

1 **Overture**

2
3 **On Directing the Office of the General Assembly to Issue**
4 **Apologies and Reparations for the Racist Closure**
5 **of the Memorial Presbyterian Church, Juneau, Alaska**
6

7 **APPROVED BY COUNCIL OF NORTHERN LIGHT UNITED CHURCH**
8 **FOR SUBMISSION TO THE NORTHWEST COAST PRESBYTERY**
9

10 **Recommendations**

11
12 The Presbytery of the Northwest Coast, in unity with and support of the Northern Light United
13 Church (“NLUC”) and its Native Ministries Committee, overtures the 225th General Assembly
14 (2022) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) (“PC(USA)”), to work to eliminate all forms of white
15 supremacy and racism in its institutions and, specifically, **to meaningfully address the wounds**
16 **inflicted on Alaska Natives**, who were directly impacted by the sin of the unwarranted 1963
17 closure of the Memorial Presbyterian Church (“MPC”), a thriving multiethnic, intercultural
18 church in Juneau, Alaska, by taking the following actions directly and through the Office of the
19 General Assembly:

- 20
21 1. Acknowledge and apologize for the harms inflicted as warranted by the call for confession
22 and repentance in “The Doctrine of Discovery: A Review of Its Origins and Implications for
23 Congregations in the PC(USA) and Support for Native American Sovereignty (2018),”
24 adopted by the 223rd General Assembly by:
25
26 a. Acknowledging culpability and silence regarding the closure of the MPC¹ and the
27 resulting harm to the community.²
28
29 b. Acknowledging and confessing that the Alaska Presbytery’s stated justification for
30 closure – to halt segregation by establishing a “strong and united church of all races
31 and classes” – merely substituted assimilationist racism for the previous practice of
32 segregationist racism. While the MPC was established to serve the Tlingit
33 community, it had evolved under Dr. Soboleff’s leadership into a multiethnic,
34 intercultural church whose members were callously and ironically directed by the

¹ “The abbreviation “MPC” was not used by the members of the Memorial Presbyterian Church, nor is it commonly used now. It is used in this Overture for simplicity and brevity. MPC members referred to their church as the “Memorial Church.”

² https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/Doctrine-of-Discovery-Report-to-the-223rd-GA-2018-FINALIZED-COPY_As-Approved.pdf

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- 1 Alaska Presbytery³ to join the virtually all-white Northern Light Presbyterian Church
2 (“NLPC”).
3
- 4 c. Acknowledging that the cessation of National Mission Board funding for MPC –
5 funding that was still being provided for other predominantly white Presbyterian
6 churches in Southeast Alaska – left the MPC congregation without viable options for
7 continuance.
8
- 9 d. Offering posthumous apology, acknowledgement, and confession in public ceremony,
10 attended by national and regional church officials, to the late Rev. Dr. Soboleff, Sr.,
11 who served as MPC’s pastor for twenty-two years, for the act of spiritual abuse
12 committed by the Presbyterian Church’s decision of closure, which was sadly aligned
13 with nationwide racism toward Alaska Natives, Native Americans, and other people
14 of color.
15
- 16 e. Offering further apology for closing the MPC without national church leaders
17 offering ceremonial protocols, expressions of regret, or formal acknowledgements of
18 the thriving nature of the MPC. Dr. Soboleff was left by himself to announce the
19 closure of the MPC; a closure that had been engineered by the Board of Missions and
20 the Alaska Presbytery.
21
- 22 f. In similar vein, providing written apology to Dr. Soboleff’s family, MPC’s members
23 and their descendants, and the Alaska Native communities profoundly impacted by
24 the ministry and outreach of MPC through communications directed to the family
25 members, the member churches of the Alaska Presbytery in 1963 (or their
26 successors), the Grand Camp of the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, the
27 federally recognized tribes in Southeast Alaska, and the Alaska Federation of Natives.
28 The positive role the Memorial Church played in Juneau and throughout the region
29 extended far beyond the formal membership of the MPC congregation.
30
- 31 g. In addition to these public ceremonies and written communications, calling upon
32 national and regional church representatives to hold private meetings with the family
33 of Dr. Soboleff and the Alaska Native members of NLUC, along with Native leaders
34 in the larger Juneau community.
35
- 36 h. Taking each of the actions identified in close collaboration with NLUC Native
37 Ministries Committee and other Native leaders to assure that they are carried out in
38 accordance with Tlingit protocol.
39
40

³ The Alaska Presbytery, a predecessor to the Northwest Coast Presbytery, served all the Presbyterian churches in Southeast Alaska, which included NLPC.

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- 1 2. Demonstrate repentance through meaningful reparative actions, without which words of
2 apology ring hollow, including the following:
3
- 4 a. Increase available resources and opportunities for Alaska Natives and other
5 Indigenous people to pursue ministry in the PC(USA) and other positions of church
6 leadership, including providing scholarship funds and mentorship for these
7 individuals, and
8
- 9 b. Uphold “primarily people of color congregations” in the PC(USA) that, to this day,
10 continue to be “marginalized by a structure that is not responding to the voices of its
11 people of color for inclusion and equity,” by adopting the Racial Equity Advocacy
12 Committee’s “A Resolution Addressing the Lack of Installed Pastoral Leadership in
13 People of Color Congregations in the PC(USA).”⁴
14
- 15 c. In keeping with the Native American Coordinating Council’s proclamation of “The
16 Decade of Confession and Repentance” in which the PC(USA) “turns around and
17 walks in the other direction” from the Doctrine of Discovery, direct the Presbyterian
18 Mission Agency to donate, in the name of Memorial Presbyterian Church, \$100,000
19 to the Sealaska Heritage Institute for Indigenous language revitalization efforts.⁵
20
- 21 d. Direct the Presbyterian Mission Agency to donate \$200,000, in the name of the MPC,
22 to the Presbyterian Foundation *Native American Church Property Fund*, and urge the
23 presbyteries and congregations of the PC(USA) also to donate in the name of the
24 MPC or present and past churches of other Native Americans and other people of
25 color important to them.
26
- 27 e. Encourage, and take active measures, to renew the collective commitments of the
28 PC(USA), including presbyteries and congregations, to:
29
- 30 i. dismantle systemic racism;
31
- 32 ii. amplify the voices of clergy and lay members of churches “primarily people
33 of color congregations;” and
34
35

⁴ <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000584>

⁵ Native American Coordinating Council Report to GA 224, Recommendation 4.g.: “Invest in the revitalization of Indigenous languages by committing resources to support tribal efforts to revitalize Indigenous languages as they see fit.”

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- 1 iii. develop and enhance models of engagement and accountability for the
2 national church and presbyteries in their interactions with churches of
3 “primarily people of color congregations” so that difficult decisions about
4 support and funding are made in a spirit that recognizes the importance and
5 contributions of these congregations to the PC(USA), which outweigh
6 superficial considerations of their membership numbers or perceived lack of
7 financial resources.
8
- 9 f. Provide financial resources to, and engage with, the City and Borough of Juneau,
10 directly or through the Northwest Coast Presbytery and NLUC, for a highly visible
11 recognition of MPC to be placed at MPC’s former location. This recognition would
12 be conceived and approved by the Native Ministries Committee of NLUC, in
13 collaboration with local partners, to encourage recognition of the vitality of MPC and
14 the harm caused by its closure.
15

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1 **Rationale**

2

3 **Introduction**

4

5 In 1963, the Alaska Presbytery, with the concurrence of the Presbyterian Church’s Board of
6 National Missions, closed the Memorial Presbyterian Church (MPC) in Juneau, Alaska. The
7 forced closure of this thriving, multiethnic, intercultural church was an egregious act of spiritual
8 abuse committed in alignment with the prevailing White racist treatment of Alaska Natives,
9 statewide, and of Native Americans, nationwide.

