

National Day of Remembrance for Indian Boarding Schools

On September 28, native and non-native people across the United States and Canada pause to remember that from the years 1819-1969, countless indigenous children were taken from their homes and placed in boarding schools, operated either by the US government or as mission schools partially funded by the government, by various Christian denominations. One of the government funded mission schools was operated by the Norwegian Lutheran Church—a predecessor body to the ELCA—Bethany Indian Mission at Wittenberg, Wisconsin.



Indian children often were placed in schools far from their families and their tribes in an effort to assimilate them to the dominant culture. They were forced to have western haircuts, made to wear clothing unfamiliar to them, and forbidden to speak in their native language. They were made to learn the cultural and religious values of white settlers and were not allowed to engage in any of the ceremonial or religious practices of their elders. Unable to learn practices germane to their tribal way of life, like ricing, maple sugaring, hunting and fishing, they were instead taught how to sew, cook, clean, and work on farms, trained to be a kind of servant class in white America.

The boarding school motto was “Kill the Indian and Save the Man (sic).”

Often, boarding schools were also places of strict discipline. Racism was endemic. Physical and sexual abuse were common. Many native children tried to run away. Others died while at boarding schools. The burial sites of a large number of children still have not yet been identified.

In recent years, we’ve come to recognize that we, in the Christian church, either condoned or actively participated in operating these boarding schools, which have led to so much suffering.

The damage inflicted on our indigenous neighbors because of the boarding schools is incalculable. Generations have struggled to regain their sense of worth and identity as native people. As they go about their healing, it is our calling as people of God to support them.

To that end, we encourage each congregation of the Northern Great Lakes Synod to observe Remembrance Day on a Sunday near September 28, by including prayers for the survivors and those who have gone missing in the worship liturgy.

Orange is the color of Remembrance Day. Invite worshippers on that day to wear orange in solidarity with our indigenous neighbors. Any orange top or shirt is just fine, or you buy a t-shirt through the link at ELCA.org or our Facebook page are specifically designed for this national recognition and support the ongoing work of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS). "The first and only national organization whose purpose is to advocate on behalf of Native peoples impacted by U.S. Indian boarding school policies. We seek truth through education and research, justice through activism and policy advocacy, and healing through programs and traditional gatherings."