



K̄unéix̄ Hídi Northern Light United Church

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Northern Light United Church Begins Era of Acknowledgment and Reparations

May 3, 2022 (Juneau): A local Juneau congregation is taking steps to acknowledge and repair the trauma caused by the 1963 forced closure of Juneau’s thriving Memorial Presbyterian Church. Northern Light United Church plans a series of concrete far-reaching actions to raise awareness, eliminate racism, make history known, and unlearn destructive attitudes and behaviors. The list of acknowledgments and reparative actions are contained in a [resolution](#) approved by the congregation after two years of work to address the enduring pain it says it inherited from the racism surrounding Memorial Church’s closure.

As a first step, the church has changed its name to **K̄unéix̄ Hídi Northern Light United Church**. The process was led by the Church’s Native Ministries Committee in consultation with language advisors Paul Marks and Paul Marks II. The name is interpreted as “the people’s healing house” or “the place where people gather to be healed.”

The Church says healing is necessary after decades of silence and the complicity of its predecessor, Northern Light Presbyterian Church, in the closure of Memorial Presbyterian Church which has deeply hampered relationships between Native and non-Natives for years.

“The deafening silence of White Presbyterian leaders and congregants regarding the abrupt closure of the Memorial Church is a disruptive force to Tlingit spiritual well-being,” says Native Ministries Committee member Lillian Petershoare. “It is also a barrier to living in harmony with White Presbyterians.”

Memorial Presbyterian Church, established in 1940, was also known as the Native Church. Led by its new young pastor Rev. Dr. Walter Soboleff, it grew into a thriving, multi-ethnic, intercultural congregation located where the Juneau Fire Department is now. Although the congregation voted in 1959 to oppose merging with the White Northern Light Presbyterian Church (NLPC), the merger and eventual closure of Memorial Church were engineered by the Alaska Presbytery and the Board of National Missions without meeting with the congregation or acknowledging the profound role of the church in the community; by moving NLPC into the same neighborhood and reducing funding for Memorial Church; and by reassigning Soboleff to serve small churches throughout Southeast Alaska. Several years after the congregation’s dissolution, the building was razed for Juneau’s urban renewal effort.

In addition to changing the Church’s name, the resolution pledges that the Church will use its own resources to carry out twenty other reparative actions including: offering a formal public apology according to traditional Tlingit custom; providing scholarships or grants to Alaska Native children and youth and to older Alaska Native students to participate in traditional culture and language programs and study for Christian ministry; commissioning and installing

significant works of art at the church created by Alaska Native artists; developing curriculum for adults, youth and children to teach the history of Memorial Church and the events surrounding its closure; investing in efforts to support meaningful invitation and welcome to Alaska Native people to worship at the church and become involved in church leadership and ministry. These and other actions will be supported by the commitment of at least \$350,000 for periodic allocations to support the church implementation of the reparations.

The Church also wrote a formal 23-page [overture](#) for consideration at this year's bi-annual national meeting of the Presbyterian Church (USA) asking the church to meaningfully address the wounds inflicted on Alaska Natives. The overture has been endorsed by the Presbytery of the Northwest Coast which will submit it for consideration to the 225th General Assembly scheduled to meet June 18 to July 9 with committee meetings preceding the full assembly.

“Actions always speak louder than words,” says Pastor Faith McClellan. “The overture is a plea that the General Assembly join us and the Northwest Coast Presbytery in tangible actions to provide reparative justice. Now is the time for all parties to deal honestly with the past and together to undertake the obligation and opportunity to improve the future.”

The overture calls for the Presbytery and the national church to acknowledge their culpability based on their own theological, spiritual and social justice imperatives and provide written and public apologies carried out in accordance with Tlingit protocol. It asks both organizations to take specific actions including increasing opportunities for Indigenous people to pursue ministry; donating funds to Sealaska Heritage Foundation for language revitalization programs and to the national church's Native American Church Property Fund; working to dismantle systemic racism; and engaging with the city of Juneau to fund a highly visible recognition of Memorial Presbyterian Church at its former site.

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Kunéix Hidi Northern Light United Church became a union congregation in 1974 affiliated with the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA) with ministry emphases in social justice, music, youth, and Native Ministries. Its mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ, through God-centered worship and people-centered ministry.