10

11 Juneau and virtually all of Southeast Alaska is Lingit Aani, the homeland of the Tlingit. The
12 Tlingit people’s connection to the land is sacred, with an individual’s identity being tied to their
13 clan’s ancestral lands. Disrespecting the Tlingit people and their communal ownership of land,
14 Russians, English and Americans explored, occupied, assumed individual ownership under
15 Western law, and extracted riches from Lingit Aani. European-American history in Lingit Aani
16 is a “history of theft.”⁶ The Presbyterian Church participated in this settler-colonial history in
17 Alaska, as elsewhere: “To Christianize is to Americanize, and to Americanize is to
18 Christianize.”⁷ The closing of Memorial Presbyterian Church, and the subsequent sale of its
19 property, furthered the consequences of White encroachment, as both land and spiritual well-
20 being were lost.

21

22 In response to these disruptive events and their continuing effects, Indigenous communities,
23 including Christians and non-Christians, continue to seek justice, which must include repair and
24 equity in Southeast Alaska and beyond. As the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of
25 Indigenous Peoples affirms, humanity is faced with an

26

27 urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples
28 which derive from their political, economic, and social structures and from their
29 cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, and especially their rights
30 to their lands, territories and resources.”⁸

31

⁶ Statement by Clarence “Butch” Laiti, President of Douglas Indian Association, a federally recognized Indian tribe in Juneau, Alaska, during a “Juneau Voices” interview.

⁷ In the documentary, “Blest Be the Tie That Binds, Presbyterian Missions in Southeast Alaska, and retired Teaching Elder Janice Stamper used this phrase attributable to Os Guinness, *The Last Christian on Earth: Uncover the Enemy’s Plot to Undermine the Church*, Baker Books, 2010. See also Mauro, Hayes Peter. *Messianic Fulfillments: Staging Indigenous Salvation in America*, University of Nebraska Press, 2019.

⁸ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, <https://undocs.org/A/RES/61/295>.

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1 To date, the full extent of the damage inflicted on Indigenous communities has yet to be repaired
2 by Presbyterians. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PC(USA)) must acknowledge its errors and
3 recognize the Alaska Native and Native American values it trampled. One step in this process is
4 to offer apology and reparations for the forced closure of Memorial Presbyterian Church.⁹

5
6 **History of the Presbyterian Mission Churches in Juneau with Emphasis on the Memorial
7 Presbyterian Church (MPC)¹⁰, and MPC’s Closure**

8
9 In 1881, Presbyterian missionaries began evangelism efforts in Juneau at Auk Village, a former
10 summer village of the A’akw Kwáan of the Tlingit Nation. White miners had converged in 1879
11 at the summer village in their quest for gold. The initial evangelistic revival attracted both miners
12 and Natives, but the church’s mission work soon segregated; by the end of the decade, two
13 churches were established, one for Natives and another for Whites. The emphasis at the White
14 church¹¹ was to minimize the debauched behavior of the miners. The focus of the Native
15 (Tlingit) church, (the congregation that became MPC), founded in 1887 in the A’akw Village,
16 now known as the Juneau Indian Village, was the same as that of all missionary activity among
17 Indigenous inhabitants of the continent - to “Christianize and civilize the Indians.” (Minutes,
18 UPCUSA, 1875, Part I, p. 541.)

19
20 The ministry and witness of the Presbyterian church in Juneau remained segregated for the next
21 fifty years; minutes and papers from the White and Tlingit congregations make scant mention of
22 each other. The only direct reference to the possibility of cooperative work was in 1905 during
23 Northern Light Presbyterian Church (NLPC - the White church) pastorate of James Kirk, when
24 “a proposal was made to unite all White and native work in Douglas and Juneau under one

⁹ In 1991, the Alaska Presbytery adopted a resolution that stated “we deeply regret the church’s part in the destruction of native artifacts and the church’s part in the loss of native languages.” It made no mention of the closing of Memorial Presbyterian, and it offered no reparations. The following year, a resolution was presented at the Presbytery’s annual meeting that declared that the church’s ministry had brought “many positive results to the Native American communities...” In subsequent years, both resolutions were posted on the Alaska Presbytery website. It is unclear what ongoing impact either resolution may have had on the Presbytery's life and work.”

¹⁰ When established, the church was called the “Tlingit Presbyterian Church” or “Tlingit Native Presbyterian Church” with variant spellings of “Tlingit.” In 1933, it was renamed “First Presbyterian Church,” and in 1940 “Memorial Presbyterian Church.” It was sometimes also referred to as the “Juneau Indian Village Church, or the “Tlingit Church.” These names are interspersed in this Rationale to correspond to the historical events being discussed. Although “MPC” is shorthand used in the Overture, after adopting this last name, it was commonly referred to as “Memorial Church.”

¹¹ When established, this church was called the “Log Cabin Church.” By 1899, it had been renamed the “Northern Light Presbyterian Church.” After it was united with the Juneau United Methodist Church, it was renamed “Northern Light United Church.” Throughout this Rationale, we use “NLPC” for Northern Light Presbyterian Church.

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1 minister. The NLPC session, however, decided that ‘consolidation was not for the best interests
2 of the church and therefore inexpedient.’”¹²

3

4 The missionaries’ “Christianizing and civilizing” efforts among Indigenous populations in
5 Alaska as well as elsewhere were accomplished through suppressing Native languages, forcing
6 converts to cease cultural observances and traditional practices, and requiring Native people to
7 adopt European names and customs.¹³ In Juneau, Presbyterians touted their success in so doing,
8 citing “progress...to eradicate the elements of evil from deep-seated pagan tradition and putting
9 in their places the laws of love and brotherhood of man.” The missionaries not only proclaimed
10 Christ; they also preached White ways, and the rejection of Tlingit culture. “No more moccasins,
11 no more canoes, and no more totem poles...the Alaskan native [*sic*] has made more rapid
12 transition from the primitive state to civilization than any other people in our history.”¹⁴

13

14 The missionaries assumed they were being “successful” in eradicating Tlingit culture and
15 practice. In reality, Tlingit people proved resilient and translated their values and traditions into
16 the Christian forms that had been thrust upon them. Within the forced segregation of Native
17 church life, Native Christians infused Christian practices with Native wisdom. Their Christian
18 faith continues to be steeped in and blended with Native cultural values that were later codified
19 in a list of “Southeast Traditional Tribal Values”¹⁵ that were developed by Tribal Elders, and
20 based largely upon the work of Dr. Walter Soboleff.

21

¹² Mayberry, Genevieve. *Northern Light Presbyterian Church: A Brief Historical Narrative*, circa 1941,
p. 14.

¹³ Mission and ministry with Native American Peoples: *A Historical Survey of the Last Three Centuries*,
p. 6.

¹⁴ Mayberry, Genevieve. *Diamond Jubilee, Memorial Presbyterian Church*, 1962, p.4.

¹⁵ Southeast Traditional Tribal Values - Our Way of Life:

Discipline and Obedience to the Traditions of Our Ancestors;
Respect for Self, Elders and Others;
Respect for Nature and Property;
Patience;
Pride in Family, Clan and Tradition is found in Love, Loyalty and Generosity;
Be Strong in Mind, Body and Spirit;
Humor;
Hold Each Other Up;
Listen Well and with Respect;
Speak with Care;
We are Stewards of the Air, Land and Sea;
Reverence for Our Creator;
Live in Peace and Harmony;
Be Strong and Have Courage.

