

1 **Overture**

2  
3 **On Directing the Office of the General Assembly to Issue**  
4 **Apologies and Reparations for the Racist Closure**  
5 **of the Memorial Presbyterian Church, Juneau, Alaska**  
6

7 **APPROVED BY COUNCIL OF NORTHERN LIGHT UNITED CHURCH**  
8 **FOR SUBMISSION TO THE NORTHWEST COAST PRESBYTERY**  
9

10 **Recommendations**

11  
12 The Presbytery of the Northwest Coast, in unity with and support of the Northern Light United  
13 Church (“NLUC”) and its Native Ministries Committee, overtures the 225th General Assembly  
14 (2022) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) (“PC(USA)”), to work to eliminate all forms of White  
15 supremacy and racism in its institutions and, specifically, **to meaningfully address the wounds**  
16 **inflicted on Alaska Natives**, who were directly impacted by the sin of the unwarranted 1963  
17 closure of the Memorial Presbyterian Church,<sup>1</sup> a thriving, multiethnic, intercultural church in  
18 Juneau, Alaska, by taking the following actions directly and through the Office of the General  
19 Assembly:

- 20  
21 1. In keeping with the spirit to ‘confess complicity and repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery’ as  
22 called for in “The Doctrine of Discovery: A Review of Its Origins and Implications for  
23 Congregations in the PC(USA) and Support for Native American Sovereignty (2018),”  
24 adopted by the 223<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly, acknowledge and apologize for the harms inflicted  
25 by:  
26  
27 a. Acknowledging culpability and silence regarding the closure of the Memorial  
28 Presbyterian Church and the resulting harm to the community.<sup>2</sup>  
29  
30 b. Acknowledging and confessing that the Alaska Presbytery’s stated justification for  
31 closure – to halt segregation by establishing a “strong and united church of all races  
32 and classes” – merely substituted assimilationist racism for the previous practice of  
33 segregationist racism. While the Memorial Church was established to serve the  
34 Tlingit community, it had evolved under Dr. Soboleff’s leadership into a multiethnic,  
35 intercultural church whose members were callously and ironically directed by the

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<sup>1</sup> Members of the Memorial Presbyterian Church most often referred to their church as the “Memorial Church,” which is how it is also most commonly referred to now.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/Doctrine-of-Discovery-Report-to-the-223rd-GA-2018-FINALIZED-COPY\\_As-Approved.pdf](https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/Doctrine-of-Discovery-Report-to-the-223rd-GA-2018-FINALIZED-COPY_As-Approved.pdf)

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- 1 Alaska Presbytery<sup>3</sup> to join the virtually all-White Northern Light Presbyterian Church  
2 (“NLPC”).  
3
- 4 c. Acknowledging that the cessation of National Mission Board funding for the  
5 Memorial Church – funding that was still being provided for other predominantly  
6 White Presbyterian churches in Southeast Alaska – left the Memorial Church  
7 congregation without viable options for continuance.  
8
- 9 d. Offering posthumous apology, acknowledgement, and confession in public ceremony,  
10 attended by national and regional church officials, to the late Rev. Dr. Soboleff, Sr.,  
11 who served as the Memorial Church’s pastor for twenty-two years, for the act of  
12 spiritual abuse committed by the Presbyterian Church’s decision of closure, which  
13 was sadly aligned with nationwide racism toward Alaska Natives, Native Americans,  
14 and other people of color.  
15
- 16 e. Offering further apology for closing the Memorial Church without national church  
17 leaders offering ceremonial protocols, expressions of regret, or formal  
18 acknowledgements of the thriving nature of the Memorial Church. Dr. Soboleff was  
19 left by himself to announce the closure of the Memorial Church; a closure that had  
20 been engineered by the Board of Missions and the Alaska Presbytery.  
21
- 22 f. In similar vein, providing written apology to Dr. Soboleff’s family, the Memorial  
23 Church’s members and their descendants, and the Alaska Native communities  
24 profoundly impacted by the ministry and outreach of the Memorial Church through  
25 communications directed to the family members, the member churches of the Alaska  
26 Presbytery in 1963 (or their successors), the Grand Camp of the Alaska Native  
27 Brotherhood and Sisterhood, the federally recognized tribes in Southeast Alaska, and  
28 the Alaska Federation of Natives. The positive role the Memorial Church played in  
29 Juneau and throughout the region extended far beyond the formal membership of the  
30 Memorial Church congregation.  
31
- 32 g. In addition to these public ceremonies and written communications, calling upon  
33 national and regional church representatives to hold private meetings with the family  
34 of Dr. Soboleff and the Alaska Native members of NLUC, along with Native leaders  
35 in the larger Juneau community.  
36
- 37 h. Taking each of the actions identified in close collaboration with NLUC Native  
38 Ministries Committee and other Native leaders to assure that they are carried out in  
39 accordance with Tlingit protocol.  
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<sup>3</sup> The Alaska Presbytery, a predecessor to the Northwest Coast Presbytery, served all the Presbyterian churches in Southeast Alaska, which included NLPC.

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- 1 2. Demonstrate repentance through meaningful reparative actions, without which words of  
2 apology ring hollow, including the following:  
3
- 4 a. Increase available resources and opportunities for Alaska Natives and other  
5 Indigenous people to pursue ministry in the PC(USA) and other positions of church  
6 leadership, including providing scholarship funds and mentorship for these  
7 individuals, and  
8
  - 9 b. Uphold “primarily people of color congregations” in the PC(USA) that, to this day,  
10 continue to be “marginalized by a structure that is not responding to the voices of its  
11 people of color for inclusion and equity,” by adopting the Racial Equity Advocacy  
12 Committee’s “A Resolution Addressing the Lack of Installed Pastoral Leadership in  
13 People of Color Congregations in the PC(USA).”<sup>4</sup>  
14
  - 15 c. In keeping with the Native American Coordinating Council’s proclamation of “The  
16 Decade of Confession and Repentance” in which the PC(USA) “turns around and  
17 walks in the other direction” from the Doctrine of Discovery, direct the Presbyterian  
18 Mission Agency to donate, in the name of Memorial Presbyterian Church, \$100,000  
19 to the Sealaska Heritage Institute for Indigenous language revitalization efforts.<sup>5</sup>  
20
  - 21 d. Direct the Presbyterian Mission Agency to donate \$200,000, in the name of the  
22 Memorial Presbyterian Church, to the Presbyterian Foundation *Native American*  
23 *Church Property Fund*, and urge the presbyteries and congregations of the PC(USA)  
24 also to donate in the name of the Memorial Presbyterian Church or present and past  
25 churches of other Native Americans and other people of color important to them.  
26
  - 27 e. Encourage, and take active measures, to renew the collective commitments of the  
28 PC(USA), including presbyteries and congregations, to:  
29
    - 30 i. dismantle systemic racism;
    - 31
    - 32 ii. amplify the voices of clergy and lay members of churches “primarily people  
33 of color congregations;” and  
34  
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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000584>

<sup>5</sup> Native American Coordinating Council Report to GA 224, Recommendation 4.g.: “Invest in the revitalization of Indigenous languages by committing resources to support tribal efforts to revitalize Indigenous languages as they see fit.”

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- 1           iii.    develop and enhance models of engagement and accountability for the  
2           national church and presbyteries in their interactions with churches of  
3           “primarily people of color congregations” so that difficult decisions about  
4           support and funding are made in a spirit that recognizes the importance and  
5           contributions of these congregations to the PC(USA), which outweigh  
6           superficial considerations of their membership numbers or perceived lack of  
7           financial resources.  
8
  
- 9           f.    Provide financial resources to, and engage with, the City and Borough of Juneau,  
10          directly or through the Northwest Coast Presbytery and NLUC, for a highly visible  
11          recognition of the Memorial Presbyterian Church to be placed at the Memorial  
12          Presbyterian Church’s former location. This recognition would be conceived and  
13          approved by the Native Ministries Committee of NLUC, in collaboration with local  
14          partners, to encourage recognition of the vitality of the Memorial Church and the  
15          harm caused by its closure.  
16

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1 **Rationale**

2

3 **Introduction**

4

5 In 1963, the Alaska Presbytery, with the concurrence of the Presbyterian Church’s Board of  
6 National Missions, closed the Memorial Presbyterian Church in Juneau, Alaska. The forced  
7 closure of this thriving, multiethnic, intercultural church was an egregious act of spiritual abuse  
8 committed in alignment with the prevailing White racist treatment of Alaska Natives, statewide,  
9 and of Native Americans, nationwide.

