

# A Circle of Thanksgiving

---

 [unitedmethodistwomen.org/bible-studies/thanksgiving](http://unitedmethodistwomen.org/bible-studies/thanksgiving)

[What We Do](#) > [Spiritual Growth](#) > [Bible Studies](#)

*The Rev. Cheryl Toothe, Cathy Nelson and Vicki Swartz sing during the Act of Repentance service at the 2012 United Methodist General Conference in Tampa, Fla.*

## A Bible Study

---

by Carol Lakota Eastin

### What does the national Thanksgiving holiday mean for Native American peoples?

---

*As I stand upon the Earth, I know that I am part of a Circle.*

*As I drink water from a cup, I know that I am part of a Circle.*

*As I harvest from a garden, I know that I am part of a Circle.*

*As I gather from a berry bush, I know that I am part of a Circle.*

*As I hunt and look into the eyes of the deer, I know that I am part of a Circle.*

*With each breath I take, with each day I live, I know I am part of a Circle.*

*My family gathers around a table and shares the foods and the stories.*

*Laughter and tears mingle to remind us that we are all part of a Circle.*

*That Circle is the Earth. That Circle is the People. That Circle is Life.*

The Rev. Dr. Thom White Wolf Fassett shared with us the tradition of the Great Thanksgiving as it is practiced by the Iroquois People in his book,  [Giving Our Hearts Away](#), the text for United Methodist Women's 2008-2009 mission study on Native American Survival. Mr. Fassett describes the lengthy prayer listing everything in creation for which the people give thanks. United Methodist Women members who participated in that study will recall the daily ritual of giving thanks for the most basic things in creation, the things that give us life.

In the Gospel of John, we read of Christ's role in the creation of these things: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (verse 1:3). This is a stunning declaration about Jesus. New Testament writers echo the theme: "For in him all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible. All things have been created through him and for him" (Colossians 1:16).

Our attitude toward creation ought be shaped by this realization and by the revelation that the salvific power of Christ goes beyond our individual salvation to the complete purpose of Christ, and that he reconciles all things to God, "whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:20). Nothing that the Greater God has

peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:20). Nothing that the Creator God has made is forgotten in the plan of redemption.

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves” (Romans 8:22-23).

So even as our families gather around our tables to give thanks on a national holiday known as Thanksgiving, we are acutely aware of the brokenness of the sacred circle of life. Not everyone has enough to eat on this day. Not everyone has a loving family with which to share it.

And the story of “the first Thanksgiving” as it has usually been told is far from the truth.

Images of pilgrims and American Indians enjoying a meal together may bring feelings of pride to some, but for Native Americans, such images are a painful reminder that peaceful relationships rarely existed between European immigrants and the First Peoples of America.

## What really happened at Plymouth Rock?

---

When the pilgrims arrived in 1620, they were poor and hungry. Miles Standish led a party to search for food, and discovering a cache of seed corn stored by Indians, he brought it back to the Mayflower. The native people were not strangers to Europeans; among them was Squanto, who had been captured as a slave in 1614, taken to Europe, and miraculously returned home again. It was with compassion mixed with great caution that the native people assisted these new arrivals, providing food, teaching planting techniques and signing a treaty granting the pilgrims the right to the land at Plymouth.

Massasoit, the powerful Wampanoag leader, formed this treaty but not without mention of the theft of the seed corn and the capacity of the colonists to violate native people. The images we see of pilgrims dining with Indians are reminiscent of that treaty signing. But within 20 years European disease and treachery had decimated the Wampanoag people, and by 1623 the elder Mather, a Pilgrim leader, gave thanks to God for destroying the “heathen savages” to make way “for a better growth.”

## When was the first Thanksgiving?

---

There seems to have been many thanksgiving ceremonies at various settlements. William B. Newell, a Penobscot Indian and former chairman of the anthropology department at the University of Connecticut, says that the first official Thanksgiving Day was proclaimed by the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1637 to commemorate the massacre of 700 men, women and children who were celebrating their annual Green Corn Dance.

