

Local Church Participates in Return to the Earth Project

In response to a call from Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), a group at Hutterthal Mennonite Church of Freeman recently completed its discussion of the Return to the Earth Study Guide and built ten burial boxes and prepared ten burial cloths for the project.

Lawrence Hart, a Mennonite, Cheyenne Peace Chief and Mennonite pastor from Clinton, Oklahoma, has been instrumental in the development of the Return to the Earth project.

The Return to the Earth project is an opportunity for individuals and groups to study and participate in a key restorative justice issue of Native American tribes and nations. It hopes to educate, challenge and enliven creative action for those who participate.

In 1860, the U.S. Surgeon General and commanders connected to the U.S. Army Medical Museum, circulated requests for troops on the frontier to collect Native American skulls. This practice was carried on for decades and thousands of remains arrived at public and private museums for scientific study and storage. It is now estimated that somewhere between 600,000 and 2 million skeletal remains were collected and housed in museums, societal collections, scientific laboratories, and universities across the country.

Two acts, the 1906 Antiquities Act and the 1979 Archaeological Resources Protection Act, asserted that Indian bones and objects found on federal land were the property of the United States. After the 1970's, however, tribes and supporters fighting for the ethical treatment of the dead, pressed for legal safeguards regarding the treatment of Native American remains and objects. And in 1990 Congress enacted the national Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). This law mandated the return of human remains and ritual objects to their tribes. It also indicated that proper respect was to be shown towards human skeletal remains and proper interment be provided when ancestors were identified.

Today, many remains have been returned to their descendants for proper burial. However, over 100,000 human remains, mostly skulls, exist in repositories, unable to be identified as belonging to a specific tribe. Records detailing the history, location and tribal identity have been lost or destroyed. In some cases identity was lost when remains were moved to different locations or during museum renovations. These once-beloved mothers, fathers, friends and children are still waiting to be returned, mourned and buried with dignity.

The study at Hutterthal was begun by viewing the video "Long Journey Home", actual footage of the return and burial of remains that had been held at the Smithsonian Institute. One session, which met at the American Indian Exhibit at Heritage Hall Museum in Freeman, was led by Carl Meyer and Karissa Ortman Loewen, Mennonite Central Committee workers on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Another session discussed the remains that were found in the 1960's nine miles west of the Hwy 81 and 44 junction during the construction of Hwy 44. Rose Paz, a Native American woman from Sioux Falls with connection to the Freeman community, shared her personal story and, along with her son and grandchildren, wore traditional Native American clothing and introduced the group to various customs. Lois Janzen Preheim, Director of the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program in Sioux Falls, gave a presentation on restorative justice and reconciliation.

In an act of reconciliation, the Hutterthal group collaboratively built the burial boxes and sewed the burial cloths. A dedication service was held at Hutterthal on Sunday, March 18, 2007 during the morning worship service prior to shipping the boxes to the MCC office in Kansas where they will be shipped to the location of the skulls waiting to be repatriated. Currently a burial site in Oklahoma is ready to receive 11,000 burial boxes.

MCC, which is working alongside numerous ecumenical organizations in supporting this project, is the relief, development and peace building arm of the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches in North America.