10

11 Juneau and virtually all of Southeast Alaska is Lingit Aani, the homeland of the Tlingit. The  
12 Tlingit people’s connection to the land is sacred, with an individual’s identity being tied to their  
13 clan’s ancestral lands. Disrespecting the Tlingit people and their communal ownership of land,  
14 Russians, English and Americans explored, occupied, assumed individual ownership under  
15 Western law, and extracted riches from Lingit Aani. European-American history in Lingit Aani  
16 is a “history of theft.”<sup>6</sup> The Presbyterian Church participated in this settler-colonial history in  
17 Alaska, as elsewhere: “To Christianize is to Americanize, and to Americanize is to  
18 Christianize.”<sup>7</sup> The closing of Memorial Presbyterian Church, and the subsequent sale of its  
19 property, furthered the consequences of White encroachment, as both land and spiritual well-  
20 being were lost.

21

22 In response to these disruptive events and their continuing effects, Indigenous communities,  
23 including Christians and non-Christians, continue to seek justice, which must include repair and  
24 equity in Southeast Alaska and beyond. As the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of  
25 Indigenous Peoples affirms, humanity is faced with an

26

27 urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples  
28 which derive from their political, economic, and social structures and from their  
29 cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, and especially their rights  
30 to their lands, territories and resources.<sup>8</sup>

31

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<sup>6</sup> Statement by Clarence “Butch” Laiti, President of Douglas Indian Association, a federally recognized Indian tribe in Juneau, Alaska, during a “Juneau Voices” interview.

<sup>7</sup> In the documentary, “Blest Be the Tie That Binds, Presbyterian Missions in Southeast Alaska, and retired Teaching Elder Janice Stamper used this phrase attributable to Os Guinness, *The Last Christian on Earth: Uncover the Enemy’s Plot to Undermine the Church*, Baker Books, 2010. See also Mauro, Hayes Peter. *Messianic Fulfillments: Staging Indigenous Salvation in America*, University of Nebraska Press, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, <https://undocs.org/A/RES/61/295>.

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1 To date, the full extent of the damage inflicted on Indigenous communities has yet to be repaired  
2 by Presbyterians. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PC(USA)) must acknowledge its errors and  
3 recognize the Alaska Native and Native American values it trampled. One step in this process is  
4 to offer apology and reparations for the forced closure of Memorial Presbyterian Church.<sup>9</sup>

5

6 **History of the Presbyterian Mission Churches in Juneau with Emphasis on the Memorial**  
7 **Presbyterian Church<sup>10</sup> and its Closure**

8

9 In 1881, Presbyterian missionaries began evangelism efforts in Juneau at Auk Village, a former  
10 summer village of the A’akw Kwáan of the Tlingit Nation. White miners had converged in 1879  
11 at the summer village in their quest for gold. The initial evangelistic revival attracted both miners  
12 and Natives, but the church’s mission work soon segregated; by the end of the decade, two  
13 churches were established, one for Natives and another for Whites. The emphasis at the White  
14 church<sup>11</sup> was to minimize the debauched behavior of the miners. The focus of the Native  
15 (Tlingit) church, (the congregation that became the Memorial Presbyterian Church), founded in  
16 1887 in the A’akw Village, now known as the Juneau Indian Village, was the same as that of all  
17 missionary activity among Indigenous inhabitants of the continent – to “Christianize and civilize  
18 the Indians.” (Minutes, UPCUSA, 1875, Part I, p. 541.)

19

20 The ministry and witness of the Presbyterian church in Juneau remained segregated for the next  
21 fifty years; minutes and papers from the White and Tlingit congregations make scant mention of  
22 each other. The only direct reference to the possibility of cooperative work was in 1905 during  
23 Northern Light Presbyterian Church (NLPC - the White church) pastorate of James Kirk, when  
24 “a proposal was made to unite all White and native [*sic*] work in Douglas and Juneau under one

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<sup>9</sup> In 1991, the Alaska Presbytery adopted a resolution that stated “we deeply regret the church’s part in the destruction of native artifacts and the church’s part in the loss of native languages.” It made no mention of the closing of Memorial Presbyterian, and it offered no reparations. The following year, a resolution was presented at the Presbytery’s annual meeting that declared that the church’s ministry had brought “many positive results to the Native American communities...” In subsequent years, both resolutions were posted on the Alaska Presbytery website. It is unclear what ongoing impact either resolution may have had on the Presbytery's life and work.”

<sup>10</sup> When established, the church was called the “Tlingit Presbyterian Church” or “Tlingit Native Presbyterian Church” with variant spellings of “Tlingit.” In 1933, it was renamed “First Presbyterian Church,” and in 1940 “Memorial Presbyterian Church.” It was sometimes also referred to as the “Juneau Indian Village Church, or the “Tlingit Church.” These names are interspersed in this Rationale to correspond to the historical events being discussed. After adopting this last name, it was commonly referred to as “Memorial Church.”

<sup>11</sup> When established, this church was called the “Log Cabin Church.” By 1899, it had been renamed the “Northern Light Presbyterian Church.” After it was united with the Juneau United Methodist Church, it was renamed “Northern Light United Church.” Throughout this Rationale, we use “NLPC” for Northern Light Presbyterian Church.

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1 minister. The NLPC session, however, decided that ‘consolidation was not for the best interests  
2 of the church and therefore inexpedient.’”<sup>12</sup>

3  
4 The missionaries’ “Christianizing and civilizing” efforts among Indigenous populations in  
5 Alaska as well as elsewhere were accomplished through suppressing Native languages, forcing  
6 converts to cease cultural observances and traditional practices, and requiring Native people to  
7 adopt European names and customs.<sup>13</sup> In Juneau, Presbyterians touted their success in so doing,  
8 citing “progress...to eradicate the elements of evil from deep-seated pagan tradition and putting  
9 in their places the laws of love and brotherhood of man.” The missionaries not only proclaimed  
10 Christ; they also preached White ways, and the rejection of Tlingit culture. “No more moccasins,  
11 no more canoes, and no more totem poles...the Alaskan native [*sic*] has made more rapid  
12 transition from the primitive state to civilization than any other people in our history.”<sup>14</sup>

13  
14 The missionaries assumed they were being “successful” in eradicating Tlingit culture and  
15 practice. In reality, Tlingit people proved resilient and translated their values and traditions into  
16 the Christian forms that had been thrust upon them. Within the forced segregation of Native  
17 church life, Native Christians infused Christian practices with Native wisdom. Their Christian  
18 faith continues to be steeped in and blended with Native cultural values that were later codified  
19 in a list of “Southeast Traditional Tribal Values”<sup>15</sup> that were developed by Tribal Elders and  
20 based largely upon the work of Dr. Walter Soboleff.

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<sup>12</sup> Mayberry, Genevieve. *Northern Light Presbyterian Church: A Brief Historical Narrative*, circa 1941,  
p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Mission and ministry with Native American Peoples: *A Historical Survey of the Last Three Centuries*,  
p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Mayberry, Genevieve. *Diamond Jubilee, Memorial Presbyterian Church*, 1962, p.4.

<sup>15</sup> Southeast Traditional Tribal Values - Our Way of Life:  
*Discipline and Obedience to the Traditions of Our Ancestors;*  
*Respect for Self, Elders and Others;*  
*Respect for Nature and Property;*  
*Patience;*  
*Pride in Family, Clan and Tradition is found in Love, Loyalty and Generosity;*  
*Be Strong in Mind, Body and Spirit;*  
*Humor;*  
*Hold Each Other Up;*  
*Listen Well and with Respect;*  
*Speak with Care;*  
*We are Stewards of the Air, Land and Sea;*  
*Reverence for Our Creator;*  
*Live in Peace and Harmony;*  
*Be Strong and Have Courage.*

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1  
2 Despite rampant and pervasive racism and discrimination in Juneau, on a personal level,  
3 kindnesses were shared among Native church members and the White missionaries, and  
4 community life grew within the church. Tlingit elder Lillian Collier was baptized in the Juneau  
5 Indian Village Presbyterian Church, and she recalls being invited along with other village youth  
6 to the missionaries David and Mary Waggoner’s home and being served blueberry juice and  
7 other refreshments.