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1 Despite rampant and pervasive racism and discrimination in Juneau, on a personal level,
2 kindnesses were shared among Native church members and the White missionaries, and
3 community life grew within the church. Tlingit elder Lillian Collier was baptized in the Juneau
4 Indian Village Presbyterian Church, and she recalls being invited along with other village youth
5 to the missionaries David and Mary Waggoner’s home and being served blueberry juice and
6 other refreshments.

7
8 Tlingit elder Marie Olson, also has fond memories of the Waggoners relaying that “they were
9 really beautiful people with the Natives.” Ms. Olson went on to explain that the Waggoners
10 were a loving couple and very welcoming.¹⁶ They were glad to see Alaska Natives coming to
11 the church. They shared good food with the church community and given the context of the
12 depression years, the sharing of food was particularly appreciated. Ms. Olson added that the
13 Russian Orthodox, the Salvation Army, and the Memorial Presbyterian churches were multi-
14 racial and the three denominations intermixed with no animosity among them. The Memorial
15 church was also the meeting place for the local Alaska Native Brotherhood and the Alaska
16 Native Sisterhood in their early years.

17
18 On the systemic level, however, early Presbyterian missionaries sought to replace traditional
19 Tlingit practices with customs that mirrored their own White Presbyterian lifestyles. Consider
20 the words of David Waggoner:

21
22 The missionaries have been tearing down the old social life and traditions of the
23 people for years. The time has come when we must give them a new social life,
24 one in harmony with Christianity.¹⁷

25
26 Carrie Willard, another missionary affiliated with the Juneau mission, in an interview with the
27 Home Mission Monthly, reported that the missionaries needed to sponsor frequent meetings to
28 keep the Natives from back-sliding, to instruct them in hygiene, as well as love and marriage,
29 and to teach them what “a true home is.” In order to keep them focused on newly imposed
30 Christian ways, Willard acknowledged that they needed to “afford them such social pleasure as
31 might compensate for the loss of their old-time feasts and friends.”¹⁸ Despite the missionaries’

¹⁶ The positive experiences of Ms. Collier and Ms. Olson at the Tlingit Church stand in marked contrast to the hostile reception a Native man subsequently received at NLPC referenced in footnote 24. In addition, although these encounters with the Waggoners are fondly remembered and are rightly affirmed, their individual actions did not diminish the systemic racism practiced by dominant culture structures in both church and society. Ms. Collier’s and Ms. Olson’s quotes originate from telephone conversations with Lillian Petershoare.

¹⁷ Home Mission Monthly, PHS, 1907 as cited in Alison Ruth Parry’s “Their works do follow them: Tlingit women and Presbyterian missions.” 1997.

¹⁸ Home Mission Monthly, PHS, 1883 as cited in Alison Ruth Parry’s “Their works do follow them: Tlingit women and Presbyterian missions.” 1997.

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1 attempts to extinguish traditional ways, Native parishioners infused church life with the Tlingit
2 value of respect. Many Tlingit families privately maintained Tlingit spirituality values enabling,
3 generations later, a revitalization of the Tlingit culture and a restoration of the traditional
4 practices.

5
6 The importance of the Tlingit Church grew even larger when the church, newly renamed MPC,
7 moved to a new site at 8th and E (now Glacier Ave.) Streets¹⁹ (where Juneau’s downtown fire
8 station currently sits), and called in 1940 its first (and only) Native pastor, the Rev. Dr. Walter
9 Soboleff, Sr.²⁰ During Dr. Soboleff’s twenty-two-year pastorate, congregational life flourished.
10 Under his leadership, MPC grew to be a vibrant congregation, not only ministering to its
11 members, but serving the whole Native community. Dr. Soboleff conducted numerous baptisms
12 and marriage ceremonies. He supported a vital youth ministry. Living MPC members and
13 descendants describe MPC as hosting a variety of activities for youths.

14
15 The influence of MPC also extended throughout the whole city of Juneau, and notably, the
16 congregation began attracting non-Native as well as Native members,²¹ even as it continued to
17 be a vital hub for the Native Community. Dr. Soboleff was an active participant in church and
18 community life throughout the region. His pastoral presence and community leadership were
19 keys to this growth both within and beyond the Native community.²²

20
21 By the 1950s, the national Presbyterian Church appeared to be trying to catch up with the
22 inclusive ministry of MPC, albeit with no recognition of the work of the MPC. In 1955, the
23 General Assembly officially renounced segregation, called on formerly segregated presbyteries
24 and synods to merge, and urged congregations to open their doors to people of all races.²³ The

¹⁹ The Board of Missions purchased the property for \$1600 in 1938 from Mrs. Matilda Madsen Streed. MPC member, Mrs. Marie Oswald, and her siblings also donated a portion of their adjacent parcel in order to enlarge the church site.

²⁰ In 1952, Dr. Soboleff received a Doctorate of Divinity from the University of Dubuque; he was also granted a Doctorate of Humanities by the University of Alaska in 1968.

²¹ Mayberry, *Diamond Jubilee*, p. 8.

²² See the section of this rationale, “Legacy of Rev. Dr. Walter Soboleff, Sr.” for more on Dr. Soboleff’s positive impacts.

²³ Efforts at the judicatory level were led by the Committee on Segregated Synods and Presbyteries. The efforts were not welcomed by some due to the White supremacist assumptions about how integration should proceed. The Dakota Presbytery, “reorganized in the 1880s as a Native American presbytery, independent of geographic boundaries” (<https://www.history.pcusa.org/collections/research-tools/guides-archival-collections/rg-375>, accessed 1/20/2021), resisted efforts to be joined to the Black Hills Presbytery, citing “lack of active efforts on the part of White churches and presbyteries toward understanding...” See 1955 Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, pp. 105-7, and follow up reports by the Committee on Segregated Synods and Presbyteries to succeeding GAs through 1962.

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1 General Assembly’s directives were resisted by many White congregations including Juneau’s
2 NLPC. A Tlingit elder relayed a painful instance of discrimination to local Juneau historian
3 Kathy Kolkhorst Ruddy. The man was praying one day in the NLPC sanctuary, and when the
4 pastor saw him there, the pastor told him to go pray at the Tlingit church.²⁴

5
6 Even in the face of NLPC resistance, the Alaska Presbytery responded to the national church call
7 for integration by proposing the creation of a “strong and united church of all races and
8 classes”²⁵ in Juneau. But instead of featuring MPC as a model of an already integrated church,
9 the Alaska Presbytery pursued a White supremacist, assimilationist response to integration by
10 increasing support for the ministry of NLPC, and withdrawing support from MPC. In 1959 in
11 response to a proposal from NPLC,²⁶ it recommended that the NLPC and MPC congregations
12 “be encouraged to continue cooperative efforts and to hold common meetings and combined
13 enterprises, so that mutual understanding and respect and good will may be nurtured.”²⁷

14
15 The MPC congregation was wary of this recommendation²⁸ because simultaneously, the Alaska
16 Presbytery, over the objection of the MPC session,²⁹ granted permission for NPLC to sell its
17 extant building and move into the same neighborhood as the MPC.³⁰ These actions boosted
18 momentum for MPC’s eventual closure.

