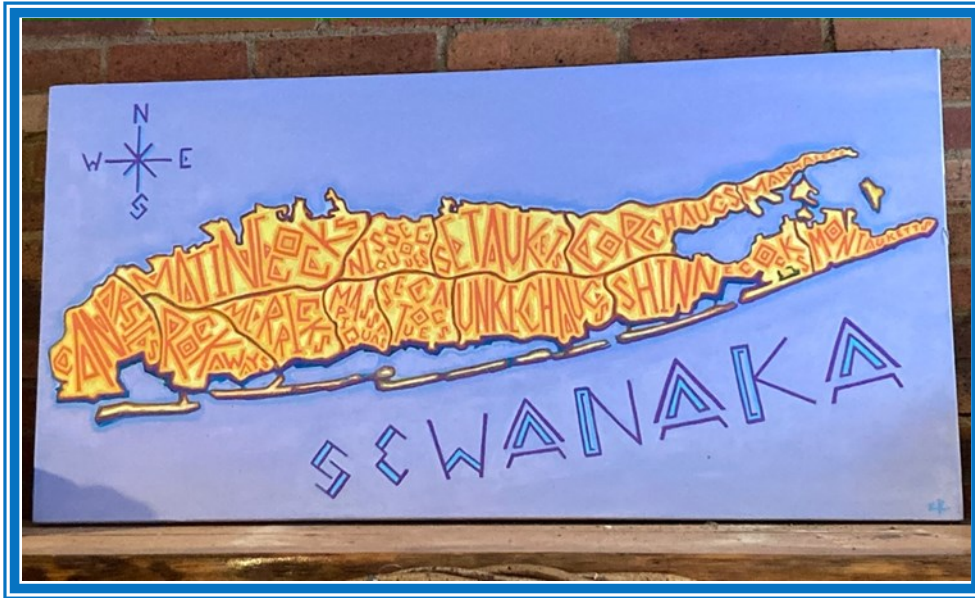




Artwork from: "The Land Claim" exhibit
Artist: Tomashi Jackson

*The Synod Team's Visit
with the Shinnecock People*





Portrait of Long Island depicting original First Nation Tribes

Report of the Synod Team's Visit with the Shinnecock People

Overview

We gathered around the sacred fire, across the street from the Presbyterian Church, on the Shinnecock Reservation, in eastern Long Island, on July 20, 2021. Present were Holly, Jennifer, Becky, and Denise from the Medicine Lodge, of Shinnecock people, and Lori, Nancy, SanDawna, Lisa, and Paul from the Synod of the Northeast.

The sacred fire was originally established to raise awareness of domestic violence and the issue of murdered and missing indigenous women. It is a safe place to talk.

Representing the Medicine Lodge, Becky gave us a sense of the history. The tribe has occupied this land for thousands of years; English settlers arrived in 1640.



Shinnecock Long House and memorial for the 215 found in mass grave discovered at former residential school in Canada

The indigenous people have never been accepted by the settler population, for whom land is a commodity and object. The native people have a visceral connection to, and affection for, this land. The settlers eventually granted an area of 8 square miles to the tribe. A copy of the deed recognizing a tract of land dedicated to the Shinnecock nation still hangs on the wall of the church. Much of that land was gradually taken from them by a centuries-long pattern of lies, force, and betrayal on the part of the European population. The largest and most grievous instance of this was in the middle of the 19th century, when the railroad appropriated a large swath of land, and much of the adjoining area was swindled away from the tribe by dubious "purchases."

The tribe was denied legal standing to challenge this until late in the 20th century. (Part of this land, originally including a sacred burial ground, is now the famous Shinnecock Hills Golf Club.)

In response, the tribe has had to train and hire lawyers trained in Constitutional Law and Indigenous Rights. They have found many allies, lately mainly through the internet. For instance, it is costing \$5m to buy back one small piece of land, called Sugarloaf, through a public land trust. (One significant financial supporter is Roger Waters, of the rock band Pink Floyd, who lives in nearby Watermill.)