8  
9 Tlingit elder Marie Olson also has fond memories of the Waggoners relaying that “they were  
10 really beautiful people with the Natives.” Ms. Olson went on to explain that the Waggoners  
11 were a loving couple and very welcoming.<sup>16</sup> They were glad to see Alaska Natives coming to  
12 the church. They shared good food with the church community and given the context of the  
13 depression years, the sharing of food was particularly appreciated. Ms. Olson added that the  
14 Russian Orthodox, the Salvation Army, and the Memorial Presbyterian churches were multi-  
15 racial and the three denominations intermixed with no animosity among them. The Memorial  
16 Church was also the meeting place for the local Alaska Native Brotherhood and the Alaska  
17 Native Sisterhood in their early years.

18  
19 On the systemic level, however, early Presbyterian missionaries sought to replace traditional  
20 Tlingit practices with customs that mirrored their own White Presbyterian lifestyles. Consider  
21 the words of David Waggoner:

22  
23         The missionaries have been tearing down the old social life and traditions of the  
24         people for years. The time has come when we must give them a new social life,  
25         one in harmony with Christianity.<sup>17</sup>

26  
27 Carrie Willard, another missionary affiliated with the Juneau mission, in an interview with the  
28 Home Mission Monthly, reported that the missionaries needed to sponsor frequent meetings to  
29 keep the Natives from back-sliding, to instruct them in hygiene, as well as love and marriage,  
30 and to teach them what “a true home is.” In order to keep them focused on newly imposed  
31 Christian ways, Willard acknowledged that they needed to “afford them such social pleasure as

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<sup>16</sup> The positive experiences of Ms. Collier and Ms. Olson at the Tlingit Church stand in marked contrast to the hostile reception a Native man subsequently received at NLPC referenced in footnote 24. In addition, although these encounters with the Waggoners are fondly remembered and are rightly affirmed, their individual actions did not diminish the systemic racism practiced by dominant culture structures in both church and society. Ms. Collier’s and Ms. Olson’s quotes originate from telephone conversations with Lillian Petershoare.

<sup>17</sup> Home Mission Monthly, PHS, 1907 as cited in Alison Ruth Parry’s “Their works do follow them: Tlingit women and Presbyterian missions.” 1997.



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1 might compensate for the loss of their old-time feasts and friends.”<sup>18</sup> Despite the missionaries’  
2 attempts to extinguish traditional ways, Native parishioners infused church life with the Tlingit  
3 value of respect. Many Tlingit families privately maintained Tlingit spirituality values enabling,  
4 generations later, a revitalization of the Tlingit culture and a restoration of the traditional  
5 practices.

6  
7 The importance of the Tlingit Church grew even larger when the church, newly renamed  
8 “Memorial Presbyterian Church”, moved to a new site at 8<sup>th</sup> and E (now Glacier Ave.) Streets<sup>19</sup>  
9 (where Juneau’s downtown fire station currently sits), and called in 1940 its first (and only)  
10 Native pastor, the Rev. Dr. Walter Soboleff, Sr.<sup>20</sup> During Dr. Soboleff’s twenty-two-year  
11 pastorate, congregational life flourished. Under his leadership, the Memorial Church grew to be a  
12 vibrant congregation, not only ministering to its members, but serving the whole Native  
13 community. Dr. Soboleff conducted numerous baptisms and marriage ceremonies. He supported  
14 a vital youth ministry. Living Memorial Church members and descendants describe the  
15 Memorial Church as hosting a variety of activities for youths.

16  
17 The influence of the Memorial Church also extended throughout the whole city of Juneau, and  
18 notably, the congregation began attracting non-Native as well as Native members,<sup>21</sup> even as it  
19 continued to be a vital hub for the Native Community. Dr. Soboleff was an active participant in  
20 church and community life throughout the region. His pastoral presence and community  
21 leadership were keys to this growth both within and beyond the Native community.<sup>22</sup>

22  
23 By the 1950s, the national Presbyterian Church appeared to be trying to catch up with the  
24 inclusive ministry of the Memorial Presbyterian Church, albeit with no recognition of the work  
25 of the Memorial Church. In 1955, the General Assembly officially renounced segregation, called  
26 on formerly segregated presbyteries and synods to merge, and urged congregations to open their

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<sup>18</sup> Home Mission Monthly, PHS, 1883 as cited in Alison Ruth Parry’s “Their works do follow them: Tlingit women and Presbyterian missions.” 1997.

<sup>19</sup> The Board of Missions purchased the property for \$1600 in 1938 from Mrs. Matilda Madsen Streed. Memorial Church member, Mrs. Marie Oswald, and her siblings also donated a portion of their adjacent parcel in order to enlarge the church site.

<sup>20</sup> In 1952, Dr. Soboleff received a Doctorate of Divinity from the University of Dubuque; he was also granted a Doctorate of Humanities by the University of Alaska in 1968.

<sup>21</sup> Mayberry, *Diamond Jubilee*, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> See the section of this rationale, “Legacy of Rev. Dr. Walter Soboleff, Sr.” for more on Dr. Soboleff’s positive impacts.

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1 doors to people of all races.<sup>23</sup> The General Assembly’s directives were resisted by many White  
2 congregations including Juneau’s NLPC. A Tlingit elder relayed a painful instance of  
3 discrimination to local Juneau historian Kathy Kolkhorst Ruddy. The man was praying one day  
4 in the NLPC sanctuary, and when the pastor saw him there, the pastor told him to go pray at the  
5 Tlingit church.<sup>24</sup>

6  
7 Even in the face of NLPC resistance, the Alaska Presbytery responded to the national church call  
8 for integration by proposing the creation of a “strong and united church of all races and  
9 classes”<sup>25</sup> in Juneau. But instead of featuring the Memorial Church as a model of an already  
10 integrated church, the Alaska Presbytery pursued a White supremacist, assimilationist response  
11 to integration by increasing support for the ministry of NLPC and withdrawing support from the  
12 Memorial Church. In 1959 in response to a proposal from NPLC,<sup>26</sup> it recommended that the  
13 NLPC and Memorial Presbyterian Church congregations “be encouraged to continue cooperative  
14 efforts and to hold common meetings and combined enterprises, so that mutual understanding  
15 and respect and good will may be nurtured.”<sup>27</sup>

16  
17 The Memorial Church congregation was wary of this recommendation<sup>28</sup> because simultaneously,  
18 the Alaska Presbytery, over the objection of the Memorial Church session,<sup>29</sup> granted permission  
19 for NPLC to sell its extant building and move into the same neighborhood as the Memorial

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<sup>23</sup> Efforts at the judicatory level were led by the Committee on Segregated Synods and Presbyteries. The efforts were not welcomed by some due to the White supremacist assumptions about how integration should proceed. The Dakota Presbytery, “reorganized in the 1880s as a Native American presbytery, independent of geographic boundaries” (<https://www.history.pcusa.org/collections/research-tools/guides-archival-collections/rg-375>, accessed 1/20/2021), resisted efforts to be joined to the Black Hills Presbytery, citing “lack of active efforts on the part of White churches and presbyteries toward understanding...” See 1955 Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, pp. 105-7, and follow up reports by the Committee on Segregated Synods and Presbyteries to succeeding GAs through 1962.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with the late Kathy Kolkhorst Ruddy, <https://www.aanyatxu.org/kathy-rudy>; accessed 12/30/2020.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from the Alaska Presbytery to presbyters, November 24, 1962.

<sup>26</sup> Minutes of the Alaska Presbytery, September 18, 1958.

<sup>27</sup> Minutes of the Alaska Presbytery, April 13, 1959.

<sup>28</sup> The Memorial Presbyterian Church Session expressed its disinterest in the presbytery’s merger proposal as it rightly viewed it as a precursor to withdrawing support for the Memorial Church and privileging Northern Light. In January 1959, the Memorial congregation voted to oppose merger with NLPC, Memorial Presbyterian Church Congregational Meeting minutes, January 7, 1959.

<sup>29</sup> Minutes of the Memorial Presbyterian Church Session, April 3, 1958.

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1 Presbyterian Church.<sup>30</sup> These actions boosted momentum for the Memorial Church’s eventual  
2 closure.