19
20 During the same time that the national denomination was lending NLPC over \$200,000³¹ for its
21 new building, it was reducing mission support for MPC and pressing it toward self-sufficiency.
22 In 1962, despite MPC’s efforts to increase financial support from congregants, and in the midst
23 of its celebration of 75 years of ministry, the Presbyterian Board of National Missions announced
24 that it would cease funding the MPC. Further, the Alaska Presbytery recommended the closure of

²⁴ Interview with the late Kathy Kolkhorst Ruddy, <https://www.aanyatxu.org/kathy-rudy>; accessed 12/30/2020.

²⁵ Letter from the Alaska Presbytery to presbyters, November 24, 1962.

²⁶ Minutes of the Alaska Presbytery, September 18, 1958.

²⁷ Minutes of the Alaska Presbytery, April 13, 1959.

²⁸ The MPC Session expressed its disinterest in the presbytery’s merger proposal as it rightly viewed it as a precursor to withdrawing support for Memorial and privileging Northern Light. In January 1959, the Memorial congregation voted to oppose merger with NLPC, MPC Congregational Meeting minutes, January 7, 1959.

²⁹ Minutes of the MPC Session, April 3, 1958.

³⁰ Minutes of the Alaska Presbytery, April 15-21, 1958, September 18, 1958, April 13, 1959.

³¹ Minutes of the Alaska Presbytery, November 8, 1960. Initial plans called for a bigger facility from the one built. The congregation failed to raise sufficient money, so the building was scaled back.

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1 MPC, and urged MPC members to join NLPC parishioners in their new building, built with
2 presbytery approval just up the street from MPC facility. (NLPC was a predecessor of what is
3 now Northern Light United Church, a PC(USA)/United Methodist Church union congregation).
4 The recommendation to close came despite the growth of the MPC congregation. During the
5 same time period when White church officials were deciding to dissolve the congregation, MPC
6 was adding fourteen pews to its sanctuary, confirming six young people, and receiving nine
7 additional new members.³² This was not a congregation in decline. Nevertheless, neither Dr.
8 Soboleff nor the MPC Session had an opportunity to negotiate funding options with the Board of
9 National Missions, nor was there consideration given to alternatives to MPC's closure.³³

10
11 Instead of dissolution, parishioners had every reason to anticipate a robust future for MPC
12 guided by the "rare and consecrated leadership of Dr. Soboleff."³⁴ Their expectations were given
13 voice through MPC session members who were quoted in the MPC history prepared for the
14 congregation's 75th Anniversary observance only a few months before the closure plans were
15 revealed:

16
17 We, as members of the session, greatly appreciate the services and spirit of our
18 pastor throughout this and past years, especially as evidenced by the growth and
19 spiritual life of the church. All members are urged to pray that such conditions
20 will continue.³⁵

21
22 But the prayers and expectations of the parishioners were for naught.

23
24 The offense of MPC's closure was compounded by how it was handled. In prior years, national
25 and regional church leaders were known to visit MPC, but when Dr. Soboleff announced at a
26 called congregation meeting in December, 1962, that a Presbytery meeting had been called to
27 vote on closing the church, no national or regional leaders were present to explain the rationale,
28 to express their sorrow for the closure, or to acknowledge through ceremony the profound role
29 the church had played in the lives of its thriving congregation.

30

³² MPC Presbyterian Session minutes, March 6, and April 20, 1962.

³³ At a called meeting of the MPC congregation on December 2, 1962, members expressed their displeasure with the presbytery's intent to close the church, and the way it was being handled: "While some members were against any move to discontinue this congregation, the unanimous feeling was that no matter what happened, it should not be done with so little notice and without consulting...our wishes." MPC's elder delegate was directed to inform the presbytery that MPC rejects the proposal for dissolution. (Congregational meeting minutes, 12/2/1962.)

³⁴ Mayberry, *Diamond Jubilee*, p. 9

³⁵ Ibid.

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1 Adding further confusion and consternation to the situation, the Presbytery’s announcement of
2 Memorial’s closure proposal was accompanied by the news that it was issuing a call to Dr.
3 Soboleff to serve as “Evangelist-at-Large” in the Presbytery. His responsibilities would include
4 serving the churches and logging camps of Southeast Alaska and coordinating ministry in
5 congregations without pastors.³⁶ The funding for the position came from the Board of National
6 Missions – the same entity that cut funding from MPC.

7
8 The timing of these two announcements prompted some church members, and the public in
9 general, to assume that the MPC was closed due to Dr. Soboleff’s acceptance of the new job with
10 the presbytery. In fact, Dr. Soboleff was not seeking a new position. The callous way in which
11 the National Church and the Alaska Presbytery engineered the demise of the MPC was a
12 traumatic affront to a people who value mutual respect, acknowledgment, and dignity in
13 relationships. Tlingit culture is steeped in the protocols of ceremony, and the abrupt closure
14 without ceremony demonstrated both a lack of awareness of, and disrespect for, Alaska Native
15 norms and practices.

16
17 The Alaska Presbytery’s intent to close MPC was not made public until early in 1963. MPC
18 elders had resisted the December proposal which resulted in a delay in its implementation. The
19 departure of Dr. Soboleff, their beloved pastor, demoralized the congregation, leaving many
20 members disillusioned with or outraged toward the Presbyterian Church. But the MPC session
21 members remained advocates for their church, and the continuance of its ministry.

22
23 After Dr. Soboleff began his new position in January, 1963, the Alaska Presbytery appointed
24 Edward Holborow, the newly called pastor of NLPC, to moderate the MPC session. The ending
25 of MPC’s ministry was increasingly viewed as inevitable, and discussion was held during the
26 congregation’s January 16, 1963, Annual Meeting about merging with NLPC rather than
27 acquiescing to the presbytery’s plan to dissolve the congregation. No decision was made to
28 support the merger, but the meeting minutes noted that it would nonetheless be an unlikely
29 outcome because a motion to dissolve MPC was expected to pass at the presbytery’s spring
30 meeting.³⁷ At a subsequent congregational meeting, the MPC session introduced a motion of
31 support for the presbytery’s closing of MPC, and an accompanying recommendation that MPC
32 members unite with NLPC, but many in the congregation opposed this; the motions narrowly
33 passed, 17 to 14.³⁸ Subsequently, MPC’s closure was euphemistically described as a union with
34 NLPC,³⁹ but in actuality, the institutional life of MPC was terminated when the presbytery
35 dissolved its session and sent the congregation’s records to the Presbyterian Historical Society.⁴⁰

³⁶ *Daily Alaska Empire*, December 12, 1962, p. 1.

³⁷ MPC Annual Meeting minutes, January 16, 1963.

³⁸ MPC Congregational Meeting minutes, February 10, 1963.

³⁹ *Daily Alaska Empire*, “Two Churches Unite,” February 14, 1963.

⁴⁰ Minutes of the Alaska Presbytery, April 1963.

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1 The Alaska Presbytery could have approached the quest for a “strong and united church of all
2 races and classes” in Juneau differently. Instead of summarily closing MPC, it could have:

- 3
- 4 • acknowledged that MPC was already a multiethnic, intercultural church from which the
5 whole presbytery could learn about intercultural ministry;
 - 6 • consulted with the MPC Session to explore various possibilities for its future;
 - 7 • proposed merging MPC and NLPC as a union of equals;⁴¹ or
 - 8 • considered closing either NLPC or MPC, and publicly assessing the pros and cons of
9 each closure.

10

11 But instead of doing any of these things, the Alaska Presbytery closed MPC and told its members
12 to join NLPC; nearly half of the membership refused to do so, citing bitterness regarding the
13 closure of MPC and/or not being comfortable attending the previously all-White church. At the
14 end of 1962, Memorial had 196 members⁴² of whom only 100 transferred to NLPC; five years
15 later only 48 former MPC members remained on the NLPC roll. The Presbytery’s actions failed
16 to produce the strong and united Presbyterian witness in Juneau that it claimed to have sought.

