

“Doctrine of Discovery”

Tell Me More..

The MUCC Racial Justice Ministries is hosting Mark Charles to speak with our congregation and the broader community over the weekend of November 18-20. The presentation will be held at Waubesa Intermediate School, 5605 Red Oak Trail, McFarland on Saturday evening. The event will be open not only to our McFarland UCC church, other congregations, the broader community, and will be available via Zoom. This event will be recorded and made available to other churches to increase the ripples of this important learning. Mr. Charles will also provide the message during our Sunday service. Additional opportunities for conversations and learning are planned. Mr. Charles will speak with students at the McFarland High School on Monday, November 20.

Who is Mark Charles?

Mark Charles is a person of both Navajo and Dutch heritage; he is an Indigenous author, a public speaker and consultant. As a speaker and leader, he invites others to join him in engaging the big questions of colonization, environmental stewardship and our stories of creation. His time spent with us will focus on the “Doctrine of Discovery.”

What is the “Doctrine of Discovery?”

As early as the 1400s, the Christian Church established a religious, political and legal justification for colonization and seizure of land not inhabited by Christians. Within this framework, because indigenous people were not Christian, they were considered non-human, and the land they occupied was considered empty. Charles says, “the ‘Doctrine of Discovery’ is essentially the church in Europe saying to the nations of Europe, wherever you go, whatever land you find where the people are not Christians, those people are subhuman and their land is yours to take.” The “Doctrine of Discovery” granted Columbus and other European settlers’ sovereignty over non-Christian lands “discovered” by explorers, and set off the genocide of Native peoples in the Americas and globally.

In 1923 the US Supreme Court, in *Johnson v. McIntosh*, in essence held the decision “that the principle of discovery gave European nations an absolute right to New World lands”. Native Americans had only a right of occupancy, which could be abolished. As recently as 2005, the Doctrine was cited in the U.S. Supreme Court as the legal underpinning of the denial of land rights to Indigenous Peoples (*City of Sherrill v. Oneida Indian Nation of New York*). These cases, and others like them, continue to cite the “Doctrine of Discovery” to decide property rights cases brought by Native Americans against the U.S. and against non-Natives.

The United Nations adopted a resolution entitled United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, requesting nations to join them; it took the United States four years to sign it.

The World Council of Churches called upon its members to adopt its Statement on the “Doctrine of Discovery” in 2012. As there has been growing awareness and concern in the U.S. about the Doctrine, the United Church of Christ at its 29th Synod in 2013 adopted a resolution to repudiate the “Doctrine of Discovery” and urged the U.S. government to do the same. This resolution declares and confesses that the doctrine has been and continues to be a shameful part of the United States and our Church’s history.

In March 2023, the Vatican formally rejected the “Doctrine of Discovery,” which had been laid out in papal bulls that were “manipulated for political purposes by competing colonial powers in order to justify immoral acts against Indigenous peoples that were carried out at times without opposition of ecclesiastical authorities.”

Beginning with these truths, Mr. Charles will unpack with us the long-lasting effects of this Doctrine in our history and challenge us in our understanding and acknowledgement of this truth, and our complacency about the Doctrine. But this is not enough. Moving from remorse to repentance to reparations, while a hard and long journey, is something the church has talked about for years. It is time to move forward and take action.

Why now?

Quite frankly, because it has been too long coming. Many people are not aware of the “Doctrine of Discovery,” what it is, and not only what harm has been caused but the harm that continues to this day. Understanding and acknowledging the oppression of indigenous peoples within the context of the “Doctrine of Discovery” is an important step forward.

Our community over the past few years has demonstrated commitment to understanding the history of the land we live on and in establishing relationships with Indigenous peoples and tribes in the area. The Village of McFarland has worked with representatives from the Ho-Chunk Nation to create a formal Land Acknowledgement. This Fall there was a well-attended ceremony to celebrate the Land Acknowledgement. Many members of MUCC were in attendance for the program. The Village has also established an *Indigenous Solidarity Collective of McFarland*, which envisions cultivating a long-term mutual relationship and institutionalized partnership between the School District, Village leaders, community members and people of the Ho-Chunk Nation. This partnership along with MUCC’s participation will be ongoing, proactive and responsive to promote Native justice and share a truthful Indigenous People’s history.

It is time for us, the McFarland United Church of Christ, to publicly demonstrate our commitment to learning, unlearning and relearning our part in the history of the Indigenous Peoples and the “Doctrine of Discovery.” It’s time to step forward and identify meaningful actions we can make.

How will we pull this off?

The MUCC Racial Justice Ministries is hosting along with several partners supporting the Mark Charles presentation weekend. Through help we are raising funding to cover expenses and project costs. A small planning group has made connections to faith groups and congregations, and has written two grants. Several events have been planned and organized to provide opportunities for learning. As a racial justice ministry, we are committed to moving MUCC and other faith congregations forward. We believe God is “still speaking” as we discern the church’s role and what is needed in bringing us together for a successful project.

Indigenous Peoples’ Justice Project - What is it?

The MUCC Justice project is innovative as we host Mark Charles, national Indigenous author to present truthful knowledge of the “Doctrine of Discovery”. Facilitated dialogue between Mr. Charles and members, partners and broader community will guide and define meaningful actions toward reconciling and healing. We plan to host a book reading of Mark Charles’ book “Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery.” This book review is planned to be a facilitated discussion with Mr. Charles to further engage members in a call to action toward confronting injustice and racism. Project plans a wrap-up session in 2024 with further work to be developed by Racial Justice Ministries with congregational input.