The Doctrine of Discovery, authorized by Pope Alexander VI in 1493, basically allowed Europeans to simply take by force land belonging to other peoples. In 1823, the U.S. Supreme Court explicitly extended this doctrine to the United States; the doctrine continues to be invoked in property disputes to this day. The General Assembly of the PCUSA in 2018 repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery and made a series of recommendations mainly directed at GA entities.

Our hosts shared an excellent documentary film about the situation, called *Conscience Point*, which gave some of the recent history of the tribe and their interactions with local political and business leaders.

At our final meeting, the team heard specific requests from the group, which included assistance to the native shellfish industry, help with moving to renewable energy, support for “Ma’s House,” a local art center, and support for the Medicine Lodge (from which most of the people the team met with came).

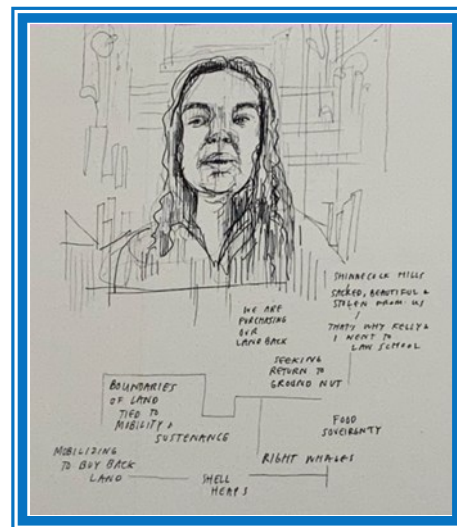
Meeting separately later, the synod team recognized that the tribe is not a monolithic or centralized entity. There are many different factions and opinions on the reservation. The group we met with was only one of these. We did not, for instance, hear from anyone associated with the Shinnecock Presbyterian Church, located on the reservation, a congregation of the Presbytery of Long Island. There were also clearly complex and long-standing relationship issues.

At the same time, the stories we heard were moving and revealed a unique situation of cultural collision, with the indigenous people invariably bearing the brunt of oppression, violence, and exploitation. The history we learned was completely plausible. The requests we heard were not exorbitant or unreasonable. We felt we had at least a positive beginning for an ongoing conversation.

Paul Rack

Reflections

Where did I see God today was the leading question during our visit to the Shinnecock Nation. The stories of their experiences of centuries of oppression and genocide rung familiar. As I listened, I recalled similar stories from my ancestors that endured years of racial segregation and oppression in the United States. I was surprised to learn that the Shinnecock people were of mixed heritage First Nation People and African Americans living in the region. The dark hue of their skin made them familiar to me in many ways. These people looked like my relatives and me. I had a comfortableness that I did not expect. I felt somehow, I knew these people, and they knew me. Yet, we were strangers meeting for the first time, except our similar narratives of oppression and struggle in the United States connected us deeply. It was that familiarity and less our connection as Presbyterians that I noticed.



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What is manifest destiny? Had God willed that this group of people become the servant class of the rich? Was the battle over land inevitable? Is reparation possible? What is the role of the Church now? These questions were at the forefront of my mind during the visit. The Hamptons is an area of natural beauty. Its citizens are the Natives and the exceptionally rich. The two groups live in different worlds. Our host pointed out the pattern of extreme greed and overconsumption. The phrase "when is enough, ever enough" was voiced repeatedly.

We were there to make sense out of a century of unfulfilled promises and in many ways repent of the Church's complicity in years of oppression. We wanted to know how to be allies to the Nation. We were there to build relationships. We were there to say that things could be different boldly.

SanDawna Gaulman Ashley



Shinnecock Presbyterian Church



Shinnecock Monument on Sunrise Highway, Long Island

The stories that they shared were filled with pain, suffering and anger, but they were buttressed by the belief that they would prevail, that they would in the fullness of time regain control of their lands and sacred sites. They spoke with the resolve of people who understand it to be their responsibility to fight for the land and preserve it not just for the next generation of Shinnecock people, but for all people. These women were the embodiment of perseverance and resilience. They described racism and discrimination directed towards them by the surrounding community, who complain that Shinnecock tribal monuments, placed on tribal lands near the highway are unsightly. They described lack of educational opportunity and an inability to access basic services that most Americans take for granted. They described the shock and pain of being denigrated and reduced to stereotypes of Native pathology. They described the ongoing trauma of living in poverty, next to one of the wealthiest communities in the country. They described the indignity of having members of that community deny their humanity and even their right to exist on lands that their people have lived on for thousands of years.

