p. 251.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Peters Coronell James. Interview conducted by David Katzeek, Sealaska Heritage Institute for the Latseen Leadership Training Program.

intercultural church life.

In 1962, the year of MPC's 75th anniversary, the Presbyterian Board of Missions decided that it would cease funding MPC. The Board of Missions did not provide any opportunity at the time for Dr. Soboleff and other leaders of MPC to negotiate alternatives that would have allowed MPC to continue its historic and vibrant ministry.

The Alaska Presbytery closed MPC the following year. It also directed the members of MPC, many of whom were Tlingits, to join the nearby Northern Light Presbyterian Church (NLPC), a virtually all-White church. Despite MPC voicing its concern to the Presbytery, NLPC moved into MPC's neighborhood with Presbytery approval. The Presbytery stated its desire to promote a "strong and united church of all races and classes" in Juneau despite NLPC's history of overt discrimination. The Presbytery did so while refusing to heed MPC's objections to the closure, and while disregarding the plain fact that MPC was, unto itself, a multiethnic, intercultural Presbyterian church that displayed strength and unity in Christ amid systemic racism and settler-colonialism.

Neither the Board of Missions nor the Alaska Presbytery consulted MPC's clergy, session, or members regarding these unilateral actions that forced the closure of MPC. Moreover, both ecclesiastical bodies have remained silent for decades about what transpired, resulting in a lack of public understanding and public accountability. Compounded by institutional silence, these actions by national and regional Presbyterian bodies sowed confusion, distress, and grief among MPC's members, their descendants, and the broader community, including many Tlingit families for whom MPC was a vital hub of spiritual and communal activity.

The pain this caused remains to this day; Lillian Petershoare explains the reverberating nature of this pain:

Because we carry our ancestors (Haa Shuká) in our hearts and believe that their spirits are among us, Dr. Soboleff's heartbreak on the closure of the Memorial Church is a pain that resonates deeply within us. It is an offense that has not been appropriately addressed. The White Presbyterian leaders and congregants' silence on the MPC closure is a disruptive force to our spiritual wellbeing as well as a barrier to our living in harmony with White Presbyterian congregants.<sup>6</sup>

While national and regional Presbyterian leaders had been known to visit MPC in previous years, none appeared to explain their actions, to express sorrow for the closure, or to acknowledge, through ceremony or otherwise, the profound and vibrant role of the church in the community. Dr. Soboleff was left to announce the closure to the congregants of MPC, which came as a shock to many. The host of emotions that the Memorial members had—dismay, confusion, outrage—were compounded by Dr. Soboleff also announcing to the congregation that he would be accepting a newly created position with the Presbytery as "Minister-at-Large" to serve churches in small communities throughout Southeast. Some subsequent messaging about MPC's closure

---

<sup>6</sup> NLUC Native Ministries Committee member and Overture coauthor Lillian Petershoare, February 7, 2021. Other coauthors of the Overture are Maxine Richert, Myra Munson, Tim Lash, and Phil Campbell, consultant.

seemed to suggest that it was closed because Dr. Soboleff left, but that was not the case.

The Alaska Presbytery and Mission Board decided to close MPC months before, and their giving Dr. Soboleff a new job was the White church's feigned attempt at compensation. Although Dr. Soboleff went on to provide great pastoral care for other churches in Southeast Alaska as a Presbyterian itinerant minister, this did not make up for the huge spiritual void left in Juneau after MPC closed. Dr. Soboleff's and the church's mission and ministry were sorely missed in the capital city amid the social turmoil of the 1960s and beyond. For MPC's Tlingit clergy and members, steeped in the protocols of ceremony since time immemorial, the callous way in which the Board of Missions and the Alaska Presbytery engineered the demise of the congregation was a traumatic affront to a people who value mutual respect, acknowledgment, and dignity in relationships.

In light of the historic ministry of MPC, followed by the harmful and lasting effects of its closure forced by the Board of Missions and the Alaska Presbytery and consistent with the confession and repentance called for in "The Doctrine of Discovery: A Review of Its Origins and Implications for Congregations in the PC(USA) and Support for Native American Sovereignty (2018)," adopted by the 223rd General Assembly,<sup>7</sup> the Native Ministries Committee has drafted an Overture for submission by the NWCP Presbytery to the 225th General Assembly. The Overture calls upon the 225th General Assembly to acknowledge the culpability and silence of the PC(USA) regarding the closure of MPC and the resulting harm to the community, and to issue apologies and reparations for the racist closure of the Memorial Presbyterian Church in Juneau, Alaska by directing its Office of the General Assembly to issue apologies and reparations.

Specifically, the Overture asks for acknowledgement, confession, and apologies to the late Dr. Soboleff and his family, to the membership of MPC, to the Alaska Native community in Juneau, and to Alaska Native communities throughout Southeast Alaska, for the racist, unilateral, and unwarranted closure of MPC. These apologies should be made in public ceremony and private meetings with impacted individuals and by letters of acknowledgment and apology be sent to the Soboleff family, MPC members, the Grand Camp of the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, to the federally recognized tribes of Southeast Alaska, and to the Alaska Federation of Natives.

Demonstration of repentance should occur through reparative actions to include creating opportunities for Alaska Native and other Indigenous people to pursue ministry and leadership; adopting the pending resolution addressing lack of installed pastoral leadership in people of color PC(USA) congregations; providing contributions to the Sealaska Heritage Institute for language revitalization efforts; donations to the Presbyterian Foundation Native American Church Property Fund; taking active measures to dismantle racism and develop and enhance engagement and accountability in Presbyterian interactions with churches of "primarily people of color;" and providing resources for a highly visible symbol recognition of MPC to be placed at MPC's former location.

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/Doctrine-of-Discovery-Report-to-the-223rd-GA-2018-FINALIZED-COPY-As-Approved.pdf>