17

18 The closing of MPC occurred because of White supremacist racism under the guise of the
19 ostensibly noble pursuit of integration. The devastation it wrought on the Alaska Native
20 community in Juneau and throughout Southeast Alaska reverberates to this day. It has caused
21 enduring trauma and anger for MPC members and their descendants, and for Juneau’s Native
22 community. The forced closure removed a place of spiritual and communal refuge for scores of
23 members and friends in a climate of local and national exclusion and marginalization. It deeply
24 wounded Native believers, as well as MPC’s members of Asian and Pacific Islander, and
25 European descent. It cut off a spiritual lifeline to souls of all ages and ethnicities that extended
26 throughout Southeast Alaska.

27

28 The enduring pain caused by the closure of MPC coexists, sometimes uneasily, with the positive
29 influences and cherished memories of the congregation’s ministry. Dr. Soboleff’s adult children
30 have shared that even though

31

32 many of the elders and members of the church have gone on...family ties of
33 membership in the Memorial Church still exist. The hurt has undoubtedly been
34 passed on to our present generation. People still speak of Dr. Soboleff’s amazing

⁴¹ A decade later, NLPC institutionally merged with the “White” Juneau United Methodist Church. A joint committee from the congregations met for months to negotiate terms of a merger of equals. The churches formally united in 1974 and adopted a new name, Northern Light United Church. Records of both Northern Light Presbyterian Church and Juneau United Methodist Church remain in the possession of Northern Light United Church.

⁴² Memorial Presbyterian Church 1962 Annual Report.

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1 pastoral work by telling stories about ‘when our family went to Memorial Church,
2 we...’ Everyone’s story is positive and genuine. Dr. Soboleff and the Memorial
3 Presbyterian Church [are] still vivid in our minds.⁴³
4

5 The heartfelt recollections underscore the continuing sense of loss and betrayal experienced by
6 MPC families. The disrespectful, disingenuous, and obfuscated manner in which the unilateral
7 closure decisions were made and presented not only devastated MPC members; they sowed
8 confusion and fostered silence within the NLPC congregation, and in the community at large.
9 White church leaders either fundamentally misunderstood what MPC meant to the Native
10 community, or they were willfully ignorant. There was no attempt to explore how Native
11 experience and values could be carried forward into a new multiethnic, intercultural church.
12 White church leaders thought that since they had imposed European Christianity on Native
13 Christians, the MPC members would welcome the end of segregation and be glad for the chance
14 to worship with European Christians at NLPC. This racist reasoning is even more egregious in
15 light of the fact that MPC had already become a multiethnic, intercultural church.
16

17 Several years after the congregation’s dissolution, the MPC building was razed as a part of
18 Juneau’s urban renewal; this spatial loss extended the spiritual harm caused by Memorial’s
19 closure as once again, Native land was appropriated for White dominant culture use.
20

21 The lack of transparency about incidents such as the closing of MPC continues to impede
22 contemporary efforts to embrace multiethnic, intercultural church life at national, regional, and
23 local levels. The decades of avoidance of the truth about the closure of MPC, and the complicity
24 of the local White NLPC, the Board of National Missions, and the Alaska Presbytery regarding
25 the closure, has deeply hampered relationships between Native and non-Native members. Dr.
26 Soboleff is fondly remembered in the national church, the Alaska Presbytery, and throughout
27 Southeast Alaska, but the wrong of removing him from the MPC pastorate has gone largely
28 unacknowledged. Northern Light United Church claims MPC as one of its predecessor
29 congregations, and supports the work of its own Native Ministries Committee, but it has
30 struggled to this day to confess and address the devastating actions of NLPC, its White
31 predecessor Presbyterian congregation, and its namesake. NLUC has not publicly acknowledged
32 and addressed the manner in which the Presbytery approved NLPC’s move into the MPC
33 neighborhood, and closed MPC. The claim that MPC is a predecessor of NLUC belies the fact
34 that there was no MPC left with which NLPC could have merged. Not facing the racism
35 embedded in the closure decision has hindered the development of authentic multiethnic,
36 intercultural church life at NLUC. “The deafening silence of White Presbyterian leaders and
37 congregants regarding the abrupt closure of MPC is a disruptive force to Tlingit spiritual
38 wellbeing as well as a barrier to living in harmony with White Presbyterians.”⁴⁴ Despite recent

⁴³ Correspondence with Janet Soboleff Burke, December 4, 2020.

⁴⁴ NLUC Native Ministries Committee member and Overture coauthor Lillian Petershoare, February 7, 2021. Other Overture coauthors are: Maxine Richert, Myra Munson, Tim Lash, and Phil Campbell, consultant.

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1 efforts at investigating and telling the story of MPC, including its support for this Overture to the
2 PC(USA), NLUC’s legacy as a community of faith and justice has been marred by decades of
3 inaction regarding the closing of MPC. These institutional failures inhibit NLUC's ability to live
4 out its stated mission, and have tarnished its local Christian witness in the community at large.

5
6 Without a full accounting of the racist, White supremacist ecclesial history that led to actions
7 such as the closing of MPC, and without understanding the enormity of what the loss of centers
8 of Native church life such as MPC meant and means for the Native community, Native
9 contributions remain tangential rather than central to current day church life and leadership. This
10 Overture is a step both toward addressing the festering wound caused by the closing of MPC,
11 and to a renewed commitment to a multiethnic, intercultural future for the Presbyterian Church
12 (U.S.A.) at the national, regional, and local levels.⁴⁵

13
14 **Legacy of Rev. Dr. Walter Soboleff, Sr.**

15
16 Walter Soboleff, born to a Tlingit woman and a father of Russian and German descent in
17 Killisnoo, Alaska, received a scholarship to the Presbyterian related University of Dubuque to
18 study for the ministry. After completing degrees in the undergraduate college and graduate
19 theological seminary, he returned to Alaska in 1940 to assume the pastorate of Juneau’s MPC.
20 Soboleff, the second ordained Alaska Native Presbyterian Minister⁴⁶ in Southeast Alaska, was
21 the first and only Native pastor of MPC.

22
23 Due to official and unofficial segregation, MPC was considered the “Native” Church, as Natives
24 were not welcomed in many “White” churches, including Northern Light Presbyterian Church.
25 Under Soboleff’s leadership, Memorial quickly grew. And in a remarkable witness against the
26 segregation of the time, Soboleff asked the membership of the church to consider inviting other
27 people besides Natives to participate, and they readily agreed. As non-Natives started to join,
28 MPC became one of the few desegregated churches in Juneau.

29
30 Dr. Soboleff’s ministry was the first to travel to the air waves, allowing Natives and non-Natives
31 throughout Southeast Alaska and as far away as the Yukon Territory to hear his Sunday sermon
32 in Tlingit and English. Even when the MPC budget was tight, the congregation supported this
33 ministry citing the importance of the fishermen out on their boats being able to attend worship.
34 He also provided the radio station’s newscasts in Tlingit. The daily newspaper in Juneau
35 featured ads inviting men to the weekly Prayer Luncheon, and women to the Women’s Church

⁴⁵For a listing of steps being taken at presbytery and local levels that accompany the actions called for in this Overture’s Recommendation, see the Conclusion section of the Rationale.

