

M4RR – April 2016

Doctrine of Discovery

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was established in 2008 to explore and document the history and legacy of the Indian Residential School system and to make recommendations on healing and reconciliation. In June of 2015, the Commission released 94 Calls to Action. Number 49 stated “We call upon all religious denominations and faith groups who have not already done so to repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples, such as the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius.”

In fact, the Executive of the General Council of the United Church had already, in 2012, passed a motion denouncing the Doctrine of Discovery. But what is the Doctrine of Discovery and what does it mean to us as members of the United Church of Canada?

The Doctrine of Discovery originated in the Roman Catholic Church in the 15th Century. It gave Christian explorers, who came to a land not inhabited by Christians, the right to claim the land on behalf of their sovereign. That land was considered “terra nullius”, empty land or nobody’s land. I am certain that my Plains Cree ancestors did not consider the land they lived and hunted on to be empty or that they themselves were “nobody”. However, to the European Christians, non-Christian indigenous peoples were not human.

The Royal Proclamation of 1763, reflected the British crown’s understanding of its rights stemming from the Doctrine of Discovery. Although, the Proclamation recognized the rights of indigenous peoples to inhabit their traditional lands, like the Doctrine of Discovery, it made clear that title to those lands belonged to the Crown. Supreme Court decisions regarding Aboriginal title have supported this position. It is time to get rid of an unjust concept from the 15th century papacy and build a new, respectful relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Canadians.

After denouncing the Doctrine of Discovery in 2012, the Executive of the General Council of the United Church “initiated a process of discerning how its own values, actions, policies, and structures continue to be informed by the Doctrine ... and encouraged congregations to learn about and advocate for the rights, aspirations and needs of Indigenous peoples.”¹

Acknowledgement of the Traditional Territory on which we are gathered at meetings and/or worship is part of this process.

Carol Germa on Behalf of the Manitou Right Relations Home Group

1. United Church Backgrounder on the TRC Calls to Action, p.2.

Other References

Reid, Jennifer, “The Doctrine of Discovery and Canadian Law”, in the Canadian Journal of Native Studies XXX, 2(2010):335-359.

“What is the Doctrine of Discovery? Why Should it be Repudiated?” (factsheet) New York Yearly Meeting, The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).