

Evangelical Covenant Church rebukes doctrine of discovery at annual meeting

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#) in the [July 28, 2021](#) issue



TJ Smith (right), president of the Indigenous Ministers Association, and John Wenrich, president of the Evangelical Covenant Church, embrace after ECC delegates vote to repudiate the doctrine of discovery. (Photo by Ivan Segura/Evangelical Covenant Church)

The Evangelical Covenant Church became the latest Protestant denomination in the United States to repudiate the doctrine of discovery, the theological justification that allowed the discovery and domination by European Christians of lands already inhabited by Indigenous peoples.

Delegates at the ECC annual meeting voted overwhelmingly (84 percent) on June 25 to approve a resolution acknowledging the damage done to Indigenous peoples in the Americas by taking their land and rights and to lament the church's complicity in the continuing effects of that history.

"After 125 years, the healing is beginning in the Evangelical Covenant Church, and I'm grateful to be starting this journey with you today," TJ Smith, president of the Indigenous Ministers Association, said in an emotional speech after the vote was taken.

While the ECC has been working on its resolution for the past five years, its action came the day after the Cowessess First Nation announced it had found indications of at least 751 unmarked graves near the former Marieval Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan.

Weeks earlier, the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation used ground-penetrating radar to confirm the remains of 215 children, some as young as three years old, on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School

in British Columbia. Kamloops was opened by the Roman Catholic Church in 1890 and became the largest school in Canada's Indian Affairs residential school system, with enrollment peaking at 500 students in the early 1950s, according to the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc.

Smith, who is Lakota, and others drew a line from the doctrine of discovery to what were known as Indian residential schools in Canada and Indian boarding schools in the United States.

"Please understand this isn't just Canada," he said.

The doctrine of discovery began as a series of 15th-century papal edicts and later was enshrined in the 1823 Supreme Court decision *Johnson v. M'Intosh*, which established that the US government, not Native American nations, determined ownership of property.

That doctrine led to action, including the "violent assimilation of Native children in Indian boarding schools," said Lenore Three Stars, a Lakota speaker and public theologian who shared remarks with the ECC gathering by video. Children were removed from their homes to attend boarding schools operated under the motto "kill the Indian, save the man."

"Over time, practice affected institutionalized injustice, which persists today," Three Stars said.

It's important for the church to know and lament that history, said Curtis Ivanoff, who is Iñupiat and superintendent of the ECC Alaska Conference.

"That its beginnings can be traced to papal decrees means the church had a direct hand in launching this belief and practice. For this reason alone, it serves us well to shine light on this history, to not only remember, but as fellow ambassadors of Jesus,

who has given us the ministry of reconciliation, to renounce such evil,” Ivanoff said.

In 2015, Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission released a report on the history and legacy of Canada’s residential school system, which came after six years of investigation.

One of the commission’s accompanying calls to action asked the pope to come to Canada within the year to apologize to Indigenous peoples there for the Catholic Church’s role in administering residential schools.

“We call upon the Pope to issue an apology to Survivors, their families, and communities for the Roman Catholic Church’s role in the spiritual, cultural, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children in Catholic-run residential schools,” it read.

In June, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau reiterated that call for an apology in Canada from Pope Francis.

But, Smith told delegates at the ECC annual meeting, “in the US, we haven’t done that. We’re invisible. They don’t even care enough to know.”

Canada operated more than 130 residential schools and has an idea how many children attended them, he said. Meanwhile, the United States operated 367 boarding schools.

Repudiating the doctrine of discovery is an important first step toward healing and solidarity, Smith said.

In recent years, several other denominations have taken similar actions, including the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the Unitarian Universalist Association, the United Church of Christ, the Community of Christ, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. They’ve been joined by the World Council of Churches and a number of Religious Society of Friends (Quaker) meetings.

US Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, who is Laguna Pueblo, recently announced the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, which will look into the history of boarding schools in the United States

The latest resolution by the ECC sets the table for Indigenous people to be seen and their stories heard, Smith said.

“With the passing of this resolution, you’ve advanced the Evangelical Covenant Church as a place where we as Indigenous people and populations are seen and welcomed. We’re accepted and acknowledged as who we are and who we are created to be,” he said.

“With the passing of this resolution, we can now participate and learn from you, and you can learn from us what the creator has for us.” —Religion News Service