



THE RIGHT REVEREND MARK LATTIME

BISHOP OF THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF ALASKA
1205 DENALI WAY, FAIRBANKS, AK 99701

**Statement of The Right Reverend Mark Lattime, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Alaska
to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on
Energy and Mineral Resources hearing “The Need to Protect the Arctic National Wildlife
Refuge Coastal Plain” on H.R. 1146 The Arctic Cultural and Coastal Plain Protection Act
March 26, 2019**

At issue are two different and fundamentally opposed views with respect to the land. Drilling in the Coastal Plain must be seen in light of the legacy of colonialism, racism, and the Doctrine of Discovery, and the opposition of these to Indigenous peoples’ relationship to the land. It is from this foundation that The Episcopal Church’s views on environmental justice, economics and climate issues lead us to oppose the industrial exploitation of the Sacred Place Where Life Begins. In order to fully understand this context, it is necessary to establish a foundational understanding of the Doctrine of Discovery and how in the past, and today, it attempts to justify exploitation.

The Doctrine of Discovery is the cumulative policy established through a series of policies and statements issued by the Bishops of Rome during the 15th Century. The Episcopal Church’s Missioner for Indigenous Ministries, The Reverend Dr. Bradley Hauff (Lakota Sioux), summarizes the outcome of these policies “as a blessing on the dispossession of land, wanton theft, slavery, and enforce indoctrination, all in the name of God, and for the perceived good of the world.”^{vi} These teachings were not exclusive to the Roman Catholic Church, Queen Elizabeth I and other Protestants gladly adopted similar views to justify their actions in Africa and the Americas for hundreds of years to come.

Sadly, this concept and the sins it gave rise to are not a vestige of the past. The Doctrine of Discovery has been ingrained into our American identity and economic system. As former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, The Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori, stated in a Pastoral Letter to the Church:

The ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples is the result of legal systems throughout the “developed” world that continue to base land ownership on these religious warrants for colonial occupation from half a millennium ago. These legal bases collectively known as the Doctrine of Discovery underlie U.S. decisions about who owns these lands. The dispossession of First Peoples continues to wreak havoc on basic human dignity.ⁱⁱ

The Doctrine of Discovery is the underlying legal theory that has led to the current system of reservations, restricted sovereignty, and today potential violation of the Gwich’in peoples’ human rights. While our legal system is still weighed down by the Doctrine of Discovery, The Episcopal Church has worked to change and come into a more Christian relationship with Indigenous people and the God we all seek to know and serve. The Gwich’in people’s encounter with early Anglican and Episcopal missionaries was not unlike that of other Indigenous peoples in North America. Some of the missionaries came with an agenda of social and cultural assimilation, which included

the establishment of church-run residential schools. Others came with a more theological motivation – to introduce Jesus Christ to the people without an assimilation agenda.

Learning the Indigenous languages and living among the people within their cultural context was essential to achieving this, and some were committed to it, not merely as an evangelistic approach, but as a culturally-integrated and theologically-integrated manner of life.

One very influential missionary to the Gwich'in was the Reverend Robert McDonald (1829-1913). McDonald married Julia Kutuq, a Gwich'in woman, with whom he had nine children. He achieved lasting recognition for his translations, having established an alphabet for the previously oral Gwich'in. With the help of various native speakers of the language, he translated the Bible, Book of Common Prayer and many hymns into Gwich'in (which he called Takudh and, later, Tukudh). His translation work helped unify the various tribes speaking similar Athabaskan languages. In 1911, he published a dictionary and grammar for the language under the title of "A Grammar of the Tukudh Language." With these accomplishments, McDonald is in the same category of missionaries as the Reverend Samuel Hinman, who lived among the Lakota/Dakota, married a Native woman, became fluent in the language, and translated portions of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer into Dakota, as well as developing the Dakota Hymnal, which is still in use within Episcopal Dakota/Lakota communities to this day.

Unlike missionaries inspired by the Doctrine of Discovery, these two (McDonald and Hinman) did not see a need to force Indigenous people to learn English; rather, they learned the Indigenous languages. By doing so, they served as custodians and purveyors of Indigenous languages, contributing to their preservation within an environment where the Federal Government was trying to have them discontinued in favor of English through assimilation processes.

To the present day, Indigenous language preservation has been one of the roles of the church within Indigenous communities. Language is important, because without it one cannot truly know and experience the depth of Indigenous culture and spirituality. So, language preservation is one way in which Gwich'in traditions are preserved by and within the church.

Another way is by recognizing and acknowledging the pre-colonial presence of Christ as found within Gwich'in traditions and spiritual expressions. Inherent in this is the conviction that, when the early missionaries brought Christianity to the Gwich'in (and all other Indigenous tribes for that matter) they really weren't bringing anything to the people that they didn't already know and have. The Indigenous peoples didn't know about the first century Jesus of Nazareth, but they did know Christ within their own teachings, especially with regard to compassion, generosity, and living in right relationship with all of creation, values that are found within Gwich'in traditional life and that of Indigenous tribes universally.

It is difficult to overstate the theological and moral importance of this point. The places and traditions, such as the Gwich'in Sacred Place Where Life Begins, that are sacred to Indigenous people today and before the introduction of formal European Christianity are still sacred under Christian teachings. Christians believe that Christ became human and engaged with us directly, as told in the Gospels. Additionally, the Holy Spirit has and does work among and through us in ways that are often hidden and indirect. Locations and traditions of Indigenous people are sacred because they are how the Holy Spirit engaged and taught them for thousands of years.

The Doctrine of Discovery was a sin against our neighbors because it dehumanized them, it violated their rights, it tried to justify slaughter, and it was founded in hate, greed, and vanity. The

Doctrine of Discovery was also a sin against God, because it was and still is used to justify the desecration of places and traditions made sacred by the Holy Spirit prior to the introduction of the Gospels and Jesus.