⁴⁶To date, very few Alaska Natives have been ordained. In Southeast Alaska, in addition to Dr. Soboleff, Edward Marsden, Tsimshian, was ordained in 1898, George Betts, Tlingit, was ordained in 1943, and Henry Fawcett, Tsimshian, was ordained in 1963. The dearth of Alaska Native ministerial leadership is an ongoing challenge for the PC(USA). The need to support Alaska Natives preparing for ministry and other church leadership roles is addressed in the Overture’s Recommendation, reparative action 2.a.

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1 Society activities. The youth met monthly with Dr. Soboleff (hot dogs served), with Catholic
2 youth from the surrounding neighborhood also attending at times.

3
4 Dr. Soboleff built and maintained relationships and extensive networks of support in Juneau, and
5 throughout Alaska. He served on the board of directors of the American Red Cross, chaplain
6 with the Territorial Legislature, and in various positions with the Alaska Presbytery. In 1951 he
7 began a 20-year term as the Alaska National Guard Chaplain, serving as chaplain and officer.
8 Like him, many Alaska Natives from the villages served in the Alaska National Guard. He was a
9 Mason, and belonged to the Lions Club. He helped the Lions establish the annual Gold Medal
10 Basketball Tournament that continues to bring 20 plus teams and hundreds of fans from the
11 villages to Juneau for a week of play. Monies raised went for college scholarships, and the
12 church housed some of the teams. A Girl Scout troop met weekly at Memorial. Dr. Soboleff's
13 long involvement in the Alaska Native Brotherhood/Sisterhood (the Native civil rights
14 organization), from its early years to his terms as Grand Secretary and Grand President, helped
15 this organization achieve its goals of furthering the social and economic development of Native
16 people.

17
18 For Dr. Soboleff, community involvement was an expression both of his Christian faith and his
19 Tlingit spiritual practices; for him there was no contradiction between being Christian and
20 Tlingit. Throughout his life, he lived the Tlingit value of *Haa Shuká*, the honoring of and feeling
21 connected to the ancestors, and recognizing one's responsibility to future generations. As Chair
22 of the Sealaska Heritage Board of Trustees, he guided the institute's staff in the development of
23 programs and curricula that celebrate Alaska Native ancestors, perpetuate Native languages, and
24 inspire the revitalization of Southeast Alaska Indigenous cultures. Native youth throughout
25 Southeast are making regalia, dancing traditional dances, and singing clan songs in Tlingit. Dr.
26 Soboleff was a wise, gentle, and humble leader whose grasp and promotion of traditional Tlingit
27 culture was inspiring.

28
29 After accepting the direction from the Alaska Presbytery to leave Memorial Church even in the
30 midst of its closure, Dr. Soboleff served as Evangelist-at-Large in the Alaska Presbytery,
31 providing pastoral leadership for small churches in small communities throughout Southeast
32 Alaska. In 1970, he moved to Fairbanks, AK where he served as the first director of the
33 University of Alaska Fairbanks Native Studies Program. After retiring from that position, he
34 returned to Southeast (dividing his time between Juneau and Tenakee Springs) where he
35 provided leadership in the Native community, and actively participated in church and community
36 life.

37
38 Also, during this time period, he was named Pastor Emeritus of NLUC where he remained an
39 active participant, and where his wise counsel was sought by Native and non-Native members
40 alike. He preached on many occasions, regularly participated in worship and other church
41 activities, and he encouraged others to get involved.

42

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1 Dr. Soboleff received numerous honors including being named Alaska Federation of Natives
2 Citizen of the Year in 1989, and in 1999 being designated Alaska Native Brotherhood Grand
3 Camp President Emeritus. Numerous facilities have been named for him including the Angoon
4 Airport, and a University of Alaska Southeast classroom building that houses the School of Arts
5 and Sciences.⁴⁷ After his death, the Sealaska Heritage Institute named its stunning heritage
6 center the Walter Soboleff Building (“WSB”) in recognition of Dr. Soboleff’s life-long
7 contributions to perpetuating Tlingit culture. The WSB is “a physical manifestation of *Haa*
8 *Shuká* and all the ideals he held dear.”⁴⁸

9
10 Even with these widespread accolades and recognitions, however, the forced closure of his
11 beloved MPC remained an unresolved sadness for Dr. Soboleff. A cruel irony of the closure is
12 that Dr. Soboleff was well known in the community at large as a “culture broker”⁴⁹ or an
13 intermediary who could bring understanding between the Native and non-Native societies. What
14 the world recognized, however, remained oblivious to the church. The immeasurable value of the
15 ministry of MPC under Dr. Soboleff’s leadership was unacknowledged, whether out of ignorance
16 or willfulness, by denominational leaders.

17
18 Neither the displaced members of MPC nor Rev. Dr. Soboleff, who remained a figure of dignity
19 and peace amid systemic racism and indignity, received an apology nor any form of restitution
20 from the Presbyterian Church before Rev. Dr. Soboleff “walked into the forest” on May 22,
21 2011, at age 102.

22
23 **Investigation into the Closure of MPC**

24
25 In March 2011, two months before Dr. Soboleff’s death, then-NLUC pastor Phil Campbell talked
26 with him about the closing of MPC. Pastor Campbell was struck by how pained Dr. Soboleff was
27 about the closure – almost 50 years after it happened. It was obvious the wound had not been
28 healed, nor had the injustice been addressed. With the support of the Native Ministries
29 Committee and the Church Council, Pastor Campbell began scouring the historical records of the
30 Alaska Presbytery, the Board of National Missions, NLPC, and MPC to learn more about the
31 circumstances that led to the closure of MPC. He presented preliminary findings at Sealaska’s
32 Walter Soboleff Day observance in 2015,⁵⁰ and he began talking with the NLUC Church Council
33 about how to repair the damage caused by the MPC’s closing.

⁴⁷The impact and significance of Dr. Soboleff’s life and ministry have been widely attested. See “A Century of Soboleff,” *First Alaskans Magazine*, February/March 2011 as an example.

⁴⁸“A Retrospective View of Dr. Walter Soboleff,” Sealaska Heritage Institute, <https://vimeo.com/146973605>, November 13, 2015.

⁴⁹ Correspondence with Dr. Rosita Worl, President, Sealaska Heritage Institute, February 4, 2021.

⁵⁰ “A Retrospective View of Dr. Walter Soboleff,” Sealaska Heritage Institute.

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In 2017, the NLUC congregation engaged in visioning exercises; identifying appropriate ways to address MPC’s closure was one of the topics discussed. In reviewing the vision plan, one of the groups⁵¹ recommended pursuing hand carved Tlingit house posts for the church lobby. In the August 2017 Council minutes, the Council went on record supporting the house posts idea, and reported that Pastor Campbell 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, Tlingit, a nationally recognized journalist, a reporter for *Indian Country Today*, and a former member of NLUC was recruited to interview MPC members. Native Ministries directed Ms. Estus to ask members about their remembrances of the MPC and the circumstances surrounding its closure. Ms. Estus 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 Pastor Campbell’s travel to the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia to access the Alaska Presbytery and MPC records. He summarized his research on the MPC closure in the March 2018 NLUC newsletter.

Current NLUC Pastor Faith McClellan, upon reviewing Ms. Estus’s article about Dr. Soboleff and the MPC, consulted with the Northwest Coast Presbytery Executive, Dr. Corey Schlosser-Hall, about submitting a formal Overture regarding the closure of the MPC. Native Ministries met with Dr. Schlosser-Hall about writing an Overture, and he wholeheartedly supported the idea. Native Ministries Liaison and Council Member Lillian Petershoare recommended that Council support the Native Ministries Committee’s recommendation to prepare an Overture to address the closure of the MPC. The NLUC Council voted 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.

