

A church returns land to American Indians

**“This is decolonized land,” a young woman said.
“This is a liberated zone.”**

by [Terra Brockman](#) in the [March 11, 2020](#) issue



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When I first saw the sturdy, red-brick building on the corner of West Fifth and Bannock Streets near downtown Denver, it reminded me of the Lutheran churches of my Midwest childhood. But the sign in front announced it as the home of the Four Winds American Indian Council, my destination for the evening.

I had come to Denver for Slow Food Nations, a yearly gathering of farmers, chefs, and food educators for a weekend of tastings, tours, and talks. The building was the site of a *hoo'eibii3ihiit* (literally “eating assembled”), the Arapaho word for feast. Descriptions of the event noted that: “Slow Food Nations and *hoo'eibii3ihiit* at Four Winds American Indian Council are located on lands of the Arapaho people. We acknowledge and honor the tribes of this area, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Comanche, Shoshone, and Ute, including Traditional Custodians, Elders past, present and future,

and all of our Plant and Animal Relatives of the lands on which we live, work, play, and are nourished."

The hoo'eibii3ihiit was organized by Slow Food Turtle Island Association, which protects and promotes indigenous foods and the traditional knowledge related to them. During the many-course meal of Navaho-Churro lamb, black tepary beans, marbled Chinook salmon, quinoa, purslane, and much more, a young woman stood up.

"You probably think you're in an abandoned church," she said.

Her voice was so strong and full of emotion that I turned my chair to face her. As I did so, I glanced at the narrow church balcony, the stained-glass windows, the simple step up to what had been an altar area. Yes, that was exactly what I had thought.

"You're not," she said. "This is decolonized land. This is a liberated zone."

I had no idea what those phrases meant. How could land be decolonized? What was a liberated zone?

With the woman's words echoing in my head, I returned to my hotel room that evening and immediately began to seek answers. That search went on for many months, and it has not ended.

I learned that the church building had been erected on land designated for the Arapaho in the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie. The land had seemed relatively worthless to early European settlers. But in November 1858, a prospector on his way to California discovered gold in the Rocky Mountains. This started the Pikes Peak Gold Rush and led Colorado territorial officials to pressure federal authorities to redefine Indian lands.

The Fort Laramie treaty was broken ("renegotiated" is the official term) in 1861, as a subset of Arapaho chiefs ceded (or were misled into ceding) most of their land. The Arapaho and other Indian peoples were forced into a small area in southeastern Colorado near the Arkansas River and one of its tributaries, Sand Creek.

There, in the predawn hours of November 29, 1864, a group of Cheyenne and Arapaho people, mainly women, children, and old men, were attacked by 700 Colorado cavalry under the command of Colonel John Milton Chivington. Chivington

was a “highly established Methodist minister,” according to George Tinker, an elder in the Four Winds community from the Osage Nation, professor emeritus at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, and author of *American Indian Liberation*, among other books. The night before the attack, said Tinker, Chivington told his officers, “Don’t spare the children, the babies, because nits make lice.” After the initial murderous assault, Chivington and his men returned to hunt down and kill the wounded and to adorn their weapons, hats, and clothing with scalps and other body parts, including fetuses and male and female genitalia.

This part of American history “is not taught in schools,” said Jolynne Locust Woodcock of the Oglala Lakota, Cherokee, and Northern Cheyenne Nations and another member of the Four Winds community. Nor do people discuss “what happened, who died, [or] at whose expense this country exists. It’s not acknowledged that we’re still alive, that we are a living, breathing, heartfelt bunch of people.”

Sky Roosevelt-Morris, the young woman who spoke at the Slow Food feast, made it clear that Native history is not dead history. It lives in long-unhealed, still-open wounds.

As Congress led inquiries into the Sand Creek atrocities, westward expansion continued. Among those who came to the Denver region was a small group of Danish Lutherans. They founded Bethany Danish Lutheran Church on the corner of West Fifth and Bannock just 15 years after the Sand Creek massacre.

When Bethany Church closed in 1973, the building and parsonage became the property of the American Lutheran Church, which in 1988 passed it on to the Rocky Mountain Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. A few years before, in 1986, the group that would become the Four Winds American Indian Council had begun using the building as a sacred space and community center. Tinker, an ordained Lutheran pastor and a leader in the Native American community, led the Four Winds community in reviving and embracing Indian spirituality. For the next two decades, the Four Winds American Indian Council used the building to serve the roughly 40,000 Indians in Denver.

But by the 2010s, the neighborhood was rapidly gentrifying, and the Rocky Mountain Synod began considering whether it should sell the building. Dena Williams, a Lutheran pastor and Denver resident, heard that a potential buyer had offered a

million dollars for the property. Alarmed at the possibility the Four Winds community would be displaced, she contacted Tinker, whom she had gotten to know while pursuing advanced degrees at Iliff. Tinker invited her to meet with the Four Winds American Indian Council.

Over the next three years, the Four Winds American Indian Council met regularly with Williams, and in the process she learned about cultural obstacles to the group staying on the property.