3  
4 During the same time that the national denomination was lending NLPC over \$200,000<sup>31</sup> for its  
5 new building, it was reducing mission support for the Memorial Church and pressing it toward  
6 self-sufficiency. In 1962, despite Memorial Church’s efforts to increase financial support from  
7 congregants, and in the midst of its celebration of 75 years of ministry, the Presbyterian Board of  
8 National Missions announced that it would cease funding the Memorial Presbyterian Church.  
9 Further, the Alaska Presbytery recommended the closure of the Memorial Presbyterian Church  
10 and urged Memorial Church members to join NLPC parishioners in their new building, built  
11 with presbytery approval just up the street from the Memorial Church facility. (NLPC was a  
12 predecessor of what is now Northern Light United Church, a PC(USA)/United Methodist Church  
13 union congregation). The recommendation to close came despite the growth of the Memorial  
14 Church congregation. During the same time period when White church officials were deciding to  
15 dissolve the congregation, the Memorial Church was adding fourteen pews to its sanctuary,  
16 confirming six young people, and receiving nine additional new members.<sup>32</sup> This was not a  
17 congregation in decline. Nevertheless, neither Dr. Soboleff nor the Memorial Church Session  
18 had an opportunity to negotiate funding options with the Board of National Missions, nor was  
19 there consideration given to alternatives to the Memorial Presbyterian Church’s closure.<sup>33</sup>

20  
21 Instead of dissolution, parishioners had every reason to anticipate a robust future for the  
22 Memorial Presbyterian Church guided by the “rare and consecrated leadership of Dr.  
23 Soboleff.”<sup>34</sup> Their expectations were given voice through Memorial Church session members  
24 who were quoted in the Memorial Church history prepared for the congregation’s 75<sup>th</sup>  
25 Anniversary observance only a few months before the closure plans were revealed:

26

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<sup>30</sup> Minutes of the Alaska Presbytery, April 15-21, 1958, September 18, 1958, April 13, 1959.

<sup>31</sup> Minutes of the Alaska Presbytery, November 8, 1960. Initial plans called for a bigger facility from the one built. The congregation failed to raise sufficient money, so the building was scaled back.

<sup>32</sup> Memorial Presbyterian Church Presbyterian Session minutes, March 6, and April 20, 1962.

<sup>33</sup> At a called meeting of the Memorial Church congregation on December 2, 1962, members expressed their displeasure with the presbytery’s intent to close the church, and the way it was being handled: “While some members were against any move to discontinue this congregation, the unanimous feeling was that no matter what happened, it should not be done with so little notice and without consulting...our wishes.” The Memorial Presbyterian Church’s elder delegate was directed to inform the presbytery that the Memorial Presbyterian Church rejects the proposal for dissolution. (Congregational meeting minutes, 12/2/1962.)

<sup>34</sup> Mayberry, *Diamond Jubilee*, p. 9

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1 We, as members of the session, greatly appreciate the services and spirit of our  
2 pastor throughout this and past years, especially as evidenced by the growth and  
3 spiritual life of the church. All members are urged to pray that such conditions  
4 will continue.<sup>35</sup>

5  
6 But the prayers and expectations of the parishioners were for naught.

7  
8 The offense of the Memorial Presbyterian Church’s closure was compounded by how it was  
9 handled. In prior years, national and regional church leaders were known to visit the Memorial  
10 Church, but when Dr. Soboleff announced at a called congregation meeting in December, 1962,  
11 that a Presbytery meeting had been called to vote on closing the church, no national or regional  
12 leaders were present to explain the rationale, to express their sorrow for the closure, or to  
13 acknowledge through ceremony the profound role the church had played in the lives of its  
14 thriving congregation.

15  
16 Adding further confusion and consternation to the situation, the Presbytery’s announcement of  
17 Memorial’s closure proposal was accompanied by the news that it was issuing a call to Dr.  
18 Soboleff to serve as “Evangelist-at-Large” in the Presbytery. His responsibilities would include  
19 serving the churches and logging camps of Southeast Alaska and coordinating ministry in  
20 congregations without pastors.<sup>36</sup> The funding for the position came from the Board of National  
21 Missions – the same entity that cut funding from the Memorial Presbyterian Church.

22  
23 The timing of these two announcements prompted some church members, and the public in  
24 general, to assume that the Memorial Church was closed due to Dr. Soboleff’s acceptance of the  
25 new job with the presbytery. In fact, Dr. Soboleff was not seeking a new position. The callous  
26 way in which the National Church and the Alaska Presbytery engineered the demise of the  
27 Memorial Presbyterian Church was a traumatic affront to a people who value mutual respect,  
28 acknowledgment, and dignity in relationships. Tlingit culture is steeped in the protocols of  
29 ceremony, and the abrupt closure without ceremony demonstrated both a lack of awareness of,  
30 and disrespect for, Alaska Native norms and practices.

31  
32 The Alaska Presbytery’s intent to close the Memorial Presbyterian Church was not made public  
33 until early in 1963. Memorial Church elders had resisted the December proposal which resulted  
34 in a delay in its implementation. The departure of Dr. Soboleff, their beloved pastor, demoralized  
35 the congregation, leaving many members disillusioned with or outraged toward the Presbyterian  
36 Church. But the Memorial Church session members remained advocates for their church, and the  
37 continuance of its ministry.

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> *Daily Alaska Empire*, December 12, 1962, p. 1.

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1  
2 After Dr. Soboleff began his new position in January 1963, the Alaska Presbytery appointed  
3 Edward Holborow, the newly called pastor of NLPC, to moderate the Memorial Church session.  
4 The ending of the Memorial Presbyterian Church’s ministry was increasingly viewed as  
5 inevitable, and discussion was held during the congregation’s January 16, 1963, Annual Meeting  
6 about merging with NLPC rather than acquiescing to the presbytery’s plan to dissolve the  
7 congregation. No decision was made to support the merger, but the meeting minutes noted that it  
8 would nonetheless be an unlikely outcome because a motion to dissolve the Memorial  
9 Presbyterian Church was expected to pass at the presbytery’s spring meeting.<sup>37</sup> At a subsequent  
10 congregational meeting, the Memorial Church session introduced a motion of support for the  
11 presbytery’s closing of the Memorial Presbyterian Church, and an accompanying  
12 recommendation that Memorial Church members unite with NLPC, but many in the  
13 congregation opposed this; the motions narrowly passed, 17 to 14.<sup>38</sup> Subsequently, the Memorial  
14 Presbyterian Church’s closure was euphemistically described as a union with NLPC,<sup>39</sup> but in  
15 actuality, the institutional life of the Memorial Presbyterian Church was terminated when the  
16 presbytery dissolved its session and sent the congregation’s records to the Presbyterian Historical  
17 Society.<sup>40</sup>

18  
19 The Alaska Presbytery could have approached the quest for a “strong and united church of all  
20 races and classes” in Juneau differently. Instead of summarily closing the Memorial Presbyterian  
21 Church, it could have:

- 22  
23 • acknowledged that the Memorial Church was already a multiethnic, intercultural church  
24 from which the whole presbytery could learn about intercultural ministry;  
25 • consulted with the Memorial Church Session to explore various possibilities for its  
26 future;  
27 • proposed merging Memorial Presbyterian Church and NLPC as a union of equals;<sup>41</sup> or  
28 • considered closing either NLPC or the Memorial Church, and publicly assessing the pros  
29 and cons of each closure.

---

<sup>37</sup> Memorial Presbyterian Church Annual Meeting minutes, January 16, 1963.

<sup>38</sup> Memorial Presbyterian Church Congregational Meeting minutes, February 10, 1963.

<sup>39</sup> *Daily Alaska Empire*, “Two Churches Unite,” February 14, 1963.

<sup>40</sup> Minutes of the Alaska Presbytery, April 1963.

<sup>41</sup> A decade later, NLPC institutionally merged with the “White” Juneau United Methodist Church. A joint committee from the congregations met for months to negotiate terms of a merger of equals. The churches formally united in 1974 and adopted a new name, Northern Light United Church. Records of both Northern Light Presbyterian Church and Juneau United Methodist Church remain in the possession of Northern Light United Church.

