

REACHING OUT FOR CHRIST IN NATIVE AMERICAN/FIRST NATIONS MINISTRIES



The RCA's mission to Native American/First Nations people began with the early Dutch settlers in New Netherlands (New York City). Bastiaen Janz Krol, the first "comforter of the sick," was mandated in 1624 to "instruct the Indians in the Christian religion out of God's holy Word."

Sixty-five years later, the very non-Dutch name "Ock-Kweese" appears among the Dutch names in the records of baptism at First Reformed Church in Albany, New York. Well over 100 individuals of the Mohawk Nation became members of the Reformed Church in the following 10 years.

These early efforts in Native American mission work in the Hudson and Mohawk River valleys came to a halt around the turn of the 18th century. The increasing hostility of the European settlers made missionary efforts unlikely. Almost 200 years passed before Native American people were again included in RCA mission efforts. It was the women of the church who revived mission to the Native Americans, this time among the people of the western plains.

The revival in Native American mission work started in 1895 when Reformed Church women called Frank Hall Wright into service. He was the child of a Choctaw Indian pastor and a missionary/teacher mother. He faithfully carried his ministry to the Comanche, the Fort Sill Apache, the Arapahoe, and the Cheyenne, all in Oklahoma. He followed the tribes from place to place, pitching his tent nearby and talking with them around their campfires. These early efforts culminated in the dedication of the Columbian Church at Colony, Oklahoma, in 1897. Twenty-two Native American people were received into the fellowship of the church. This congregation survived until 1932. These early beginnings are the roots of all present-day RCA ministry among Native American/First Nations people.

Today the work of the Reformed Church among Native American/First Nations people in the U.S. and Canada takes place in three contexts: reservation churches, non-reservation churches, and institutions and organizations serving the needs of native peoples.

NATIVE AMERICAN/FIRST NATIONS MISSION IN THE RESERVATION CONTEXT

North American Indian/First Nations reservations are unique communities within the broader culture of the United States and Canada. A locally elected tribal council is the governing body on each of these reservations. Each reservation has its own set of laws governing life in the community. The tribe's economy is based on tribal industries and various federal programs. These reservation communities frequently experience high incidences of unemployment, suicide, disease, and alcoholism. Native American/First Nations leaders are combating the negative images of reservation life by pressing for greater self-determination and by working toward ending dependency on federal programs. The RCA has three mission churches within this context.

Mescalero Reformed Church in Mescalero, New Mexico

The Mescalero Apache reservation is located in the Sacramento Mountains in southern New Mexico, approximately 100 miles from the Mexican border. The Reformed Church first contacted the Apache Indians when Frank Hall Wright traveled to Mescalero in 1907.

Mescalero Reformed Church was organized in 1913 under the efforts of E. B. Fincher, who had been sent as a missionary to the Apaches by Iowa Classis. On the first Sunday of organization, 87 Apaches joined the congregation. In addition to the main chapel, a small chapel was built for the 170 Fort Sill Chiricahua Apaches who moved to the White Tail Canyon area of the reservation. A new mission site was purchased in 1948, and the present chapel, parsonage, and worker's cottage are located there.

The Mescalero Apache nation is one of the strongest, politically and economically, among the Native American nations. The reservation now numbers over 2,500 people. More than half of the total population is under 17 years of age.

RCA Global Mission provides the salary for the missionary pastor, a staff grant for a ministry associate, and a program grant. The consistory seeks to carry out the traditional programs of an established church in ways that reflect its Indian heritage. This congregation has support shares for its own pastor and provides a significant portion of the cost for the ministry associate.

Jicarilla Apache Reformed Church, Dulce, New Mexico

The Jicarilla Apache reservation in Dulce, New Mexico, lies in the extreme north-central part of the state at an altitude of about 7,000 feet.

The Reformed Church work began in Dulce in 1911. The economically deprived Jicarilla Apache people, suffering from sickness of body and spirit, were openly resistant to any effort of the "white missionaries." It took the missionaries many hours of riding on horseback to visit isolated areas. The love and commitment of such leaders as Walter C. Roe and J. Denton Simms were a major factor in building a level of trust that enabled individuals to hear the gospel.

A small church and parsonage were built in 1914. These early buildings were later remodeled and an education building and recreation/community center were added. The church also ministers to Navajo, Pueblo, and Oklahoma Indian people who live on the Jicarilla Apache reservation.

RCA Global Mission provides the salary for the missionary pastor and a grant to assist with the salary of a ministry associate. The congregation has assumed shares in the support of its pastor and has committed support to the ministry associate.

Calling Lake Church Plant in Calling Lake, Alberta

In 2009, the groundwork was laid for a church plant on the Woodland Cree reservation in Calling Lake, Alberta. This was the first RCA church established on a First Nations reservation in Canada. Church planter Norm McCallum, who is himself Woodland Cree, got to know people on the reservation by visiting the local food bank and participating in vacation Bible school programs on the reservation. As relationships developed, they began to hold worship services in local homes for 12-15 people each week.

The Calling Lake church plant receives support from the Regional Synod of Canada's Mobilizing for Mission program as well as from the Classis of Canadian Prairies and Athabasca Reformed Congregation in Athabasca, Alberta.

MISSION WORK IN NON-RESERVATION NATIVE AMERICAN/FIRST NATIONS CONGREGATIONS

The Reformed Church has two Native American/First Nations congregations in non-reservation settings: Apache Reformed Church in Apache, Oklahoma, and Comanche Reformed Church in Lawton, Oklahoma. Indian people in these locations do not live on reservations because the government granted them land allotments as treaty settlements. Therefore, the congregations are in integrated communities. Due to this environment, the native people have an opportunity to interface with the mainstream society with greater ease than individuals who live on reservations. They do, however, also seek to maintain their language and traditions.

