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The United Methodist Church Northeastern Jurisdiction Native American Ministries Committee announces official position on full inclusion of LGBTQIA2S+ persons.

Feb 20, 2021, at a special meeting held on ZOOM, representatives from THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH NORTHEASTERN JURISDICTION COMMITTEE ON NATIVE AMERICAN MINISTRIES (NEJNAMC) voted unanimously on the following statement of affirmation for full inclusion in the church:

We affirm full inclusion of LGBTQIA2S+ persons to be an authentic expression of the Gospel perspective that all are created in the image of God. Our perspective relates to the realities of “Two Spirit” persons in First Nations Peoples and communities who may be members of our churches.

For clarity: At a minimum, “full inclusion” means the removal from the Book of Discipline all negative or discriminatory language related to LGBTQIA+ people as well as specifically endorsing same gender marriage and the ordination of persons who identify as LGBTQIA+.

Two Spirit, also signified as “2S,” is a modern Pan-Indian, umbrella term used by some Indigenous North Americans to describe Native Peoples in their communities who fulfill a traditional third gender ceremonial role. It was claimed in 1990 by the Indigenous Lesbian and Gay International Gathering in Winnipeg to distinguish and distance Native American/First Nations Peoples from non-native Peoples concerning perspectives on sexual and gender diversity.

In addition, the term First Nations Peoples, is used in this case, as an umbrella term that includes Native Americans, Indigenous Peoples, American Indians, Native Peoples, tribal nations etc.

This is only the beginning:

The full inclusion statement is derived from a larger document resulting from two years of research and conversations. RoBear Wilson Chairperson Western PA CONAM and Dr. Ellesa High, chairperson of the WV CONAM and NEJNAMC secretary, researched, wrote, and presented the larger position paper. Representatives from across the NEJNAMC refined, and unanimously passed the statement.

When we begin to discuss such documents and statements it becomes immediately clear the ways english language and grammar limits our ability to be inclusive. For instance, how do we explain the diversity of peoples represented in our NEJNAMC churches and CONAM’s while also making impactful statements of justice? Terms such as “First Nations” and “Indigenous Peoples” limit our descriptions of the many different Indigenous Nations within our Jurisdiction and the world. At the same time, they enable us to speak to a concern for the welfare of our fellow human beings that encompasses many different nations. One of the many ongoing discussions today included the use of “Two Spirit” persons and “Turtle Island” which are neither agreed upon terms, nor are they described the same by all peoples.

Northeastern Jurisdiction Native American Ministries Committee

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One of the most difficult discussions came from our desire to honor relationships. We want to release statements and position papers such as this, but we also recognize the need to build relationships and listen.

While we have released this statement, it is only the beginning, because the larger position paper presented during the special meeting continues to be perfected. We seek to answer a call Bishop Peggy Johnson shared during our meeting, to be in conversation and to consider the voices of those who identify as LGBTQIA, and particularly as "Two Spirit" persons, who are absent from our leadership circle as we further develop this statement and the position paper.

"We are sitting at the fire and we are learning more and more about this while also releasing this official statement" said Pat Parent, Abenaki/Penobscot, Chairperson NEJNAMC. RagghiRain NEJNAMC Advocacy chair added, "We have a written paper/statement and we also have the opportunity/option to go outside of our own circle and be listening to the voices." Thus, the continuing work will include conversations through talking circles with our LGBTQIA2S+ members, representatives, and allies.

An Upper New York representative and Presbyterian pastor from the Shinnecock Nation, Rev. Holly Haile Thompson, reminded us of the importance of this work and its ties to our ongoing Act of Repentance. "Part of what is important - is that there are traditional and historical understandings of the wide umbrella of Two Spirit siblings" ... "It has been unknown and ignored by the UMC and western Christianity." She continued, "It has come from the Doctrine of Discovery and is part of Native life... this Act of Repentance [reaches] back hundreds of years!"