

The Native American – Alaskan Native Peoples Fund: Background on this effort

The 223rd General Assembly (2018) directed the Presbyterian Foundation to create an ongoing fund for urgent and immediate repairs and improvements for Native American churches and chapels.

“How did these churches get into this situation where they are needing so much repair?” This paraphrase of a Commissioner’s question at the June 2020 GA was a good question and one which many are asking as they understand the structural needs and repairs that most of the ninety-five churches and chapels need.

Background: The Presbyterian Church, USA, and its preceding denominations have been working with Native Americans since the 1600’s. The oldest remaining congregation, the Shinnecock Presbyterian Church, was established in 1741. Missionaries were sent to the tribes to convert them to Christianity, an effort to bring the Indigenous people into the American mainstream. Many of the church buildings Native American Presbyterians still use were constructed over one-hundred years ago or prior to the 1970’s. In the early part of that decade, these congregations were moved from being the responsibility of mission boards into the sphere of their local presbyteries and synods. The church buildings were not renovated nor were there many efforts to do so.

Native American Presbyterians are one of the most economically challenged constituencies in the Presbyterian Church, USA. Ninety-four of these congregations are on reservations. The Central Presbyterian Church in Phoenix, Arizona is the only one not on a reservation. Members of these congregations find work with their tribes at mostly minimum-wage positions. They do not have members who are “professionals” with the largesse to give substantially to the work of these churches. Much of their funding before the 1970’s came through the national denomination then their synods or presbyteries. Most of that funding went to the ministry needs of the congregations. Infrastructure needs were often not addressed.

The General Assembly Action in 2018, Item 10-01, *On an Initiative to Repair Critical Infrastructure Needs of the Churches and Properties in the Historic Native American and Alaskan Native Mission Field of the PC(USA)*, is the denomination’s initial effort to help these congregations address their structural needs. It directed the Presbyterian Mission Agency to *perform inventories of Native American church properties in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and to report its findings to the 224th General Assembly (2020)*. Assessments are completed and a Report presented to the 224th GA (2020).

The 224th General Assembly Action (2020) “...calls upon mid-councils with Native American churches and chapels in their bounds, as well as churches with partnerships with Native American congregations, to review this report and develop a process for repair and improvement of church properties.” It also recommends GA “Call upon mid-councils with funds that they hold to improve Native American churches and chapels to engage in funds development for Native American church property repairs, and encourage support for the Native American Church Property Fund established by the Presbyterian Foundation in 2019. The 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the PC(USA) directed the Presbyterian Foundation to create an ongoing fund for Native American Church property urgent and immediate repairs and improvements. . .”

This background information is provided to help you understand the needs of these Native American Presbyterian congregations. Most giving to these churches has helped the ministries continue their work but very little has gone toward the structural needs of their buildings. Your gifts to this Fund will help with critical repairs and are most appreciated. If you would like to give to this Fund or pass this information to others, you may use this link: <https://www.presbyterianfoundation.org/nativeamericanchurches/>

Thank you.

Irvin Porter, Associate, Native American Intercultural Congregational Support
Irv.porter@pcusa.org