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OF CHRIST

Historic Property Transfer: Wisconsin Conference Returns Property to Ho-Chunk Nation

By Rev. Rob MacDougall

Ho-Chunk United Church of Christ, formerly the Winnebago Mission, near Black River Falls, gathered for worship and some deeply important decision making on Sunday, September 27. The members and leaders of the church had been praying, planning and preparing for decisions that would move their life and ministry into the future.

From the time of its founding the church property and building were owned by the predecessor bodies of the Wisconsin Conference UCC, and then, until September 27, by the Wisconsin Conference. For several years the Wisconsin Conference and the Ho-Chunk Church had been in dialogue about the church taking possession of the property and building. This was not to be a sale of the property; the Conference would simply hand over the deed to the faithful people who had worshiped and been in ministry at the church for more than a century.



Ho-Chunk United Church of Christ



Hattie Walker signing transfer papers

The Rev. David McBride has been serving the church in an interim capacity and has been helping to keep the transfer of ownership conversation alive. Though Rev. McBride would be unable to be present on September 27, a congregational meeting was called and publicized by the church. Hattie Walker, a member of the consistory and the church's organizational hub, worked to gather the people and materials in order for the church to move

forward. Hattie contacted Rev. Marlene Helgemo, pastor of All Nations Church in Minneapolis and representative of CAIM UCC. Marlene is a daughter of the Ho-Chunk Church who has offered spiritual and organizational wisdom over the years. Rev. Helgemo was invited to talk to the church about possible building projects and a capital campaign to support them. Glen White, the church's president, gave leadership to the day. Glen lead the worship service along with Larry Littlegeorge, a Lay Academy member, and Rev. Rob MacDougall, Wisconsin Conference ACM, who preached.

During the worship service many prayers were offered. Prayers for people who were sick and hurting, prayers of gratitude for a new job, prayers for grandchildren and all children, prayers for the Pope and people serving in the military, prayers for people suffering from alcohol abuse and for those recovering from addictions. The prayers were powerful, expressing the deepest concerns of people's lives. Following the prayers, in the middle of the service as an act of genuine care, coffee and cookies were served.



Truman Lowe and Glen White

After worship, the congregation moved to a large tent that had been set up adjacent to the church. Kettles of various soups had been prepared, along with fry bread and punch for a stomach-warming lunch. The thirty five kids and adults who were present ate their fill and then the meeting began. Details of what was necessary for the transfer of ownership were examined and then the congregation voted unanimously to receive the property. Rev. Helgemo stood up and told the church to applaud themselves because they had just made a very significant decision. Rev. Helgemo also thanked the Wisconsin Conference for its commitment to justice for people.



Larry Littlegeorge and members of the Ho-Chunk Congregation

The congregation then entered into a long discussion about the needs of their aging building and the ministries of the church. Truman Lowe, a son of the church and nationally-known Native American artist, stood up and gave witness to the gifts he received from the church growing up. Irene Keenan, Sr., daughter of the church who had traveled from La Crosse for the day, stood up and

spoke of the children's programs she lead for several years at the church. Someone got up and talked about how the church had been the source of water for many households in the past. Someone talked about the women's sewing circles that had been a part of the church. Almost every person present rose to speak of the importance of the church in their life and then they talked about the future ministry of the church to children and youth. Though their numbers were not large these faithful people spoke from their hearts and from their souls and it was a wonder to see.

The Ho-Chunk congregation expressed its commitment to remaining part of the UCC. Larry Littlegeorge lifted up the General Synod's vote to address the Doctrine of Discovery as it continues to burden the relationship of indigenous people to the Christian church. His words speak to the need for ongoing spiritual work and reconciliation between people. The people and churches of the UCC still walk a path of faithfulness together and we must speak to each other of our brokenness and mutual joy. We give thanks to God for the Ho-Chunk Church, for all it has been for its children and who it will be for its future children. We give thanks for the covenant that binds us together as God's people in the hope that we might reflect the heart of Jesus ever more fully.