⁵¹ NLUC 2014 - 2018 Visioning Work Plan, Native Ministries and Purple Group additions, Activity 1.1, May 9, 2017.

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1 **Additional Context**

2
3 In Juneau, the 1960s were particularly challenging times for the local Tlingit Community. The
4 White man's legacy of encroachment on Indigenous lands exhibited itself in numerous ways in
5 the capital city and Douglas (which later became incorporated in the Borough of Juneau).

6 Consider:

- 7
- 8 ● The condemnation and burning of houses in the Douglas Indian Village beginning on
9 May 4, 1962. The Douglas Indian Village had been working with the Corps of Engineers
10 and the Bureau of Indian Affairs to obtain a village harbor until the City of Douglas
11 intervened by clearing the land of homes for purposes of constructing a city harbor.
12
 - 13 ● On February 1, 1962, the State of Alaska and the City as plaintiffs successfully brought
14 to the U.S. District Court an action to quiet title to the tidelands of the Juneau Indian
15 Village.
16
 - 17 ● The Forest Service in 1964 established a campground on A'akw Kwáan burial sites.
18
 - 19 ● In the mid-1960s and early 1970s, the City of Juneau implemented President Lyndon
20 Johnson's "Great Society Program" and began an urban renewal effort that focused on
21 twenty-three acres of filled tidelands which included 140 homes (130 were considered
22 "sub-standard"), owned for many years primarily by Alaska Native and Filipino/Native
23 families. This neighborhood on 7th, 8th and 9th Streets and beyond surrounded the MPC
24 that was located on 8th Street. Many in the neighborhood attended the church prior to its
25 closure in 1963. Despite protests by the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, the
26 homes were razed (the MPC building was also razed and the land sold). Although owners
27 were compensated, it wasn't enough for some who had to move in with relatives or others
28 who had to move out the road in trailers which necessitated buying an auto. Urban
29 renewal essentially displaced a tightly knit ethnic neighborhood along with their church,
30 which was closed earlier.⁵²
31

32 Concurrently, local, state and federal governments in Juneau were appropriating Lingit Aani, and
33 disrespecting sacred burial grounds in the process. The federal district court stripped the
34 tidelands from the Juneau Indian Village for community development and private purposes. At a
35 time when Juneau Tlingits were suffering monumental assaults on their ancestors' graves sites
36 and property losses that hugely impacted their livelihoods and subsistence way of life, the
37 comforting and encouraging words of their pastor might have helped them cope, were it not for
38 the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) choosing to close the MPC in the midst of all this profound
39 loss. It is hard to overstate the devastating impact of MPC's closure. Surely the presence of its

⁵² Kimberly L. Metcalf, ed. *In Sisterhood: The History of Camp 2 of the Alaska Native Sisterhood*, 2008.

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1 ministry would have made a positive contribution to Native life, and to Juneau as a whole during
2 the era of devastating social change and upheaval in the 1960s and beyond.

3
4 **Theological, Spiritual, and Social Justice Imperatives**

5
6 In his book, *Stamped from the Beginning*,⁵³ Ibram Kendi documents the historical evolution of
7 racist and anti-racist ideas and actions. He identifies the existence of two types of racism –
8 segregationist racism and assimilationist racism. In the practice of segregationist racism, the
9 dominant class separates itself from those it deems inferior. The distance serves to ensure that
10 dominant White systems and structures are not exposed to or compromised by social contact
11 with Black and Indigenous people and groups. Assimilationist racists believe that Black and
12 Indigenous people of color can “evolve” into full humanity by becoming like White people and
13 adopting White ways. Anti-racism affirms the inherent worth of all people, culture and systems,
14 does not establish separate structures, and does not believe in the inferiority or superiority of any
15 group of people. An examination of the history of Presbyterian Church missionary practices
16 reveals that the first practice was segregationist racism. In Juneau, this led to the establishment of
17 two congregations – one for Whites and one for Natives.

18
19 In the 1950s when the national Presbyterian Church repented of segregation, it did not embrace
20 anti-racism. Instead, it instituted assimilationist racism with the accompanying assumption of the
21 superiority of White Christianity. Thus, when segregation ended, the Presbyterian Church
22 dissolved the congregation originally established to minister to Natives so that Native
23 Presbyterians could go to the White church and learn White church ways. In 1963, the MPC was
24 closed for the same reason it was established by Presbyterian Missionaries 76 years earlier:
25 White supremacist racism. The congregation was opened by racist White supremacy expressed
26 through segregation; it was closed by racist White supremacist assimilationist racism operating
27 under the guise of integration.

28
29 The Presbytery’s and the Mission Board’s theological reflection on their actions was notably
30 shallow. They rushed to embrace an integrationist goal of establishing in Juneau a “strong and
31 united church of all races and classes,” without seriously addressing the damage wrought by
32 centuries of forced segregation. White church leaders failed to heed the warning of the prophet
33 Jeremiah who spoke out against those who seek to sweep under the rug the trauma caused by the
34 history of discrimination:

35
36 ¹⁴They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “All is well,”
37 when all is not well. ¹⁵They acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet
38 they were not ashamed, they did not know how to blush... (Jeremiah 6: 14-15a).

39

⁵³ Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, Bold
Type Books, 2016.

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1 In treating the wound without proper care, national and regional church leaders did not embrace
2 the church’s calling as the Body of Christ. As the body of Christ, “every action the church takes
3 in the world must be as representatives of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Racism is a sin and is not only
4 a life-negating offense against humanity; it is also an affront to God and goes against the life-
5 affirming, inclusive ministry of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁴ It is a denial of the radically egalitarian vision
6 that the Apostle Paul offered the church in Galatia:

7
8 ²⁶ You are all God’s children through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷All of you who were
9 baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew
10 nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are
11 all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are
12 Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3: 26-29,
13 CEB)
14

15 The vision of Galatians was already operative at MPC, but the lenses of White church leaders
16 were clouded by White supremacy that kept them from seeing this truth.

17
18 Thankfully, the church has not stood still. Four years after the closure of MPC, the General
19 Assembly adopted the Confession of 1967 that furthered the church’s commitment to racial
20 justice, to ending discrimination, and to seeking reconciliation:

21
22 God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In his
23 reconciling love, God overcomes the barriers between sisters and brothers and
24 breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference,
25 real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all people to receive and uphold
26 one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing,
27 education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights.
28 Therefore, the church labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and
29 ministers to those injured by it. Congregations, individuals, or groups of
30 Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize others, however subtly, resist the
31 Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess.⁵⁵
32
33

⁵⁴ Correspondence with NLUC Pastor Faith McClellan, February 9, 2021. Rev. McClellan recommended that the Overture include the theological affirmation of the church as the Body of Christ, noting also that the church’s true vocation is “with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to proclaim God’s justice, mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation to a broken world.”

⁵⁵ The Confession of 1967— Inclusive Language Version, Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2002, 9.44a.

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1 In the spirit of the Confession of 1967, this Overture provides redress for the domination and
2 patronization of MPC that brought contempt on the faith that church leaders espoused.

