Enmegahbowh, Migration with Dignity, a liberation theology

Let us pray: Great Spirit, remembering all my ancestors, help me remain balanced upon my sacred journey and never stray from you. Amen.

Following ancient prophecy to travel west until they found “the food that grows upon the water,” the Ojibwe moved over generations into the wild rice country of what is now Minnesota.

This is also the land of manoomin, the sacred food upon the water, whose future remains threatened by mining, runoff fertilizers, and water pollution, raising urgent questions about our responsibility to creation and future generations.

Their story became entangled with broken treaties, forced displacement, and the tragedy of Sandy Lake.

The Sandy Lake Tragedy, often called the “Ojibwe Trail of Tears,” occurred in 1850 when the U.S. government attempted to force the Ojibwe from their homelands in Wisconsin and Michigan to lands west of the Mississippi River. Thousands were ordered to travel to Sandy Lake, Minnesota, to receive treaty annuity payments.

When they arrived, in late fall, supplies and payments were delayed, food was scarce, and disease spread rapidly. More than 10% of the Ojibwe men, women, and children died from illness, starvation, and exposure. For many Anishinaabe people, Sandy Lake is remembered not as an accident, but as the result of broken treaties, government deception, and an attempted policy of forced removal.

In **1862**, Minnesota Governor **Alexander Ramsey** told the state legislature that “the Sioux Indians of Minnesota must be exterminated or driven forever beyond the borders of the state.” This historical statement is one of the clearest examples of empires call for the removal of Indigenous peoples from Minnesota.

Yet a deeper story endured: a people shaped not by conquest but by resilience, sacred movement, and trust in the Creator.

Enmegahbowh—whose name is often translated “the one who stands before his people”—was the first Indigenous priest ordained in The Episcopal Church. Born among the Ojibwe, he became a bridge between cultures during a period marked by colonization, displacement, treaty violations, and immense pressure upon Indigenous communities.

The Gull Lake people were pushed first toward Leech Lake and then toward White Earth. But they did not disappear. they carried their stories, their language, their prayers, and their identity with them. And among them walked Enmegahbowh, praying with his people while standing—just as his name proclaims—bearing witness that neither empire nor removal could erase what the Creator had planted in their hearts.

He accompanied his people through grief and uncertainty, carrying faith, prayer, and community into a new place marked by both survival and sorrow.

Enmegahbowh served faithfully among the Ojibwe people of Minnesota, advocated with Bishop Whipple for peace during the U.S.–Dakota War, and remained deeply committed both to Christian faith and to the dignity of his own people. His life stands as both a witness to the possibilities of accompaniment and a

reminder of the Church's complicated history in partnership with empire and conquest.

Enmegahbowh's witness offers the Church a profound invitation: To stand before the people not as conquerors, but as companions. As people willing to walk together through wilderness toward beloved community.

The collect for his feast prays that we may serve Christ "with fiery zeal and gentle humility." Those two qualities rarely appear together in our world. Usually, we are asked to choose between them.

Enmegahbowh's life reminds us that Christian witness is strongest when courage and tenderness remain bound together.

We are living in a time when migration itself has become politicized in ways that strip people of their humanity. Migrants become statistics. Talking points. Threats. Problems to solve. Entire communities reduced to insults, categories and labels.

Migration With Dignity stands as resistance in our time as a rejection of the Doctrine of Discovery—the series of fifteenth-century papal decrees that gave Christian nations moral and legal justification to seize Indigenous lands, dominate peoples, and erase cultures in the name of the forced conversion and empire.

Those doctrines helped shape centuries of colonization, land seizure, forced assimilation, displacement, genocide, and violence across this continent, including here in Minnesota.

The Episcopal Church and others have publicly confessed their participation, and repudiated those teachings, recognizing that they fundamentally contradict the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Migration With Dignity calls us in another direction. It insists upon the sacred worth and dignity of every human being.

It reminds the Beloved Community that our calling is not to sanctify and support economic domination, cultural erasure, borders to limit cultural and racial diversity. Our calling is to walk humbly with one another as relatives, neighbors, and fellow bearers of the image of God.

And for us as Episcopalians, this question is deeply rooted in our baptismal covenant.

Every time we gather around the font, we proclaim that every human being carries immeasurable worth before God. Not because of citizenship, legal status, or economic value, but simply because we are beloved.

Every baptism is, in some sense, a border crossing. A movement into a new way of belonging where old divisions begin to lose their power. No human being is illegal to God.

I must also speak honestly.

The Church does not have a stellar history living into this covenant.

The Church has too often aligned with conquest instead of accompaniment. Christianity was often complicit within the systems that erased language, culture, identity, and belonging. Far too often the Gospel of Jesus is distorted using faith as a tool of domination.

Enmegahbowh's witness asks us difficult questions:

How might Christian history be written if we Christians did not so often support the forces of domination, colonialism, and exclusion?

What if our history was lived out through the Pentecostal experience of the early church rather than the corporate contract with empire.

Those questions matter especially here in Minnesota.

A land whose soil carries the memory of broken covenants, forced removals, and uprooted communities.

We confess the sins of our ancestors both historical and ongoing done on our behalf.

The Way of Love is not to defend our history or our lust for economic power. The Way is to confess our greed, our displacement of peoples and cultures, our theft of land and resources.

Let us agree as called by Bishop Loya to practice, witness and resist, in prayerful solidarity with those whose dignity is denied. Let us together stand before the people.

To stand beside immigrants seeking safety, Indigenous communities whose historical stories still need telling, human remains returned to their families, and in our own time Palestinians—Christian and Muslim displaced as the target of unspeakable genocide.

Enmegahbowh speaks to the Church today. Not through triumph or domination. But through steadfast presence.

The Gospel asks whether we are willing to recognize one another as fellow sojourners. To stand together in prayer, stand beside the vulnerable in courage, and walk together toward the promise of a beloved community.

Enmegahbowh's story is more than a feel-good story of the first Indigenous priest. It is the story of an Indigenous people enduring removal, treaty betrayal, and cultural assault—and yet refusing to disappear.

The Gull Lake people were relocated. Their reservation was dissolved. Their children were stolen. Their homeland was taken. Yet they remembered and carried their language, their prayers, their songs, and their faith forward. And among them stood Enmegahbowh, bearing witness that neither empire, nor removal, nor the Doctrine of Discovery could erase what the Creator had planted in the hearts of the people. "We are still here." That may be the deepest sermon his life continues to preach.

"Who will find peace with the lands? The future of humankind lies waiting for those who will come to understand their journeys and take up their responsibilities to all living things.

Who will listen to the trees, the animals and birds, the voices of the places of the land?

As the long-forgotten settlers of the respective continents rise and begin to reclaim their own ancient heritage, they will discover the meaning of the lands of their ancestors.

That is when the invaders of the North American continent will finally discover that for this land, God is red."

— Vine Deloria Jr., God Is Red

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Rex McKee