The Indians were ordered from the building and were shot down as they came out; those remaining in the building were burned alive. The very next day the governor declared a

thanksgiving day. For the next 100 years, every thanksgiving day ordained by a governor was in honor of this bloody “victory.”

Later, U.S. President George Washington proclaimed the first nationwide thanksgiving celebration, marking Nov. 26, 1789, “a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favours of Almighty God.” Certainly a better sentiment, but the earlier images of settlers’ thankfulness remain in Indian peoples’ memories.

## Giving thanks today

---

So, how do Indian people commemorate Thanksgiving Day today? As we have for thousands of years: We gather with our families and our community to thank God for the harvest and the hunt, to honor the plants and the animals that give themselves up so that we can live, and to remember that everything in creation is sacred. We enjoy our meal of traditional Indian foods like turkey, corn and sweet potatoes.

Some Indian communities have alternative plans for Thanksgiving.

In Colorado, descendants of the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre gather each year for the “Healing Run” in which young people retrace the escape path of their ancestors who survived that massacre, which was led by Methodist clergyman Col. John Chivington and devastated a peaceful camp of Cheyenne and Arapaho.

In recent years, some United Methodists have participated in the run, including Denver Area Bishop Elaine Stanovsky and her family. Bishop Stanovsky says the history of the Sand Creek Massacre still shapes the tension between the area’s native communities and the predominantly white majority. “We have to really come to grips with that particular history and what it means and the harm that it continues to do, to cause, in the human family,” she said.

At the 2008 General Conference, our denomination’s highest policymaking body, the United Methodist Church pledged \$50,000 to support the new national historic site near Eads, Colo., and additional funds are forthcoming. Ongoing conversations between the descendants of the survivors and United Methodists are the beginning of a healing relationship.

At the 2012 General Conference, historic actions included passing a resolution that denounced the Doctrine of Discovery, an international legal concept popular in the 1800s that held any land not inhabited by Christians could be “discovered” and claimed by Christians. According to this doctrine, original inhabitants could be converted, enslaved or killed.\*

The 2012 General Conference Act of Repentance with Indigenous People was a memorable

accounting of the historic mistreatment of indigenous people and a commitment from the Church and its bishops to embark on a trail of repentance and a process of healing relationships.

United Methodists are called to participate in the Act of Repentance, through study, listening, relating and action. Delegates to the General Conference received a copy of *Giving Our Hearts Away*, which was reprinted for this purpose. The good work of United Methodist Women helped significantly in setting the stage for the Act of Repentance. Delegates also received "On This Spirit Walk," a new curriculum written specifically for the Act of Repentance.\*\* United Methodist Women and local churches are encouraged to engage in these studies and take part in the Act of Repentance journey.\*\*\*

At General Conference in Tampa this spring, I volunteered at the Act of Repentance booth that was located next to the United Methodist Deaconess' Prayer Center where women were making prayer quilts. Over the course of the conference, some Native American women joined them in the task of making prayer squares for the Act of Repentance service.

As I sat, designing, painting and stitching my part in the prayer quilt, I felt a solidarity with United Methodist Women and other women who wanted to share in praying for the Act of Repentance. I had come to the conference with supplies to sew prayer horses made of felt and beads. Some United Methodist Women members took an interest in making them, and we sent our prayers to heaven as we made the little prayer horses together.

Actions like these, native and other women praying together, are a good start on our journey.

The trail of repentance that we walk is a trail prepared for us by Jesus Christ, who has called all of us to take up our cross and follow him. It is a trail that will include tears of both grief and joy as we participate in the reconciliation of all things to God.

"We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves" (Romans 8:22-23).

This is a journey that will be filled with thanksgiving as we remember that all of us are part of the same circle. That circle is the earth. That circle is the people. That circle is life.

\* Go to [naicumc.org](http://naicumc.org) for more on "Doctrine of Discovery"

\*\* Available from Native American Comprehensive Plan, [nacomp@prodigy.net](mailto:nacomp@prodigy.net)

\*\*\* Go to [gccuic-umc.org](http://gccuic-umc.org) and click on the "Act of Repentance" tab for more information.