The sins of previous generations have also warped and harmed the way we view and interact with God's Creation. The Doctrine of Discovery, and the legal and economic theories it has evolved into today, argued that God's Creation was a commodity for people to exploit. It transformed the traditional relationship between God's human and non-human creations from a respectful coexistence to a transactional exploitation. Just as the Doctrine of Discovery justified the enslavement of people it taught us that the earth was also our slave to be hedonistically used and exploited. Today, we see the impact of this heresy through climate change, pollution, toxic waste sites, Super Fund sites, and communities made sick as a result of our irresponsible use of God's Creation.

In my travels around the Diocese, I have observed, even in my short 9 years, the accelerating effects of climate change. While the physical effects of climate change are easy to measure: loss of sea ice, coastal erosion, shifts in animal migrations, receding glaciers, and melting permafrost; the human effects are too often left underreported or all together ignored. In my pastoral ministry to the people of Alaska, I can sadly report that climate change has profound consequences on human spirituality and identity.

This is especially true for those who live closest to the land: Alaska's indigenous people. As someone who is invited to pray and participate in the lives of the people of Alaska, to walk with them, through the struggles of life in a changing and uncertain world, I have first-hand experience how climate change has affected their lives and spirit. Communities that have thrived for tens of thousands of years in sustainable relationship with the land and animals are now being forced to evacuate their traditional homes. Indigenous social values of sharing and mutual care for one's community are breaking down as individuals are forced to abandon their traditions and the land of their ancestors to find work in the very industries that are hastening their own cultural demise.

There is an insidious cultural genocide to the march of climate change, and our economic interests are complicit in this march. This reality floods my prayers and troubles my soul. The challenges of climate change are, therefore, deeply personal and spiritual to me, especially as I am convicted by my faith to seek justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being.

The Episcopal Church recognizes climate change as a justice issue. This Lent, our Presiding Bishop called upon the Church to make climate justice a matter of prayerful action and invited all Episcopalians to renew our commitment to loving, life-giving stewardship.

It is time for our nation and world to undo the social and environmental impacts of previous centuries. We must shift from a transactional relationship to a cooperative and equal balance. This is not done through actions alone but must include shifts in our philosophy and societal behaviors. We must work to live in a state of balance and harmony with God's Creation – human and non-human – for we are all equally entitled to prosper. Our Church has begun this work, however humbly, through a number of changes enacted by our General Convention – a legislative body elected by our members that serves as our official decision-making body.

Since the early 1990's the Church has officially opposed drilling within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge ([1991-D125](#)). This has been renewed many times, including last summer as we considered this most recent assault on the Gwich'in people, their way of life, and their faith. In pursuit of eco-justice, the Church has articulated its support for the self-determination of Indigenous tribes ([2012-B023](#)) and renounced the Doctrine of Discovery ([2009-D035](#)) in both its political and theological applications.

As part of the Church's work to ensure the responsible and sustainable use of God's creation, the Church has called for significant efforts to transition the world, our nation, and the economy away from fossil fuels. Recognizing that such changes will have adverse side effects for those currently employed in these legacy industries, the Church must work to support their transition. No commitment to environmental justice can be complete without advocating for those, who, through no fault of their own, will be harmed by the transition to renewable and clean energy.

In my Diocese, Alaska, this transition will be incredibly difficult, but we must stop making the problem worse before we can seriously address the future. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is more than a wilderness preserve established to protect delicate arctic ecosystems, it is also a sacred place: the spiritual and cultural home of the Gwich'in people. Gwich'in identity--what it means to be a people—cannot be separated from the land and the caribou who thrive there; and long before the Church arrived, the Gwich'in recognized the sanctity of this place where life begins.

Therefore, protecting the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and especially the Coastal Plain, is more than an effort to preserve the tundra, the caribou, or the caribou calving grounds. Protecting the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a matter of justice, a sacred trust that honors and preserves the life, culture, and spiritual integrity of a people.

As a Christian and a Bishop, I frame my support for policy like H.R.1146 in the context of Biblical and theological understandings. The Gwich'in recognize the Coastal Plain as "The Sacred Place Where Life Begins." This is not a casual self-interested statement. It is, in fact, a profound understanding of the immutable relationship between God and creation, and it is consistent with Biblical faith. Sacred space is not exclusively determined by bishops or the Church, nor is it defined by the walls of any house of worship. Sacred space is God's space, where the One who is present in all Creation is recognized, if only dimly, by eyes open to seeing what is beyond human understanding. As Wendell Berry has said, "sacred space is where we stop and turn to realize the "worth" of things is not ours to assign, God gives worth, value."

As a Christian and a bishop, I would rejoice if more people were to follow the example we have from the Gwich'in and recognize the critical importance of honoring the sacred nature of this good earth – our island home, and to set apart portions as sacred.

If Congress will not respect the Gwich'in peoples' Constitutional right to the free exercise of their religion – which designates this space as sacred and is a view upheld and supported by our Church – then I hope you will consider history. History does not look favorably on those leaders who utilized the Doctrine of Discovery and its later embodiments to justify the physical and cultural slaughter of Indigenous people. Today, this generation, this Congress has the choice to perpetrate the same sins of our forefathers or to learn, grow, and work for a better world than they did.

I beseech you on behalf of a loving, liberating, and life-giving God who fills all things because He created all things, to pass H.R. 1146 and protect the Holy and Sacred Place Where Life Begins.

ⁱ <https://cqcengage.com/episcopal/file/R4Uf9M88Bag/Brad%20Hauff%20EAM%20Paper%202018.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/episcopal-presiding-bishop-katharine-jefferts-schori-issues-pastoral-letter>