



# WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
JUSTICE AND WITNESS MINISTRIES

700 Prospect Ave.  
Cleveland, OH 44115-1110  
Phone: 216.736.3700  
Fax: 216.736.3703

**M. Linda Jaramillo**  
**Executive Minister**

**Witness for Justice #661**

**December 2, 2013**

**Learn Our History**

Thanksgiving is a time for families to gather and enjoy a magnificent bounty of way too much food. It is a day when parades and football games consume most of the air time on television. It is the beginning of the weekend shopping frenzy leading us into Christmas.

However, in the midst of the excitement, we tend to forget the origin of this day. Sadly, an honest description of the people and communities who lived here first is often missing from school books. Instead, the history lessons in our schools describe the first Thanksgiving as a time when the recently arrived immigrant Pilgrims gratefully celebrated life in their newly claimed land.

What is rarely publicly acknowledged that it was a very difficult time for indigenous people – those who extended hospitality to the new arrivals without fully realizing their way of life would change forever. Little did they know the land, their cultural traditions and languages, and even their children would be taken away without their permission. Hospitality would turn into hostility and genocide as Indian nations were scattered and disenfranchised.

There are so many ways in which we could commemorate this annual holiday of Thanksgiving. One way is to finally admit Christopher Columbus did not “discover” America for Europe. It was already here with a rich cultural heritage and vibrant community life. Another way would be to learn from our mistakes by offering reparations to indigenous peoples that are acceptable to them rather than convenient for

the majority and more powerful. Telling the real truth about our history would be another way.

An immediate and practical step we could take this year as we celebrate Thanksgiving is to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery. The Doctrine of Discovery originated several centuries ago by the church in Europe who believed that they had the God given authority to claim territories in the Western hemisphere “for Christ.” It is a shameful part of our Christian heritage that vividly describes how religious elitism can destroy people’s basic spiritual practices and dismantle their culture. Unfortunately, governments have followed suit by establishing legal practices that stripped our Native American brothers and sisters of their land.

We need to learn the truth of our history. The Doctrine was the basis for the 1823 Supreme Court case claiming that the U.S. government, as a successor to Great Britain, inherited the authority over all lands within our boundaries. It would be one thing if these practices remained as part of history, but it is not so. We continue to impose the principles of the Doctrine of Discovery in making legal decisions about the property rights of American Indians, Native Hawaiians and Alaskan Natives.

We could learn so much about hospitality if we remember our brothers and sisters who extended it to all of us who are immigrants in this land. This Thanksgiving, let’s learn the truth about our history.

Note: In June of 2013, the United Church of Christ General Synod voted to join many of our faith community partners all over the world in a movement to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery. Join the movement, <http://www.ucc.org/justice/getting-to-the-root-of-it/the-doctrine-of-discovery.html>

View this and other columns: <http://bit.ly/witness4justice>

Donate to support Justice and Witness Ministries: <http://bit.ly/donatejwm>

*The United Church of Christ has more than 5,154 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.*