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1  
2 But instead of doing any of these things, the Alaska Presbytery closed the Memorial Presbyterian  
3 Church and told its members to join NLPC; nearly half of the membership refused to do so,  
4 citing bitterness regarding the closure of the Memorial Church and/or not being comfortable  
5 attending the previously all-White church. At the end of 1962, the Memorial Church had 196  
6 members<sup>42</sup> of whom only 100 transferred to NLPC; five years later only 48 former Memorial  
7 Church members remained on the NLPC roll. The Presbytery's actions failed to produce the  
8 strong and united Presbyterian witness in Juneau that it claimed to have sought.

9  
10 The closing of the Memorial Presbyterian Church occurred because of White supremacist racism  
11 under the guise of the ostensibly noble pursuit of integration. The devastation it wrought on the  
12 Alaska Native community in Juneau and throughout Southeast Alaska reverberates to this day. It  
13 has caused enduring trauma and anger for Memorial Church members and their descendants, and  
14 for Juneau's Native community. The forced closure removed a place of spiritual and communal  
15 refuge for scores of members and friends in a climate of local and national exclusion and  
16 marginalization. It deeply wounded Native believers, as well as Memorial Church's members of  
17 Asian and Pacific Islander, and European descent. It cut off a spiritual lifeline to souls of all ages  
18 and ethnicities that extended throughout Southeast Alaska.

19  
20 The enduring pain caused by the closure of the Memorial Presbyterian Church coexists,  
21 sometimes uneasily, with the positive influences and cherished memories of the congregation's  
22 ministry. Dr. Soboleff's adult children have shared that even though

23  
24 many of the elders and members of the church have gone on...family ties of  
25 membership in the Memorial Church still exist. The hurt has undoubtedly been  
26 passed on to our present generation. People still speak of Dr. Soboleff's amazing  
27 pastoral work by telling stories about 'when our family went to Memorial Church,  
28 we...' Everyone's story is positive and genuine. Dr. Soboleff and the Memorial  
29 Presbyterian Church [are] still vivid in our minds.<sup>43</sup>

30  
31 The heartfelt recollections underscore the continuing sense of loss and betrayal experienced by  
32 Memorial Church families. The disrespectful, disingenuous, and obfuscated manner in which the  
33 unilateral closure decisions were made and presented not only devastated Memorial Church  
34 members; they sowed confusion and fostered silence within the NLPC congregation, and in the  
35 community at large. White church leaders either fundamentally misunderstood what the  
36 Memorial Presbyterian Church meant to the Native community, or they were willfully ignorant.  
37 There was no attempt to explore how Native experience and values could be carried forward into  
38 a new multiethnic, intercultural church. White church leaders thought that since they had  
39 imposed European Christianity on Native Christians, the Memorial Church members would

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<sup>42</sup> Memorial Presbyterian Church 1962 Annual Report.

<sup>43</sup> Correspondence with Janet Soboleff Burke, December 4, 2020.

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1 welcome the end of segregation and be glad for the chance to worship with European Christians  
2 at NLPC. This racist reasoning is even more egregious in light of the fact that the Memorial  
3 Presbyterian Church had already become a multiethnic, intercultural church.

4  
5 Several years after the congregation’s dissolution, the Memorial Presbyterian Church building  
6 was razed as a part of Juneau’s urban renewal; this spatial loss extended the spiritual harm  
7 caused by the Memorial Church’s closure as once again, Native land was appropriated for White  
8 dominant culture use.

9  
10 The lack of transparency about incidents such as the closing of the Memorial Presbyterian  
11 Church continues to impede contemporary efforts to embrace multiethnic, intercultural church  
12 life at national, regional, and local levels. The decades of avoidance of the truth about the closure  
13 of the Memorial Church, and the complicity of the local White NLPC, the Board of National  
14 Missions, and the Alaska Presbytery regarding the closure, has deeply hampered relationships  
15 between Native and non-Native members. Dr. Soboleff is fondly remembered in the national  
16 church, the Alaska Presbytery, and throughout Southeast Alaska, but the wrong of removing him  
17 from the Memorial Church pastorate has gone largely unacknowledged. Northern Light United  
18 Church claims the Memorial Church as one of its predecessor congregations and supports the  
19 work of its own Native Ministries Committee, but it has struggled to this day to confess and  
20 address the devastating actions of NLPC, its White predecessor Presbyterian congregation, and  
21 its namesake. NLUC has not publicly acknowledged and addressed the manner in which the  
22 Presbytery approved NLPC’s move into the Memorial Church’s neighborhood and closed the  
23 Memorial Presbyterian Church. The claim that the Memorial Church is a predecessor of NLUC  
24 belies the fact that there was no Memorial Presbyterian Church left with which NLPC could have  
25 merged. Not facing the racism embedded in the closure decision has hindered the development  
26 of authentic multiethnic, intercultural church life at NLUC. “The deafening silence of White  
27 Presbyterian leaders and congregants regarding the abrupt closure of the Memorial Church is a  
28 disruptive force to Tlingit spiritual wellbeing as well as a barrier to living in harmony with White  
29 Presbyterians.”<sup>44</sup> Despite recent efforts at investigating and telling the story of the Memorial  
30 Church, including its support for this Overture to the PC(USA), NLUC’s legacy as a community  
31 of faith and justice has been marred by decades of inaction regarding the closing of the Memorial  
32 Presbyterian Church. These institutional failures inhibit NLUC’s ability to live out its stated  
33 mission and have tarnished its local Christian witness in the community at large.

34  
35 Without a full accounting of the racist, White supremacist ecclesial history that led to actions  
36 such as the closing of the Memorial Church, and without understanding the enormity of what the  
37 loss of centers of Native church life such as the Memorial Church meant and means for the  
38 Native community, Native contributions remain tangential rather than central to current day

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<sup>44</sup> NLUC Native Ministries Committee member and Overture coauthor Lillian Petershoare, February 7,  
2021. Other Overture coauthors are: Maxine Richert, Myra Munson, Tim Lash, and Phil Campbell,  
consultant.

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1 church life and leadership. This Overture is a step both toward addressing the festering wound  
2 caused by the closing of the Memorial Presbyterian Church, and to a renewed commitment to a  
3 multiethnic, intercultural future for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at the national, regional,  
4 and local levels.<sup>45</sup>

5

6 **Legacy of Rev. Dr. Walter Soboleff, Sr.**

7

8 Walter Soboleff, born to a Tlingit woman and a father of Russian and German descent in  
9 Killisnoo, Alaska, received a scholarship to the Presbyterian related University of Dubuque to  
10 study for the ministry. After completing degrees in the undergraduate college and graduate  
11 theological seminary, he returned to Alaska in 1940 to assume the pastorate of Juneau's  
12 Memorial Presbyterian Church. Soboleff, the second ordained Alaska Native Presbyterian  
13 Minister<sup>46</sup> in Southeast Alaska, was the first and only Native pastor of the Memorial Church.

14

15 Due to official and unofficial segregation, the Memorial Presbyterian Church was considered the  
16 "Native" Church, as Natives were not welcomed in many "White" churches, including Northern  
17 Light Presbyterian Church. Under Soboleff's leadership, the Memorial Church quickly grew.  
18 And in a remarkable witness against the segregation of the time, Soboleff asked the membership  
19 of the church to consider inviting other people besides Natives to participate, and they readily  
20 agreed. As non-Natives started to join, the Memorial Church became one of the few  
21 desegregated churches in Juneau.

22

23 Dr. Soboleff's ministry was the first to travel to the airwaves, allowing Natives and non-Natives  
24 throughout Southeast Alaska and as far away as the Yukon Territory to hear his Sunday sermon  
25 in Tlingit and English. Even when the Memorial Church budget was tight, the congregation  
26 supported this ministry citing the importance of the fishermen out on their boats being able to  
27 attend worship. He also provided the radio station's newscasts in Tlingit. The daily newspaper  
28 in Juneau featured ads inviting men to the weekly Prayer Luncheon, and women to the Women's  
29 Church Society activities. The youth met monthly with Dr. Soboleff (hot dogs served), with  
30 Catholic youth from the surrounding neighborhood also attending at times.

31

32 Dr. Soboleff built and maintained relationships and extensive networks of support in Juneau, and  
33 throughout Alaska. He served on the board of directors of the American Red Cross, chaplain  
34 with the Territorial Legislature, and in various positions with the Alaska Presbytery. In 1951 he

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<sup>45</sup>For a listing of steps being taken at presbytery and local levels that accompany the actions called for in this Overture's Recommendation, see the Conclusion section of the Rationale.

