

# EMBRACING THE CULTURE OF NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH

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A few weeks ago, I visited the small Native American church I attended during my childhood. My mother and other family members still attend. On this particular day, my younger brother was leading worship. When the time came for the collection, he called me up to help a young boy take up the offering. I had to smile. As conference superintendent of the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference (OIMC), I perform all sorts of duties, but it had been years since I had taken up the offering!

Taking the offering was how, as a young boy, I began my service to God and to the church. Soon after, my pastor was calling on me to read Scripture and lead responsive readings. Before I knew it, I was teaching Sunday school and serving as youth leader. Some years later, I was ordained an elder at the age of thirty-one. When I was comfortable just attending church, my pastor noted my call to ministry and found ways to start me in serving the church. I continue to be amazed at how others can see God's call on our lives before we do.

I share this story because I believe the intentional identification of young people for leadership is key to involving young adults in the church. Among our Indian Methodist churches, mentoring is a normal part of life. Our elders, parents, grandparents, pastors, and teachers understand their role in preparing young persons for service in the church. This role exists not only in the church but also in our culture. Parents, grandparents, and family members prepare their young to dance in the tribal arena. They teach their children as they encounter new things, passing down wisdom from life experiences, just as they pass down ceremonial items.

The great leader Mourning Dove from the Salish tribe once said, "Everything on the earth has a purpose, every disease an

herb to cure it, and every person a mission. This is the Indian theory of existence." Native people believe persons of all ages have a purpose. While many of our congregations do not have a large presence of young adults, they are always affirming young people in all levels of leadership. **At the last church I served, the Sunday school superintendent was twenty-eight years old and the youth leader was twenty-seven. Trustees and**

**college-student workers were also in their twenties. How refreshing it was to see young adults sharing their gifts and talents.** To keep and attract young persons, it is very important to be intentional in identifying young persons for leadership. If we do not, they will find other organizations and places to affirm their gifts.

The acceptance and inclusion of culture in the life of the church is an important issue for Native American churches. For many years, Native American culture has not been embraced, even in our own churches. There are many church elders who have been taught all their lives by pastors and leaders there should be a separation of Native culture and

Christianity. However, if we are to include Native young persons in the life of the church today, the inclusion and incorporation of Native culture is a must.

Young persons are present at pow-wows, tribal gatherings, and ceremonies in large numbers. I recently attended a sweat lodge ceremony and noted more than half of the participants were between the ages of sixteen and thirty. They attend not only because of the religious nature of the sweat but also because it affirms their Native identity. Two of the participants were young men who used to be very active in one of our churches. While the tribe's ceremonial events affirm their culture, the church did not always do that.

Young people will search for places of worship that affirm and appreciate who they are. For example, the Native American Campus Ministry at Norman First American United Methodist Church affirms and uses Native expressions in its ministry, such as pow-wows, Native American hand games, and tribal singing. Students can be who they are and have leaders who understand their issues as young Native persons. Just recently, two OIMC churches both sponsored pow-wows on the same day—an unprecedented event that indicated our churches are beginning to understand the importance of culture. As I attend large pow-wows across the state, I can always identify young participants who are also United Methodists. It's a great feeling!

If we are to grow and exist for the present and future, churches must realize culture is an integral part of who we are. We cannot leave it at the door. If we cannot and do not affirm the culture of young people, they will identify with communities other than the church. This is true not only for Native persons, but for young persons of all races. An old Native American proverb sums up our task to develop young leaders—"Tell me and I'll forget. Show me and I may not remember. Involve me and I'll understand."



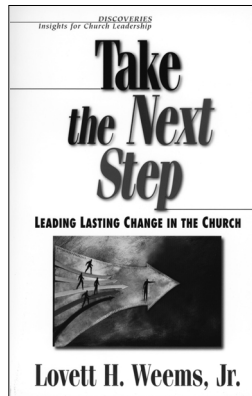
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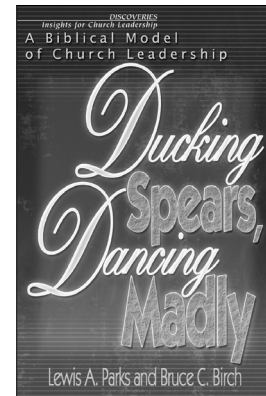
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