Setting out on the visit, I don't know what I expected to find, or what I expected to see, but I did not expect to find myself. I wasn't prepared to see and hear the experiences of black people echoing in their tales, and for the first time I saw and understood more clearly the plight of native communities. We asked each other to be on the lookout for God's presence throughout the trip. Each day I saw God in the strength, perseverance, and hope of these women and their people. *Lori Hylton*



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Upon meeting Rev. Holly Thompson, there was an ease and a desperation that were evident to me. Her obvious love for the place where her ancestors traveled and lived was remarkable to see. The idea that it didn't matter how profitable her situation could be, honoring her people and her heritage was more important. It was easy to see God in her actions. Juxtaposed the very nature of the Shinnecock people against the American values of getting ahead, of making a life easier than your parents, of attaining wealth, left me wondering why we couldn't all live with the values of the Shinnecock Nation.

The attempts to be within but not absorbed by those living in the Hamptons, left a wound and sore that hurt so deeply that it was evident to those who listened, and, in some way, we couldn't help but feel that pain as well. The history of the Shinnecock people, how the Americans found their way to those shores and the overrunning of the Shinnecock people and housing away from their economic stream and enclosure on the reservation; is a sad tale of First Nation People. The Shinnecock people we met have struggled, but they believe in God, the creator of everything. Their daily personal worship of the ancestors, the land and the Creator are to be emulated not annihilated. They could be a strong constituent of our Synod. They desire to be fully incorporated in our body. There is much to learn from their temperament and determination. There are many ways to see God in their daily living, and I am honored to have spent time with them. *Lisa Baker*



Sacred fire across from
Shinnecock Presbyterian Church

We began the day sitting on a small piece of land at the corner of two streets where a fire pit had been built surrounded by seats. By its use and by the way it is respected within the community, this small plot of grass on a street corner was transformed into a sacred space where people gather to share their joys, their sorrows, their challenges, their community struggles, their plans for building up the community or whatever is on their hearts or minds. The idea was conceived by one of the women leaders. As we sat, I began to feel the sacredness of this space.

Where is God in this place? Everywhere. There is a sacredness about how people honor Shinnecock values and remain true to them today. We met two men who created and tend clam and oyster beds. They never spoke of the profit motive. Instead, they explained how clams and oysters are grown and shared with us the ecological gifts these living creatures provide by helping to filter the waters in which they grow. They gave us pieces of jewelry crafted from shells. It felt as if the jewelry was a way to honor the gifts of creation.

Their conversations with us showed that their connection to this work was far more than a job. While the clams and oysters provide food for people and it is a way of making a living, these two men appeared to be dedicated caretakers of what their Spirit God has created and provided. It struck me as a far cry from the dominion over the land and all creatures that we see today among White people who control the corporations and companies that are destroying our earth. *Nancy Talbot*



Mussle bed



In the End . . .

After two days of touring the area and sharing stories, we settled on the following path forward. The visit was in part a response to the 222 General Assembly mandate for the Church to repudiate and own its complicity in the Doctrine of Discovery. Additionally, the visit aligned with our values as a Matthew 25 Synod. We pledged our commitment to raise congregational awareness on the issues of:

- ◆ Supporting Native Americans in their ongoing efforts for sovereignty and fundamental human rights.
- ◆ Developing relationships with tribal nations, especially those in their immediate communities.

This joint report will be shared with Synod Commissioners at the September meeting. Additionally, the Synod will be invited to view together the documentary *On Conscious Point*. During Come to the Table a panel discussion featuring Native leaders within the Synod will provide an opportunity for additional learning. The panel will include a discussion on the Doctrine of Discovery recommended action items. A Woman's Retreat to learn from the Shinnecock Women will be planned separately.



Shinnecock Bay