<sup>46</sup>To date, very few Alaska Natives have been ordained. In Southeast Alaska, in addition to Dr. Soboleff, Edward Marsden, Tsimshian, was ordained in 1898, George Betts, Tlingit, was ordained in 1943, and Henry Fawcett, Tsimshian, was ordained in 1963. The dearth of Alaska Native ministerial leadership is an ongoing challenge for the PC(USA). The need to support Alaska Natives preparing for ministry and other church leadership roles is addressed in the Overture's Recommendation, reparative action 2.a.



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1 began a 20-year term as the Alaska National Guard Chaplain, serving as chaplain and officer.  
2 Like him, many Alaska Natives from the villages served in the Alaska National Guard. He was a  
3 Mason and belonged to the Lions Club. He helped the Lions establish the annual Gold Medal  
4 Basketball Tournament that continues to bring 20 plus teams and hundreds of fans from the  
5 villages to Juneau for a week of play. Monies raised went for college scholarships, and the  
6 church housed some of the teams. A Girl Scout troop met weekly at Memorial. Dr. Soboleff's  
7 long involvement in the Alaska Native Brotherhood/Sisterhood (the Native civil rights  
8 organization), from its early years to his terms as Grand Secretary and Grand President, helped  
9 this organization achieve its goals of furthering the social and economic development of Native  
10 people.

11  
12 For Dr. Soboleff, community involvement was an expression both of his Christian faith and his  
13 Tlingit spiritual practices; for him there was no contradiction between being Christian and  
14 Tlingit. Throughout his life, he lived the Tlingit value of *Haa Shuká*, the honoring of and feeling  
15 connected to the ancestors, and recognizing one's responsibility to future generations. As Chair  
16 of the Sealaska Heritage Board of Trustees, he guided the institute's staff in the development of  
17 programs and curricula that celebrate Alaska Native ancestors, perpetuate Native languages, and  
18 inspire the revitalization of Southeast Alaska Indigenous cultures. Native youth throughout  
19 Southeast are making regalia, dancing traditional dances, and singing clan songs in Tlingit. Dr.  
20 Soboleff was a wise, gentle, and humble leader whose grasp and promotion of traditional Tlingit  
21 culture was inspiring.

22  
23 After accepting the direction from the Alaska Presbytery to leave Memorial Church even in the  
24 midst of its closure, Dr. Soboleff served as Evangelist-at-Large in the Alaska Presbytery,  
25 providing pastoral leadership for small churches in small communities throughout Southeast  
26 Alaska. In 1970, he moved to Fairbanks, Alaska where he served as the first director of the  
27 University of Alaska Fairbanks Native Studies Program. After retiring from that position, he  
28 returned to Southeast (dividing his time between Juneau and Tenakee Springs) where he  
29 provided leadership in the Native community, and actively participated in church and community  
30 life.

31  
32 Also, during this time period, he was named Pastor Emeritus of NLUC where he remained an  
33 active participant, and where his wise counsel was sought by Native and non-Native members  
34 alike. He preached on many occasions, regularly participated in worship and other church  
35 activities, and he encouraged others to get involved.

36  
37 Dr. Soboleff received numerous honors including being named Alaska Federation of Natives  
38 Citizen of the Year in 1989, and in 1999 being designated Alaska Native Brotherhood Grand  
39 Camp President Emeritus. Numerous facilities have been named for him including the Angoon  
40 Airport, and a University of Alaska Southeast classroom building that houses the School of Arts

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1 and Sciences.<sup>47</sup> After his death, the Sealaska Heritage Institute named its stunning heritage  
2 center the Walter Soboleff Building (“WSB”) in recognition of Dr. Soboleff’s life-long  
3 contributions to perpetuating Tlingit culture. The WSB is “a physical manifestation of *Haa*  
4 *Shuká* and all the ideals he held dear.”<sup>48</sup>

5  
6 Even with these widespread accolades and recognitions, however, the forced closure of his  
7 beloved Memorial Presbyterian Church remained an unresolved sadness for Dr. Soboleff. A  
8 cruel irony of the closure is that Dr. Soboleff was well known in the community at large as a  
9 “culture broker”<sup>49</sup> or an intermediary who could bring understanding between the Native and  
10 non-Native societies. What the world recognized, however, remained oblivious to the church.  
11 The immeasurable value of the ministry of the Memorial Church under Dr. Soboleff’s leadership  
12 was unacknowledged, whether out of ignorance or willfulness, by denominational leaders.

13  
14 Neither the displaced members of the Memorial Presbyterian Church nor Rev. Dr. Soboleff, who  
15 remained a figure of dignity and peace amid systemic racism and indignity, received an apology  
16 nor any form of restitution from the Presbyterian Church before Rev. Dr. Soboleff “walked into  
17 the forest” on May 22, 2011, at age 102.

18  
19 **Investigation into the Closure of the Memorial Presbyterian Church**

20  
21 In March 2011, two months before Dr. Soboleff’s death, then-NLUC pastor Phil Campbell talked  
22 with him about the closing of the Memorial Church. Pastor Campbell was struck by how pained  
23 Dr. Soboleff was about the closure – almost 50 years after it happened. It was obvious the  
24 wound had not been healed, nor had the injustice been addressed. With the support of the Native  
25 Ministries Committee and the Church Council, Pastor Campbell began scouring the historical  
26 records of the Alaska Presbytery, the Board of National Missions, NLPC, and the Memorial  
27 Church to learn more about the circumstances that led to the closure of the Memorial  
28 Presbyterian Church. He presented preliminary findings at Sealaska’s Walter Soboleff Day  
29 observance in 2015,<sup>50</sup> and he began talking with the NLUC Church Council about how to repair  
30 the damage caused by the Memorial Church’s closing.

31

---

<sup>47</sup>The impact and significance of Dr. Soboleff’s life and ministry have been widely attested. See “A Century of Soboleff,” *First Alaskans Magazine*, February/March 2011 as an example.

<sup>48</sup>“A Retrospective View of Dr. Walter Soboleff,” Sealaska Heritage Institute, <https://vimeo.com/146973605>, November 13, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Correspondence with Dr. Rosita Worl, President, Sealaska Heritage Institute, February 4, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> “A Retrospective View of Dr. Walter Soboleff,” Sealaska Heritage Institute.

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1 In 2017, the NLUC congregation engaged in visioning exercises; identifying appropriate ways to  
2 address Memorial Church’s closure was one of the topics discussed. In reviewing the vision  
3 plan, one of the groups<sup>51</sup> recommended pursuing hand-carved Tlingit house posts for the church  
4 lobby. In the August 2017 Council minutes, the Council went on record supporting the house  
5 posts idea and reported that Pastor Campbell expanded the idea to include official reconciliation  
6 over the closure of the Memorial Presbyterian Church.

7

8 With Council’s support for the house posts, the Native Ministries Committee decided to further  
9 investigate the closure of the Memorial Presbyterian Church, realizing that learning this history  
10 would pave the way for developing pertinent themes for the house posts, including the story of  
11 the Memorial Church. Joaqlin Estus, Tlingit, a nationally recognized journalist, a reporter for  
12 *Indian Country Today*, and a former member of NLUC was recruited to interview Memorial  
13 Church members. Native Ministries directed Ms. Estus to ask members about their  
14 remembrances of the Memorial Church and the circumstances surrounding its closure. Ms. Estus  
15 wrote an article, “Segregation of Faith,” for the Alaska Federation of Natives Annual Meeting  
16 edition of *First Alaskans Magazine* (October 2019) that summarizes her and Phil Campbell’s  
17 research on the closure of the Memorial Presbyterian Church and speaks to the resulting pain  
18 experienced by the many families who attended the Memorial Church.

19

20 Native Ministries also funded Pastor Campbell’s travel to the Presbyterian Historical Society in  
21 Philadelphia to access the Alaska Presbytery and Memorial Presbyterian Church records. He  
22 summarized his research on the Memorial Church closure in the March 2018 NLUC newsletter.