Apache Reformed Church, Apache, Oklahoma

The first Native American congregation located in a non-reservation context is Apache Reformed Church in Apache, Oklahoma. Apache Reformed Church had its beginning when the missionary to the Comanche tribe began work with the Chiricahua Apaches. Jonah Washington came to Apache to be the first full-time pastor in 1958. Since that time the church has continued to grow.

The community of Apache, in which the church is located, has a population of about 1,500 people. Since there are other Protestant churches in the community, Apache Reformed Church has remained principally an Indian congregation, although it also includes some whites, blacks, and Hispanics. RCA Global Mission provides the salary for the missionary pastor. This congregation has Partnership-in-Mission support in its own pastor.

Comanche Reformed Church, Lawton, Oklahoma

Among the numerous and painful injustices suffered by Native Americans was the removal of the Comanche people from their home territory. In deprivation, they were relocated near Fort Sill, Oklahoma. They contacted RCA missionary Frank Hall Wright and pleaded with him to come to visit them. He spent three days with them, sharing the gospel and seeking to meet their physical needs. At the end of the visit, 12 people were baptized and the Comanche Mission was started.

Four years later (1907), Vermilye Memorial Comanche Reformed Church was organized with 63 members. In 1934 Robert Chaat, the first Native American to be accepted into the ordained ministry of the Reformed Church, was installed as pastor. The Comanche church is the first Native American congregation to assume a self-supporting status.

It is an integrated congregation serving non-Indian persons from the immediate community and the Fort Sill military post as well as individuals and families from the Comanche Nation. The church receives no aid from RCA Global Mission.

MISSION TO NATIVE AMERICAN/FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE THROUGH INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

The third context in which the Reformed Church is in mission among Native American/First Nations people is in the area of institutions and organizations designed to meet specific needs of Native Americans/First Nations.

Lutheran Association of Missionaries and Pilots, Inc.

RCA Global Mission provides a program grant to the Lutheran Association of Missionaries and Pilots, Inc. (LAMP). LAMP sends teams of volunteers to remote native villages in Canada each summer to teach vacation Bible school and minister to youth and adults. Some LAMP volunteers serve on a sports ministry team that travels to communities teaching soccer skills, encouraging healthy lifestyles, and sharing the love of Christ.

Mission Aviation Repair Center

Since 1998, RCA Global Mission has partnered with the Mission Aviation Repair Center (MARC) in Soldotna, Alaska, to support a pilot mechanic. MARC provides aviation services for missionary outreach, Bible conferences, and training camps for a number of denominations serving the isolated native Alaskan communities.

Center of Hope

RCA Global Mission helps support the Center of Hope, an urban outreach ministry in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, an area with a high population of Native Americans. The center's programs address spiritual and material needs by providing prayer, access to computers and phones, winter clothing (over 7,500 items each year), bikes to ride to work (more than 600 bikes per year), and mother/baby baskets (100 per year). The center also welcomes people to Hope Worship Hour, Sports Night for teens and young adults, a weekly fellowship meal, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, adult Bible studies, and several children's programs.

MISSION RELATIONSHIPS AND THE FUTURE OF NATIVE AMERICAN/FIRST NATIONS MISSION

All of the churches in the Native American/First Nations mission program relate directly to local classes. RCA Global Mission supplements salaries and assists with program money. The financial load of a local congregation could not be carried by the local people alone. In recent years, however, Native American/First Nations congregations have been assuming more of their own program support.

The RCA emphasis on partnership with the congregations is appreciated by Native American/First Nations people. Each congregation is developing an identity this is both Christian and Indian. Native American/First Nations congregations are assuming partnership responsibility in other ways, such as the increase in benevolent contributions to the mission program of the Reformed Church around the world. Recognizing their own cultural heritage, the congregations are also financially supporting institutions and organizations that meet particular needs of Native American/First Nations people and their communities.

Future mission partnership with Native American/First Nations people will need to include the following emphases:

1. Commitment by the Reformed Church to the understanding that the gospel can and does speak to Native American/First Nations people within the context of their own culture.
2. Support for programs seeking to prepare Native American/First Nations people for leadership in the Christian church.
3. Support of the Native American/First Nations congregations in their desire to reach out evangelistically.
4. Support of the Native American/First Nations congregations as they continue to grow in stewardship.

5. Increasing the role of the RCA as a listening partner. The RCA has much to learn from the Native American/First Nations culture, with its holistic approach to tribal communal life.

YOU CAN BE A MISSION PARTNER IN NATIVE AMERICAN/FIRST NATIONS MINISTRIES

There are many ways you can become a partner in the worldwide mission of the Reformed Church in America:

- Commit to a Partnership-in-Mission share.
- Include the RCA mission program in your will.
- Make designated or undesignated gifts.
- Serve as an RCA mission volunteer.
- Assist your classis in forming a partnership with an RCA global church partner.
- Commit to pray for RCA missionaries and church partners.

For more information about any of these ways to support RCA mission, please contact Nancy Ellens at nellens@rca.org or (800) 968-3943.

To donate to support a missionary or mission project, mail your check—made out to “Reformed Church in America” and with the memo line clearly designating the project or missionary you would like to support—to Reformed Church in America; P.O. Box 19381; Newark, NJ 07195-1938 or, in Canada, to Regional Synod of Canada; 201 Paradise Road N., Hamilton, ON L8S 3T3.

Donations for many mission projects can be made online. Visit the RCA donation page, www.rca.org/give, and click on “Missionaries,” “Featured Projects,” or “Reformed Church World Service” to find mission projects that need your support.

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