

West Virginia CONAM (Committee on Native American Ministries) 2020-2021 Report

Committee members: Ellesa "Elle" High (chairperson) Tracey Brown-Dolinski (secretary), Tim Edin, Ed Grant, Ellen Krimmel, Ken Krimmel, Jay Parkins, Rich Shaffer, Karen Tate

Because of the COVID pandemic, the WV CONAM held its meetings via Zoom and had to make many changes in its activities, especially those focused on in-person community and church get-togethers. The CONAM again financially supported Mother Earth Beat Drum, a West Virginia Native Women's drum group, to participate in the Eastern Native American Women's Drum Gathering to be held in South Carolina. This spring event was canceled because of statewide quarantining. The CONAM looks forward to Mother Earth Beat attending this celebration of Native Women's drums when it's rescheduled in the future.

For the first time, the CONAM financially supported two pow wows: the "Mountain Spirit" pow wow held in Core, WV (also supported by the Western PA CONAM), and the "Thunder in the Mountains" pow wow held in Parsons, WV. We are hoping that this kind of support will lead to strengthening community ties and create more networking by the CONAM with Native people around our state.

We continued developing the Pt. Pleasant weekend activities we had planned for Fall of 2020. These include potential presentations on the Adena people and on the indigenous tribes originally in the Pt. Pleasant area, exhibits of Native artifacts, information on Missing and Murdered Indian Women, a round-table discussion of Indian mascots in our public schools, a film about "The Doctrine of Discovery," a feast (pitch-in dinner), Native drumming and singing, and a Native American Sunday service in area churches. These plans had to be tabled because of the ongoing pandemic, but we are hoping to make at least some of these activities a reality in 2022.

At this year's WV annual conference, the CONAM again was asked to welcome participants to the meeting, also acknowledging that we come together on the traditional lands of indigenous peoples who have lived in what we now call West Virginia for thousands of years, including the Cherokee, Shawnee, Lenape, Monacan, Mingo, Seneca, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, Cayuga, and other tribes and their ancestors. We're proud that the WV annual conference has shown such leadership and opened its meetings with this indigenous land acknowledgment for many years.

The WV CONAM attended online the 2020 yearly Northeastern Jurisdiction of Native American CONAMs (NEJNAMC) and spoke on several key issues. Elle High, who had previously served on the treasurer's and social justice committees, was elected to a two-year term as secretary for this regional organization (she since has stepped down for medical reasons).

She and RoBear Wilson (chairperson, Western Pennsylvania CONAM) wrote a position paper concerning the full inclusion of LGBTQ2S+ People within the United Methodist Church, drawing upon the Native American traditional acceptances and honoring of "Two Spirit" tribal members. Their draft document was submitted to the NEJ for further revision and development. At a special meeting held by Zoom in February 2021 (the WV CONAM was well represented), the paper was voted upon, unanimously accepted, and a press release about this position was posted on the NEJNAMC website.

While many activities of the WV CONAM were curtailed by COVID-19 restrictions, our members continued actively to "promote" our ministries and to be involved in many ways. One of our members, Ed Grant, loaned a number of Native artifacts (focused on the Fort Ancient people) to the American Exhibit at the Huntington Museum of Art. The exhibit covered American life from pre-contact time through the 1860s.

Rich Shaffer led our effort to write a letter opposing the Department of the Interior's action that, as part of the Trump administration, attempted to dis-establish the Mashpee Wampanoag's tribal reservation. This letter also was sent to our state senators, as well as to Bishop Steiner-Ball. More recently, CONAM members individually sent letters supporting Rep. Deb Haaland's nomination to become Secretary of the Interior in the new Biden administration. Her appointment has proven to be especially important, not only because she is the first Native American woman to hold a cabinet-level position, but by heading the Bureau of Indian Affairs, she continues strong advocacy work for Native peoples across the nation.

Our most recent efforts have been to educate the general public and encourage people to stand with Native Americans by wearing orange on Wednesday, October 6, as a "Day of Remembrance: Justice for our Children Healing for our Communities." Ken Krimmel wrote an article concerning the terrible losses of Indian children at residential boarding

schools which was published on the WV annual conference's website, and included in the Church's online newsletter, Short Circuit. In addition, Tim Edin and Elle High made a short video message about the importance of October 6 which also appeared online.

The COVID pandemic has taken a terrible toll on many of us in WV. To recognize our loss and honor the loved ones who had died, Elle High led this year's Peace Tree Ceremony at West Virginia University. Working from Native traditions, she and her neighbors in Preston County made 500 tobacco prayer ties, each one representing an individual who had died of the virus in the state as of the first week in November 2020 when the ceremony was held on campus. A garland of the prayer ties was placed on the Peace Tree as part of the ceremony and has remained there over this year. A couple of months later, Elle and others in the Bruceton United Methodist Church also made Native prayer ties for a memorial at the death of their longtime and much loved minister, Rev. Vicki Sheppard.

The pandemic may have changed things, but it has been unable to stop us from expressing our love for one another and the need for our churches to remain strong in our faith and in our caring for each other. It remains an exciting time to be a member of the WV CONAM as it strives to take part in that effort.

Submitted by Elle High, chairperson