23

24 Current NLUC Pastor Faith McClellan, upon reviewing Ms. Estus’s article about Dr. Soboleff  
25 and the Memorial Presbyterian Church, consulted with the Northwest Coast Presbytery  
26 Executive, Dr. Corey Schlosser-Hall, about submitting a formal Overture regarding the closure  
27 of the Memorial Presbyterian Church. Native Ministries met with Dr. Schlosser-Hall about  
28 writing an Overture, and he wholeheartedly supported the idea. Native Ministries Liaison and  
29 Council Member Lillian Petershoare recommended that Council support the Native Ministries  
30 Committee’s recommendation to prepare an Overture to address the closure of the Memorial  
31 Presbyterian Church. The NLUC Council voted unanimously to back a Native Ministries  
32 Committee recommendation to seek reparative action, through an Overture requesting an  
33 apology and other reparations, from the national Presbyterian Church for the closure of the  
34 Memorial Presbyterian Church.

35

**36 Additional Context**

37

38 In Juneau, the 1960s were particularly challenging times for the local Tlingit Community. The  
39 White man’s legacy of encroachment on Indigenous lands exhibited itself in numerous ways in

---

<sup>51</sup> NLUC 2014 - 2018 Visioning Work Plan, Native Ministries and Purple Group additions, Activity 1.1, May 9, 2017.

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1 the capital city and Douglas (which later became incorporated in the Borough of Juneau).  
2 Consider:

- 3
- 4 ● The condemnation and burning of houses in the Douglas Indian Village beginning on  
5 May 4, 1962. The Douglas Indian Village had been working with the Corps of Engineers  
6 and the Bureau of Indian Affairs to obtain a village harbor until the City of Douglas  
7 intervened by clearing the land of homes for purposes of constructing a city harbor.  
8
- 9 ● On February 1, 1962, the State of Alaska and the City as plaintiffs successfully brought  
10 to the U.S. District Court an action to quiet title to the tidelands of the Juneau Indian  
11 Village.  
12
- 13 ● The Forest Service in 1964 established a campground on A'akw Kwáan burial sites.  
14
- 15 ● In the mid-1960s and early 1970s, the City of Juneau implemented President Lyndon  
16 Johnson's "Great Society" program and began an urban renewal effort that focused on  
17 twenty-three acres of filled tidelands which included 140 homes (130 were considered  
18 "sub-standard"), owned for many years primarily by Alaska Native and Filipino/Native  
19 families. This neighborhood on 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Streets and beyond surrounded the  
20 Memorial Church that was located on 8<sup>th</sup> Street. Many in the neighborhood attended the  
21 church prior to its closure in 1963. Despite protests by the Alaska Native Brotherhood  
22 and Sisterhood, the homes were razed (the Memorial Presbyterian Church building was  
23 also razed and the land sold). Although owners were compensated, it wasn't enough for  
24 some who had to move in with relatives or others who had to move out the road in trailers  
25 which necessitated buying an auto. Urban renewal essentially displaced a tightly knit  
26 ethnic neighborhood along with their church, which was closed earlier.<sup>52</sup>  
27

28 Concurrently, local, state and federal governments in Juneau were appropriating Lingit Aani, and  
29 disrespecting sacred burial grounds in the process. The federal district court stripped the  
30 tidelands from the Juneau Indian Village for community development and private purposes. At a  
31 time when Juneau Tlingits were suffering monumental assaults on their ancestors' graves sites  
32 and property losses that hugely impacted their livelihoods and subsistence way of life, the  
33 comforting and encouraging words of their pastor might have helped them cope, were it not for  
34 the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) choosing to close the Memorial Presbyterian Church in the  
35 midst of all this profound loss. It is hard to overstate the devastating impact of the Memorial  
36 Church's closure. Surely the presence of its ministry would have made a positive contribution to  
37 Native life, and to Juneau as a whole during the era of devastating social change and upheaval in  
38 the 1960s and beyond.  
39

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<sup>52</sup> Kimberly L. Metcalf, ed., *In Sisterhood: The History of Camp 2 of the Alaska Native Sisterhood*, 2008.

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1 **Theological, Spiritual, and Social Justice Imperatives**

2

3 In his book, *Stamped from the Beginning*,<sup>53</sup> Ibram Kendi documents the historical evolution of  
4 racist and anti-racist ideas and actions. He identifies the existence of two types of racism –  
5 segregationist racism and assimilationist racism. In the practice of segregationist racism, the  
6 dominant class separates itself from those it deems inferior. The distance serves to ensure that  
7 dominant White systems and structures are not exposed to or compromised by social contact  
8 with Black and Indigenous people and groups. Assimilationist racists believe that Black and  
9 Indigenous people of color can “evolve” into full humanity by becoming like White people and  
10 adopting White ways. Anti-racism affirms the inherent worth of all people, culture and systems,  
11 does not establish separate structures, and does not believe in the inferiority or superiority of any  
12 group of people. An examination of the history of Presbyterian Church missionary practices  
13 reveals that the first practice was segregationist racism. In Juneau, this led to the establishment of  
14 two congregations – one for Whites and one for Natives.

15

16 In the 1950s when the national Presbyterian Church repented of segregation, it did not embrace  
17 anti-racism. Instead, it instituted assimilationist racism with the accompanying assumption of the  
18 superiority of White Christianity. Thus, when segregation ended, the Presbyterian Church  
19 dissolved the congregation originally established to minister to Natives so that Native  
20 Presbyterians could go to the White church and learn White church ways. In 1963, the Memorial  
21 Presbyterian Church was closed for the same reason it was established by Presbyterian  
22 Missionaries 76 years earlier: White supremacist racism. The congregation was opened by racist  
23 White supremacy expressed through segregation; it was closed by racist White supremacist  
24 assimilationist racism operating under the guise of integration.

25

26 The Presbytery’s and the Mission Board’s theological reflection on their actions was notably  
27 shallow. They rushed to embrace an integrationist goal of establishing in Juneau a “strong and  
28 united church of all races and classes,” without seriously addressing the damage wrought by  
29 centuries of forced segregation. White church leaders failed to heed the warning of the prophet  
30 Jeremiah who spoke out against those who seek to sweep under the rug the trauma caused by the  
31 history of discrimination:

32

33 <sup>14</sup>They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “All is well,”  
34 when all is not well. <sup>15</sup>They acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet  
35 they were not ashamed, they did not know how to blush... (Jeremiah 6: 14-15a).

36

37 In treating the wound without proper care, national and regional church leaders did not embrace  
38 the church’s calling as the Body of Christ. As the Body of Christ, “every action the church takes  
39 in the world must be as representatives of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Racism is a sin and is not only  
40 a life-negating offense against humanity; it is also an affront to God and goes against the life-

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<sup>53</sup> Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, Bold Type Books, 2016.

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1 affirming, inclusive ministry of Jesus Christ.”<sup>54</sup> It is a denial of the radically egalitarian vision  
2 that the Apostle Paul offered the church in Galatia:

3

4       <sup>26</sup> You are all God’s children through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>27</sup>All of you who were  
5 baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup>There is neither Jew  
6 nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are  
7 all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup>Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are  
8 Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3: 26-29,  
9 CEB)

10

11 The vision of Galatians was already operative at the Memorial Church, but the lenses of White  
12 church leaders were clouded by White supremacy that kept them from seeing this truth.

13

14 Thankfully, the church has not stood still. Four years after the closure of the Memorial  
15 Presbyterian Church, the General Assembly adopted the Confession of 1967 that furthered the  
16 church’s commitment to racial justice, to ending discrimination, and to seeking reconciliation:

17

18       God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In his  
19 reconciling love, God overcomes the barriers between sisters and brothers and  
20 breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference,  
21 real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all people to receive and uphold  
22 one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing,  
23 education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights.  
24 Therefore, the church labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and  
25 ministers to those injured by it. Congregations, individuals, or groups of  
26 Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize others, however subtly, resist the  
27 Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess.<sup>55</sup>

28

29 In the spirit of the Confession of 1967, this Overture provides redress for the domination and  
30 patronization of the Memorial Presbyterian Church that brought contempt on the faith that  
31 church leaders espoused.

32

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<sup>54</sup> Correspondence with NLUC Pastor Faith McClellan, February 9, 2021. Rev. McClellan recommended that the Overture include the theological affirmation of the church as the Body of Christ, noting also that the church’s true vocation is “with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to proclaim God’s justice, mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation to a broken world.”

<sup>55</sup> The Confession of 1967— Inclusive Language Version, Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2002, 9.44a.

