

Church returns sacred lands to Wyandotte people

by [Kay Panovec](#) in the [October 23, 2019](#) issue

For 176 years, generations of Methodist missionary societies and Methodists in western Ohio have held in trust the land upon which the Methodist mission among the Wyandotte (also known as Wyandot) people was planted. On September 21, United Methodist Global Ministries returned three acres of land, including the historic Wyandot Mission Church, to the Wyandotte people.

Chief Billy Friend of the Wyandotte Nation of Oklahoma called it “a monumental day” for the Wyandotte people. “For the Methodist people to come to us and offer to give the land back to us, we are truly overjoyed.”

With tears in his eyes, Friend accepted the deed to the land from Thomas Kemper, general secretary of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. Nearly 600 people rose to their feet and applauded while Wyandotte from Oklahoma, Kansas, and Michigan voiced celebratory cries. Wyandotte children and youth—including Wyandotte Princess Sara Wright—danced, and Wyandotte men drummed.

Over the last decade, Friend has been taking elders and youth from Oklahoma to the Upper Sandusky, Ohio, site on a regular basis to teach them about their ancestors and their history in Ohio.

The historic day began at the John Stewart United Methodist Church in Upper Sandusky with a look back at the relationship between the Wyandotte and the Methodists.

John Stewart was born in Virginia to parents of mixed African and European descent. Plagued by illness throughout his life, Stewart experienced many difficulties traveling from Virginia to Ohio. He was robbed of his possessions, drank heavily, and fought depression.

One night, after attending a Methodist camp meeting in Marietta, Ohio, Stewart received a calling from God to be faithful and tell others about God. Although he fought the calling, he vowed to commit himself to mission work among Native

Americans. Traveling more than 200 miles to northwest Ohio, Stewart settled in what is now known as Upper Sandusky. He began his work with the Wyandotte people in 1816.

He was befriended by Jonathan Pointer, another person of African descent. Pointer, who lived with the Wyandotte people, translated Stewart's messages. This resulted in friendship and religious conversion by Wyandotte chiefs and leading women in their community.

The Methodist Episcopal Church supported Stewart's mission work financially and appointed missionaries to assist him. His work and example inspired the formation of the Methodist Missionary Society in 1820, the forerunner to today's General Board of Global Ministries.

"It is an honor to know and share the history of this sacred place with all who visit. After 176 years, we close the circle as the land is returned to the Wyandotte," said Pastor Betsy Bowen of John Stewart UMC and a member of the Records and History Committee. "It's a good day to be a Wyandotte, and it's a good day to be a United Methodist."

The land includes the site of the mission church and two burial grounds, where Stewart, later missionaries, and Wyandotte tribal members are buried. The mission church was built with US government funds secured from President James Monroe by the mission's second Methodist missionary, James B. Finley, who stopped by the White House to meet the president on his way to the General Conference in Baltimore. Designated as a national Methodist historical site by the 1960 General Conference, it was added to the US National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

In 2012, the UMC began a new chapter in the church's relationship with indigenous peoples. Since then, 26 conferences have either held an Act of Repentance or began a process to connect with indigenous peoples.

The Council of Bishops, represented by West Ohio bishop Gregory V. Palmer and East Ohio bishop Tracy Malone, reaffirmed their commitment to work toward healing relationships and acknowledging the failings of the past and the present. Palmer and Malone said they are committed to cultivating opportunities for advocacy, dialogue, and repentance.

“This history has been both painful and tragic; yet, there has also been the triumph of human spirit by the grace of God coming out of that history. That grace has enabled people to heal, to be redeemed and to reconcile with one another, with God and with the land,” Palmer said.

The Global Ministries president, Wisconsin Conference bishop Hee-Soo Jung, said the agency would continue supporting annual conference and Native American ministries; educating staff, churches, and communities about the harm done by Native American mascots and the racism they perpetuate; and listening to and standing with Native Americans in their struggle for justice and full participation in society.

Together, chiefs and bishops clasped hands and prayed.

Kemper expressed hope that that attendees would leave with a new commitment to cross boundaries in order to be in solidarity with Native American and indigenous sisters and brothers everywhere. “We also hope that each will take away a sense of mission from the margins from the example of missionary John Stewart, whose marginalized position in society allowed him a unique way of connecting with the Wyandotte people,” Kemper said.

Friend presented a \$10,000 check to the Records and History Committee of John Stewart UMC for the continuing care and upkeep of the Mission Church. “It is a miracle the church is still standing,” Friend said. “We will be forever indebted to the local community for their commitment and hard work for the preservation and upkeep of this land. This will always be our church together.” —United Methodist West Ohio Conference, United Methodist News Service, *Christian Century* staff