

Navajoland pilgrimage welcomes Indigenous leaders from across Anglican Communion

by [David Paulsen](#)

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Good Shepherd Mission in Fort Defiance, Arizona (Photo courtesy of Good Shepherd Mission)

Nearly three dozen Anglicans and Episcopalians representing Indigenous cultures from around the world have gathered in the Episcopal [Missionary Diocese of Navajoland](#) to begin a weeklong pilgrimage intended to deepen cross-cultural relationships while celebrating Navajoland's recent [elevation to diocesan status](#).

The 34 pilgrims began arriving July 31 at Navajo Nation, the 27,000-square-mile reservation that includes parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Their August 1-9

itinerary will include stops at Episcopal congregations and cultural landmarks in each of the Navajoland diocese's regions.

The pilgrimage was organized by Don Tamihere of the [Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia](#) in collaboration with Cornelia Eaton, Navajoland's canon to the ordinary, who will lead participants on their journey. Other participants include Martinez Santos Bassotto, the presiding bishop and primate of the [Anglican Episcopal Church of Brazil](#), and Chris Harper, [national Indigenous Anglican archbishop](#) of the Anglican Church of Canada.

Eaton, in a July 31 interview, said the pilgrimage was designed to be "packed full of stories," to be shared by members of the hosting Navajo communities and their Indigenous visitors. "I think that's the best way to get to know each other," she said. "We'll share around a lot of our culture and traditions and our faith."

She and Tamihere first talked of organizing such a pilgrimage in 2023 while attending an [Indigenous theological gathering in New Zealand](#). The Anglican province there is [organized around three parallel cultural streams](#), or tikanga: Māori, New Zealander, and Polynesian. Tamihere, head of the Tikanga Māori, is one of the province's three co-equal primates.

"A pilgrimage is a sacred journey undertaken with intention, reflection, and reverence," Tamihere said in a written message welcoming his fellow pilgrims. Their visit to Navajoland is "an opportunity to walk prayerfully through landscapes rich in spirit, history and meaning while deepening our connection to God and one another."

He also described the pilgrimage as "a collective celebration of the Diocese of Navajoland's formal recognition." Navajoland was created in 1977 as an area mission of the Episcopal Church. In 2024, [the 81st general convention authorized](#) its elevation to missionary diocese status, allowing it to call its own bishop. That status was formalized in June 2025 when the executive council approved Navajoland's new constitution. It soon [will launch a bishop search](#).

"This milestone reflects a relationship that has been nurtured over many years built on trust, shared prayer, and deep respect for Indigenous ways of life and leadership," Tamihere said in his message to pilgrimage participants.

The past year has been an exciting time for Navajo Episcopalians, Eaton said, and that excitement was heightened by their preparations to welcome Indigenous pilgrims from other Anglican provinces.

“They’re really coming here to celebrate with us, to support us, to be in solidarity with us,” she said. “It really is quite a gift that we’re being acknowledged in this way by the Anglican Communion.”

Sean Rowe, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, was unable to join in person, but he offered a written statement welcoming the pilgrims to this newest diocese of the Episcopal Church.

“I celebrate this opportunity for the people of Navajoland to host a pilgrimage with our Indigenous and Anglican siblings from around the globe,” Rowe said in the statement. “May this be a time of fruitful exchange and reflection as you celebrate the new Missionary Diocese of Navajoland—and a source of great encouragement for Indigenous leadership in the church.”

The pilgrimage began August 1 at Good Shepherd Mission in Fort Defiance, Arizona. Other early stops will include the Navajo Nation Museum in nearby Window Rock, and Canyon de Chelly National Monument and Spider Rock, a sacred landmark in Navajo history and culture. Other stops will include St. Christopher’s Mission in Bluff, Utah, and Episcopal congregations in the Farmington, New Mexico, area, as well as the diocese’s [Hozho Wellness Center](#).

Each day, pilgrims will eat community meals of local staples, such as lamb stew, fry bread, and Navajo tacos. Their travels will conclude August 9 with a stop west of Navajo Nation near Albuquerque, New Mexico, at Santuario de Chimayó, where they will be led in prayer by Pennsylvania Bishop Daniel Gutiérrez, a New Mexico native and president of the Anglican Communion Compass Rose Society.

Tamihere and Eaton also have scheduled time for talking circles, where participants can “vision together” by sharing stories, ministries, and Indigenous knowledge, Eaton said.

“I look forward to meeting up with them and helping them to see firsthand the culture and spirituality of the Navajo people,” Eaton said. —Episcopal News Service