

RELIGION

Episcopal Church to study its role in federal Indian boarding schools

By Emily McFarlan Miller

July 15, 2022 at 1:23 p.m. EDT

The Episcopal Church will establish a fact-finding commission to research its role in the federal Indian boarding school system that separated generations of Indigenous children from their families and cultures in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Bishops and deputies at the general convention of the mainline denomination approved [the resolution](#) to tell the truth about the history of the Episcopal Church with Indigenous boarding schools last weekend in Baltimore.

The resolution encourages the Episcopal Church to hire one or more research fellows to work with dioceses where boarding schools for Indigenous children were located and to share records with the Indigenous Ministries of the Episcopal Church and the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition.

It also directs Episcopal Church archivists to create educational resources about the schools and encourages dioceses where boarding schools were located to gather information from survivors and their descendants about their experiences.

The House of Deputies, which with the House of Bishops oversees the church, also elected an Indigenous clergywoman, the Rev. Rachel Taber-Hamilton, as its vice president. A member of the Shakan First Nation and a priest in the Diocese of Olympia, Taber-Hamilton is the first [ordained woman](#) and only the third woman to serve in that role, according to Episcopal News Service.

She was elected alongside incoming president Julia Ayala Harris, a Latina laywoman from the Diocese of Oklahoma. Their election marks the first time two women and two people of color will lead the house.

Those actions come as Interior Secretary Deb Haaland kicks off a national listening tour in which she will hear from survivors of Indian boarding schools in the United States. Her department [recently released](#) the first volume of an investigative report into the federal Indian boarding school system.

At the end of this month, Pope Francis will travel to Canada to offer an apology to survivors of similar residential schools in that country. The pontiff received representatives of Canadian Indigenous people at the Vatican in April.

“This is a moment for us to really examine how we as a church might look at the ramifications of our sometimes unintentional and sometimes intentional acts of culturalism, racism and every other sin we could talk about,” Bishop Carol Gallagher said before the vote on the resolution.

The general convention, which the Episcopal Church normally holds every three years, was already delayed by the pandemic, and the meeting that ended Monday was shortened from eight days to four to minimize risks of spreading the virus.

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry urged committees working ahead of the gathering to focus on resolutions on “matters essential for the governance and good order of the church,” according to Episcopal News Service. The resolution on Indigenous schools rose to that level.

The Indian boarding school system was part of an effort by the federal government to assimilate Indigenous peoples and seize their land, according to the Interior Department report. Many children endured physical and emotional abuse, and some died.

Members of both the House of Bishops and House of Deputies spoke unanimously in favor of the resolution. Some shared their experiences officiating at funerals for children whose remains had been repatriated from the former Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. Others spoke of pushing the city of Albuquerque to acknowledge that children had been buried beneath a public park constructed on the former site of a boarding school run by the Presbyterian Church. Still others shared their experiences as boarding school survivors themselves or descendants of survivors.

Deputy Ruth Johnson of the Navajoland Area Mission attended two boarding schools, an experience, she told the House of Deputies, that is still hard for her to talk about. At the first school, Johnson said, she was traumatized when she became ill and her long hair was cut. At the second, she was beaten. “I could have easily been one of those that never made it home,” she said.

Gallagher, a member of the Cherokee Nation who serves the Diocese of Massachusetts and the Diocese of Albany, said her grandfather was a boarding school survivor. Her family still talks about a visit her parents made to a boarding school when she was a baby where children who had not seen their mothers in years climbed into her mother’s lap, she said. Some of those children never saw their families again, she said.

“For Indigenous people, listening is always the first step and really hearing the stories and living into the stories and working toward a consensus of what will come next,” Gallagher told Religion News Service. “Oftentimes, churches want to do some quick fix, and that is not going to get us anywhere.” That is why the resolution approved at general convention is important, she said.

The Episcopal Church resolution expresses once again the denomination’s support for federal legislation creating a Truth and Healing Commission to reckon with the country’s history of boarding schools similar to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was established in Canada.

It also incorporates language from a second resolution acknowledging the intergenerational trauma caused by the boarding schools and directing the denomination to support spiritual healing centers in Indigenous communities. The denomination has budgeted \$225,000 for that work.

“This is important work, and it’s for all of us,” said Bishop Mark Lattime of the Diocese of Alaska. “You might think your diocese doesn’t have a history of boarding schools with Indigenous people and, while that might be true, there isn’t a diocese in this church that doesn’t have a history with Indigenous people.”

Despite precautions, 26 people tested positive for the coronavirus out of about 1,200 participants at the general convention, according to Episcopal News Service. Other denominations also have seen some coronavirus cases as they have resumed meetings in person this summer, including the Southern Baptist Convention, the Presbyterian Church and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

— *Religion News Service*