“Some Four Winds members were adamantly opposed to the entire concept of ownership of land. There was unwillingness to seek legal status as a nonprofit organization,” Williams said. “My role was to listen and learn and present the realities of the situation. . . . I did not give advice but matter-of-factly described the legal and practical options available to Four Winds.”

Rocky Mountain Synod bishop Jim Gonia said figuring out what to do with the building “wasn’t necessarily straightforward and easy” and involved “a lot of back-and-forth.”

“I think there was a ton that we, as the church, didn’t know. We didn’t know about the reality of Native American history in this country, about the continued marginalization of American Indian folk in our own community, and about their spiritual life, which is so important.”

But despite all the uncertainties, the building was on its way to becoming something most of the participants had never considered, “decolonized land.” Critical in the three-year process were dinner meetings at Four Winds attended by Bishop Gonia, synod council members, and others where members of the Four Winds community shared their food and their stories. These were “personal stories of struggle, accounts of historical horrors visited upon the native people by white settlers, soldiers, and government leaders and representatives,” recalled Williams, as well as stories about “the significance of Four Winds in the lives of urban Indians in the metro area, a cultural understanding of spirituality, the land, the people, all earthly creatures.”

Eventually, Four Winds American Indian Council applied for nonprofit status. When that status was granted in late 2014, Four Winds was in a position to receive donated property. Though some Four Winds members still felt uncomfortable working within the Euro-Christian understanding of land ownership, in early January

2015 the Four Winds American Indian Council and a Rocky Mountain Synod task force jointly drafted a letter requesting that the synod transfer the property at Fifth and Bannock to Four Winds.

In late January, members of the Four Winds American Indian Council met with the Rocky Mountain Synod Council at the office of Bishop Gonia. Tinker remembers that the council members again shared stories about the Four Winds community. The synod “heard how that’s Indian culture there: we married people there, we buried people there, we celebrated sobriety anniversaries, we’ve done political planning there. We’re not giving it up. They’ll have to come and remove a circle of protesters. We didn’t tell them that until right at the end of the couple hours, ‘By the way, you need to know up front that we’re not going anywhere.’”

After the meeting, the synod council voted unanimously to transfer the deed from the synod to Four Winds. In March, a ceremony took place at Four Winds to mark the transfer. Williams described the occasion:

Sage, the peace pipe, the drums, songs, prayers, and voices of the native people brought the presence of the Great Spirit. A hymn, “Spirit of Gentleness,” was sung, gifts were exchanged, the deed was given over, and yes, the overwhelming sense was one of reparations. I spoke not of donating, but of returning sacred land to my American Indian brothers and sisters, as it never belonged to us in the first place.

Bishop Gonia echoed Williams’s words about the origins of the land. “The white American thing would be to make a profit off this building, which was sitting in a critical spot in Denver and could have netted possibly a million dollars. But it wasn’t the right thing to do. The right thing to do is to recognize that the ministry that had been taking place there for the last 20 years really represented the origins of that land to begin with.”

Tinker spoke with quiet awe as he placed the return of the land in a larger context.

To give the land back to the Four Winds American Indian Council . . . it was a stunning thing. And that becomes a role model to the rest of the euro-colonial world, the colonizer world. What churches in the United States are not on Indian land? What universities are not on Indian land? What homes

are not on Indian land? For them to decide to give it to us was absolutely remarkable.

But Tinker said he did not like to use the term *reconciliation* for such a step.

Christians like to talk about reconciliation . . . *re-concile*, to concile again. And Indians won't have it. We aren't conciled, we were never conciled. We were pushed and pushed out of our lands, our people killed, our cultures and languages destroyed. When they talk about reconciliation, what Christians are really saying is, "Can you forgive us for when we took the land?" The bottom line is, "Can we keep the land in good conscience?"

So "reconciliation" is not about the Indians, but about the guilt Christians feel. Sorry, it's not that easy. Our job is not to make you feel good. After you committed mass genocide, the only possible reparation is land.

It's really important to understand that Indian people are never going to be satisfied with financial reparations for the loss of one and a half billion acres of land. Even if we were to receive the original pricing for one and a half billion acres, and the compound interest since then . . . well, there's just not enough money to do that. And we don't want it anyway. The only thing that's going to make right that terrible, terrible wrong is to return the land.

Hearing the deeply felt and strongly argued words of Tinker, Woodcock, and Roosevelt-Morris prompted me to ask for the first time, "Whose land am I on?" It didn't take long to find out. I typed the name of my rural Illinois town into <https://native-land.ca/> and in less than a second the map zoomed in to where I live and told me: "You are on the land of the Peoria, Bodéwadmikiwen (Potawatomi), Miami, and Oceti Šakówin (Sioux)."

I am still in the process of figuring out how to act upon this knowledge. At the very least, I will follow the lead of the organizers of the *hoo'eibii3ihiit* feast and repeat to myself and others at every opportunity: I acknowledge and honor the tribes of the area, Peoria, Potawatomi, Miami, and Sioux, including traditional custodians, elders past, present and future, and all of our plant and animal relatives of the lands on which I live and am nourished by.

Read [Jolynne Locust Woodcock](#) and [Sky Roosevelt-Morris](#) on the meaning of Four Winds.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Decolonized sacred land.”