3
4 The Confession of 1967 also provides guidance for the church’s missionary endeavors. It
5 acknowledges that the

6
7 Christian religion [is]...distinct from God’s self-revelation, [and] has been shaped
8 throughout its history by the cultural forms of its environment.” It further declares
9 that “Christians find parallels between other religions and their own and must
10 approach all religions with openness and respect. Repeatedly God has used the
11 insight of non-Christians to challenge the church to renewal.⁵⁶

12
13 The cultural humility called for by the Confession of 1967 was absent from the church’s
14 missionary encounters with Tlingit people, as it has been across the globe throughout the history
15 of church life. Non-European cultures and worldviews are vibrant and profound; they are not
16 devoid of spiritual depth and understanding. In the case of MPC and the Juneau community,
17 Tlingit values and spiritual insights contributed invaluable to MPC church life. Key Tlingit
18 spirituality concepts are explicated by Lillian Petershoare:

19
20 Our Tlingit elders and culture bearers teach us that everything has spirit, both the
21 inanimate and animate, with all things being worthy of respect. From a young
22 age, we are taught to live in harmony, maintaining social and spiritual balance
23 between eagles and ravens.⁵⁷ Coastal Tlingits belong to either moiety based on
24 their maternal lineage, while inland Tlingits belong to the wolf or crow moiety.

25
26 As Tlingits, we practice *Haa Shuká* knowing that we are connected to our
27 ancestors and future generations.⁵⁸ Our traditional values instill in us a
28 responsibility to ensure that our descendants know what it means to be a Tlingit
29 and to “imitate their ancestors” (embrace Tlingit lifeways).

30
31 We believe our ancestors’ spirits are among us. In ceremonies to remove the grief
32 of those who have lost a loved one, we speak of our ancestors as being with us—
33 comforting and healing our sorrow. For example, Jessie Dalton of Hoonah in one
34 of the finest recorded oratories, cried out, “Yes how very much it is as if they’re

⁵⁶ The Confession of 1967— Inclusive Language Version, Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2002, 9.41, 9.42.

⁵⁷ Correspondence with Dr. Rosita Worl, February 4, 2021.

⁵⁸ Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer. *Haa Shuká, Our Ancestors*, pp. 28, 29.

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1 [the ancestors] revealing their faces.”⁵⁹ Later in the same speech, she refers to the
2 mourners’ father’s sisters (ancestors for whom the clan crest is the Tern) as being
3 terns flying over those who are grieving, letting their down fall like snow
4 (bringing peace and comfort) and taking the grief back to their nests.⁶⁰ Another
5 example of reinforcing our ancestors’ presence: Elder Dorothy Peters Coronell
6 shared in a recorded interview, “We never lose them; they are all here in our
7 hearts.”⁶¹

8
9 Because we carry our ancestors (*Haa Shuká*) in our hearts, and believe that their
10 spirits are among us, Dr. Soboleff’s heartbreak over the closure of the Memorial
11 Church is a pain that remains and reverberates deeply within us. It is an offense
12 that yet remains unresolved. As we speak of the closure, our pain is
13 communicated in our choice of words and in the passion behind the words.
14

15 Our understanding of God is enhanced when we are able to view the creator through the lens of
16 all cultures. During the segregation era, and later during the assimilation push, White church
17 leaders and missionaries failed to recognize the profound cultural contributions of the Tlingits.
18 Tlingit and other Indigenous spiritualities contribute to authentic multiethnic, intercultural church
19 life.

20
21 Only in recent years has the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) begun to articulate a commitment to
22 antiracism as it seeks to embrace the future as a multiethnic, intercultural communion. With
23 regard to how this commitment addresses PC(USA) history and relationships with Native
24 Americans, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians, in 2016, the General Assembly offered a
25 general apology for its complicity in the promotion of the Doctrine of Discovery and its
26 participation in systemic racism against Indigenous peoples, stating:

27
28 We know that apology is only a first step in the larger hope of repentance and
29 reconciliation. We seek the guidance of relationships ... as we seek to identify and
30 act on restorative practices and policies at the relational, communal, and national
31 level.⁶²
32

⁵⁹ Jessie Dalton, Hoonah. 1968. as translated in Dauenhauers’ *Haa Tuwunáagu Yis, for Healing Our Spirit*, p. 245.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁶¹ Dorothy Peters Coronell James. Interview conducted by the late David Katzeek, Sealaska Heritage Institute, for the Latseen Leadership Training Program.

⁶² Offering an Apology to Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians, <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/6350>.

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1 The redress for the closure of MPC called for in this Overture is one step of repentance and
2 restorative practice that will demonstrate the General Assembly’s commitment to repairing
3 damage caused by White supremacy, and to the pursuit of ongoing healing and reconciliation
4 within church and society. Without reparative actions, the words of apology ring hollow. The
5 response called for in the recommendation section of this Overture will provide demonstrable,
6 national commitment to the church’s antiracist posture with regard to relationships with Native
7 people in Juneau and Southeast Alaska.

8
9 **Actions by NLUC and the Presbytery of the Northwest Coast**

10
11 The efforts of the Office of the General Assembly and the Presbyterian Mission Agency will join
12 local and regional efforts undertaken by the Northern Light congregation and the Northwest
13 Coast Presbytery.

14
15 The Congregation of the Northern Light United Church (“NLUC”), the successor to the Northern
16 Light Presbyterian Church, recommended by the NLUC Council, has adopted the attached
17 Resolution 2021-___, Regarding Acknowledgment, Apology, and Reparations to demonstrate its
18 repentance and intent to pursue healing and reconciliation within our church, community, and
19 society

20
21 *NLUC understands that the NWCP Executive Board is working on this and trust it will insert
22 below whatever it most appropriate. It is NLUC’s profound believe that that we must each,
23 individually and collectively, take action and that the best advocacy at the General Assembly for
24 passage of this Overture will be proof that this isn’t a request being made only for someone else
25 to take action, but rather a request that the General Assembly join us all in taking this action.*

26
27 Actions taken by of the Northwest Coast Presbytery, as a successor body of the Alaska
28 Presbytery for PC(USA) congregations in Southeast Alaska, to acknowledge its culpability and
29 silence regarding the closure are

- 30
31 a. Supporting the efforts of the NLUC as referenced above;
32 b. Supporting the Alaska Cluster of churches in Southeast Alaska in their efforts
33 to remain viable, to welcome members from all cultures, especially Alaska
34 Native cultures, and to encourage and train lay leaders, accordingly;
35 c. Taking affirmative, transparent and open steps to assure that, when the
36 Presbytery considers difficult decisions about the future of local
37 congregations, the Presbytery’s resources will not be allocated in ways that
38 favor predominantly White churches or disfavor primarily People of Color
39 congregations; and

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1 d. Using the proceeds of the sale of the Sitka Presbyterian Church building to
2 fund a Native Resource Center for Southeast Alaska, consistent with the
3 Native American Coordinating Council’s recent recommendations.⁶³
4

5 **Conclusion**
6

7 Actions always speak more loudly than words. This Overture is a plea that the General
8 Assembly join NLUC and the Northwest Coast Presbytery in their tangible actions to provide
9 reparative justice.
10

11 In proposing this Overture, members of the NLUC Native Ministries Committee
12 have sought to heal our ancestors, heal ourselves, and heal the land on which the
13 Presbyterian missionaries, the Board of Missions, and the Alaska Presbytery
14 committed the offenses outlined herein, with special focus on the Memorial
15 Church closure.⁶⁴
16

17 Now is the time for all parties to deal honestly with the past, and together to undertake the
18 obligation and opportunity to improve the future.

⁶³ Native American Coordinating Council Report to GA 224, Recommendation 4.c.: “Encourage mid councils to disburse a portion of the proceeds to Native American ministries when buildings or property are sold, symbolic of good stewardship”; and Recommendation 5.e.: “Creation of Native American centers, programs, and resources outside of reservations.”

⁶⁴ Lillian Petershoare, February 7, 2021.