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1 The Confession of 1967 also provides guidance for the church’s missionary endeavors. It  
2 acknowledges that the

3  
4 Christian religion [is]...distinct from God’s self-revelation, [and] has been shaped  
5 throughout its history by the cultural forms of its environment.” It further declares  
6 that “Christians find parallels between other religions and their own and must  
7 approach all religions with openness and respect. Repeatedly God has used the  
8 insight of non-Christians to challenge the church to renewal.<sup>56</sup>

9  
10 The cultural humility called for by the Confession of 1967 was absent from the church’s  
11 missionary encounters with Tlingit people, as it has been across the globe throughout the history  
12 of church life. Non-European cultures and worldviews are vibrant and profound; they are not  
13 devoid of spiritual depth and understanding. In the case of the Memorial Church and the Juneau  
14 community, Tlingit values and spiritual insights contributed invaluable to the Memorial  
15 Presbyterian Church’s life. Key Tlingit spirituality concepts are explicated by Lillian  
16 Petershoare:

17  
18 Our Tlingit elders and culture bearers teach us that everything has spirit, both the  
19 inanimate and animate, with all things being worthy of respect. From a young  
20 age, we are taught to live in harmony, maintaining social and spiritual balance  
21 between eagles and ravens.<sup>57</sup> Coastal Tlingits belong to either moiety based on  
22 their maternal lineage, while inland Tlingits belong to the wolf or crow moiety.

23  
24 As Tlingits, we practice *Haa Shuká* knowing that we are connected to our  
25 ancestors and future generations.<sup>58</sup> Our traditional values instill in us a  
26 responsibility to ensure that our descendants know what it means to be a Tlingit  
27 and to “imitate their ancestors” (embrace Tlingit lifeways).

28  
29 We believe our ancestors’ spirits are among us. In ceremonies to remove the grief  
30 of those who have lost a loved one, we speak of our ancestors as being with us—  
31 comforting and healing our sorrow. For example, Jessie Dalton of Hoonah in one  
32 of the finest recorded oratories, cried out, “Yes how very much it is as if they’re  
33 [the ancestors] revealing their faces.”<sup>59</sup> Later in the same speech, she refers to the

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<sup>56</sup> The Confession of 1967— Inclusive Language Version, Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2002, 9.41, 9.42.

<sup>57</sup> Correspondence with Dr. Rosita Worl, February 4, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer. *Haa Shuká, Our Ancestors*, pp. 28, 29.

<sup>59</sup> Jessie Dalton, Hoonah. 1968. as translated in Dauenhauers’ *Haa Tuwunáagu Yís, for Healing Our Spirit*, p. 245.

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1 mourners' father's sisters (ancestors for whom the clan crest is the Tern) as being  
2 terns flying over those who are grieving, letting their down fall like snow  
3 (bringing peace and comfort) and taking the grief back to their nests.<sup>60</sup> Another  
4 example of reinforcing our ancestors' presence: Elder Dorothy Peters Coronell  
5 shared in a recorded interview, "We never lose them; they are all here in our  
6 hearts."<sup>61</sup>

7  
8 Because we carry our ancestors (*Haa Shuká*) in our hearts, and believe that their  
9 spirits are among us, Dr. Soboleff's heartbreak over the closure of the Memorial  
10 Church is a pain that remains and reverberates deeply within us. It is an offense  
11 that yet remains unresolved. As we speak of the closure, our pain is  
12 communicated in our choice of words and in the passion behind the words.

13  
14 Our understanding of God is enhanced when we are able to view the creator through the lens of  
15 all cultures. During the segregation era, and later during the assimilation push, White church  
16 leaders and missionaries failed to recognize the profound cultural contributions of the Tlingits.  
17 Tlingit and other Indigenous spiritualities contribute to authentic multiethnic, intercultural church  
18 life.

19  
20 Only in recent years has the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) begun to articulate a commitment to  
21 antiracism as it seeks to embrace the future as a multiethnic, intercultural communion. With  
22 regard to how this commitment addresses PC(USA) history and relationships with Native  
23 Americans, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians, in 2016, the General Assembly offered a  
24 general apology for its complicity in the promotion of the Doctrine of Discovery and its  
25 participation in systemic racism against Indigenous peoples, stating:

26  
27 We know that apology is only a first step in the larger hope of repentance and  
28 reconciliation. We seek the guidance of relationships ... as we seek to identify and  
29 act on restorative practices and policies at the relational, communal, and national  
30 level.<sup>62</sup>

31  
32 The redress for the closure of the Memorial Presbyterian Church called for in this Overture is  
33 one step of repentance and restorative practice that will demonstrate the General Assembly's  
34 commitment to repairing damage caused by White supremacy, and to the pursuit of ongoing

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>61</sup> Dorothy Peters Coronell James. Interview conducted by the late David Katzeek, Sealaska Heritage Institute, for the Latseen Leadership Training Program.

<sup>62</sup> Offering an Apology to Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians, <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/6350>.



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1 healing and reconciliation within church and society. Without reparative actions, the words of  
2 apology ring hollow. The response called for in the recommendation section of this Overture will  
3 provide demonstrable, national commitment to the church’s antiracist posture with regard to  
4 relationships with Native people in Juneau and Southeast Alaska.

5

6 **Actions by NLUC and the Presbytery of the Northwest Coast**

7

8 The efforts of the Office of the General Assembly and the Presbyterian Mission Agency will join  
9 local and regional efforts undertaken by the Northern Light congregation and the Northwest  
10 Coast Presbytery.

11

12 The Congregation of the Northern Light United Church (“NLUC”), the successor to the Northern  
13 Light Presbyterian Church, recommended by the NLUC Council, has adopted the attached  
14 Resolution 2021-01, Regarding Acknowledgment, Apology, and Reparations to demonstrate its  
15 repentance and intent to pursue healing and reconciliation within our church, community, and  
16 society.

17

18 *NLUC understands that the NWCP Executive Board is working on this and trusts it will insert*  
19 *below whatever is most appropriate. It is NLUC’s profound belief that that we must each,*  
20 *individually and collectively, take action and that the best advocacy at the General Assembly for*  
21 *passage of this Overture will be proof that this isn’t a request being made only for someone else*  
22 *to take action, but rather a request that the General Assembly join us all in taking this action.*

23

24 Actions taken by the Northwest Coast Presbytery, as a successor body of the Alaska Presbytery  
25 for PC(USA) congregations in Southeast Alaska, to acknowledge its culpability and silence  
26 regarding the closure are

27

- 28 a. Supporting the efforts of the NLUC as referenced above;
- 29 b. Supporting the Alaska Cluster of churches in Southeast Alaska in their efforts  
30 to remain viable, to welcome members from all cultures, especially Alaska  
31 Native cultures, and to encourage and train lay leaders, accordingly;
- 32 c. Taking affirmative, transparent and open steps to assure that, when the  
33 Presbytery considers difficult decisions about the future of local  
34 congregations, the Presbytery’s resources will not be allocated in ways that  
35 favor predominantly White churches or disfavor primarily People of Color  
36 congregations; and

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1 d. Using the proceeds of the sale of the Sitka Presbyterian Church building to  
2 fund a Native Resource Center for Southeast Alaska, consistent with the  
3 Native American Coordinating Council's recent recommendations.<sup>63</sup>  
4

5 **Conclusion**  
6

7 Actions always speak more loudly than words. This Overture is a plea that the General  
8 Assembly join NLUC and the Northwest Coast Presbytery in their tangible actions to provide  
9 reparative justice.  
10

11 In proposing this Overture, members of the NLUC Native Ministries Committee  
12 have sought to heal our ancestors, heal ourselves, and heal the land on which the  
13 Presbyterian missionaries, the Board of Missions, and the Alaska Presbytery  
14 committed the offenses outlined herein, with special focus on the Memorial  
15 Church closure.<sup>64</sup>  
16

17 Now is the time for all parties to deal honestly with the past, and together to undertake the  
18 obligation and opportunity to improve the future.

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<sup>63</sup> Native American Coordinating Council Report to GA 224, Recommendation 4.c.: "Encourage mid councils to disburse a portion of the proceeds to Native American ministries when buildings or property are sold, symbolic of good stewardship"; and Recommendation 5.e.: "Creation of Native American centers, programs, and resources outside of reservations."

<sup>64</sup> Lillian Petershoare, February 7, 2021.