

Iliff School of Theology reckons with grisly past

by [Jim Patterson](#) in the [November 18, 2020](#) issue



Tink Tinker at the 2012 United Methodist General Conference. (Photo by Mike DuBose, UMNS)

For 80 years, a book about Christianity bound in the tanned skin of a murdered Lenape Indian was displayed in a glass case outside the library at the Iliff School of Theology, a United Methodist seminary in Denver, Colorado.

Donated in 1893 by R. M. Barns, a Methodist minister, the book was written in Latin and appears to have been considered a unique curiosity. In a 1934 story, the Rocky Mountain News called it “a priceless vestment for the teachings of brotherly love.”

In 1974, assistant librarian Jerry Campbell removed the book's cover with a blade. "I remember thinking, 'Good grief, this is the skin of a human being,'" he said. "This is a terrible thing to have here and be kind of celebrating it."

Iliff transferred the cover to the American Indian Movement of Colorado, which planned to give the remains a proper burial. Smith Jameson Jones Jr., the school's president at the time, insisted there be no publicity about the transfer ceremony, even requiring those in attendance to sign nondisclosure agreements.

The rest of the book was put in a safe in the library, and Jones ordered that the issue not be discussed among faculty and staff members.

There it sat until Tink Tinker, a member of the Osage Nation, arrived at Iliff in 1985 to teach American Indian cultures, history, and religious traditions. A fellow faculty member, Clarence Snelling, informed him about the book saga.

Tinker said his reaction was "nausea" and "revulsion." He considered walking away from the job. But he had spent all his savings to move to Denver and put a down payment on a house. He wasn't aware of any other jobs that fit his qualifications.

He stayed away until the weekend, when he came back to "work out the whole building with one of our smoking medicines," he said. "I was able to walk through the whole building—not through private offices—but most classrooms and the areas to which I had a key. I was able to speak with the man whose skin was flayed and tanned, and ask his permission to be in that place and talk to people about these things."

Tinker decided he would remain, but he wouldn't be silent about the book hidden away in the library vault.

"I felt I could be a burr under Iliff's saddle," he said.

Tinker started writing and teaching about the book, and in 2015, some Iliff students formed the Native American Justice Council to raise awareness.

"The students were aghast," Tinker said. "Faculty were supportive, but my colleagues of color understood much more clearly than my white colleagues."

There were five Iliff presidents from 1981 to 2013 as the book remained hidden from view. But when Thomas V. Wolfe arrived as president in 2013, he decided the book

and its legacy should be faced.

“I thought this was an opportunity for . . . Iliff to tell the truth about it and turn upside down the tendency for institutions to protect their brand by trying to hide these things,” Wolfe said. “Instead, let’s be honest about it and talk about it.”

Since then, Iliff has held two conferences about the book, both focused on Indigenous speakers. Plans for a third gathering were postponed by the coronavirus pandemic, but ideas are circulating about ways the school can reach out to Indigenous communities.

“In my discussions with Tink Tinker, we came to the agreement that this could be a real teaching moment,” said Curtis Zunigha, director of cultural resources for the Delaware Tribe of Indians. The Delaware Tribe is one of several groups that are descendants of the Lenape Indians.

“That book is a powerful symbol, and not just about one individual whose skin might have come from his back to make a book,” he said. “That represents the true history of the Americas and the attitude taken by the conqueror . . . and it still exists today. That’s the teachable moment I’m talking about.”

Zunigha envisions a new curriculum at Iliff that studies the roots of racial prejudice back to the 15th century. About \$200,000 has been raised for a chair honoring Tinker, now retired, and it’s hoped that \$2 million will eventually be raised to help finance such an effort.

There has also been talk about an annual event focusing on Indigenous concerns, along with remembering the story of the book covered with human skin, Tinker said.

“I want to make sure that Iliff, a hundred years from now, still remembers that we did that.”