

4a – A Plea for Forgiveness

Beginning in colonial times, White Americans attempted to Christianize Indians, believing that Native forms of worship were primitive and barbaric. Although some Indians' conversion to Christianity was voluntary and genuine, Native adoption of the Christian religion was often coerced or used by the U.S. government as a bargaining tool: Those who embraced Christianity - such as the Ponca - were granted special benefits and protections. In 1987, Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and other Christian denominations in the Pacific Northwest issued an apology to the region's tribal councils for the part their churches played in the religious oppression of America's Native peoples.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This is a formal apology on behalf of our churches for their long-standing participation in the destruction of traditional Native American spiritual practices. We call upon our people for recognition of and respect for your traditional ways of life and for protection of your sacred places and ceremonial objects. We have frequently been unconscious and insensitive and have not come to your aid when you have been victimized by unjust Federal policies and practices. In many other circumstances we reflected the rampant racism and prejudice of the dominant culture with which we too willingly identified. During the 200th Anniversary year of the United States Constitution we, as leaders of our churches in the Pacific Northwest, extend our apology. We ask for your forgiveness and blessing. ...

[W]e call upon the people of our denominations and fellowships to a commitment of mutual support in your efforts to reclaim and protect the legacy of your own traditional spiritual teachings.

*This article is reprinted by from the Teaching Tolerance curriculum kit
A Place at the Table.*