

Hundreds of clergy gather in North Dakota to support indigenous people blocking pipeline

by [Gregg Brekke](#) in the [December 7, 2016](#) issue

When John Floberg, an Episcopal priest on the Standing Rock reservation, called for clergy to join him in Cannon Ball, North Dakota, to show support for the Standing Rock Sioux Nation, he thought 100 might come.

Instead, more than 500 clergy from around the world came to support the Sioux Nation's efforts to protect land and resources they say are at risk from construction of the Dakota Access pipeline. They gathered November 2 and 3 at the Oceti Sakowin camp on the shores of the Cannonball River, [one of several camps the Standing Rock Sioux and supporters have set up](#).

"The invitation of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe—the people who have been here for weeks and months—that's how it came to be that God called us together," Floberg said at the introductory gathering.

Emphasizing the interfaith and ecumenical nature of the gathering, Floberg encouraged everyone to represent their own faith tradition even as he acknowledged the "overwhelming" presence of Christian clergy. The next day the group processed to Backwater Bridge, where [in late October 141 people were arrested while blocking construction](#).

Calling on tenets of prayer, peaceful presence, and nonviolent resistance, Floberg reminded attendees that they were there at the invitation and under the guidance of tribal elders, who were striving to maintain a calm environment in which to protest.

"From the time the invitation went out," he said, "there's been a great deal of violence that's taken place. If that violence were to continue on that scale, there will be death. And we're not going to contribute to that."

The next morning began at the Oceti Sakowin's sacred fire, which is maintained around the clock. Surrounded by open space and several tarp-covered sun and rain shelters, the fire circle is the center of camp life where tribal elders gather to confer with one another, dancers greet the day, and people make community

announcements.

Faith leaders officially disavowed the Doctrine of Discovery—[a legal concept rooted in 15th-century papal writings that asserts Christians' right to land they claim to have discovered](#). Each leader read a portion of an adapted repudiation statement crafted by the World Council of Churches.

Tribal elders were presented with copies of the Doctrine of Discovery and, after discussing their options, the clergy elected to burn them to complete the act of apology.

“I remember looking down at my feet at one point, being very overwhelmed, and recognizing that I was standing on holy ground,” said Sara Lisherness, director of Compassion, Peace and Justice ministries at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). “That kept being echoed through the day.”

Clergy then marched to the barricaded and well-guarded Backwater Bridge. A burned-out shell of a car straddling the road and two torched trucks provided a blockade on the other side of the river. Law enforcement vehicles were lined up beyond the trucks. Representatives of faith groups continued to express remorse for the way religious groups had treated indigenous peoples and promised to listen to and join their voices to the concerns of Native groups.

Robert Two Bulls, a retired Lakota missionary for the department of Indian work in the Episcopal diocese of Minnesota, said. “I’ll be the first one laying in front of that bulldozer, when they start digging and putting a fence in,” he said. “I’m not afraid to give my life for that. For my land. For the land our ancestors gave us.”

Since April, thousands of indigenous people and their allies have cycled through camps north of the Standing Rock reservation, where the 1,172-mile pipeline is set to run under the Missouri River. Initially focused on the environmental risk to water resources, activists—who call themselves water protectors—also aim to preserve of Native lands and sacred sites. They say the pipeline construction is a continued violation of the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty, whereby Native lands were guaranteed protection from exploration, extraction, and development.

Energy Transfer Partners, the Texas-based company constructing the pipeline, says it will “reduce the current use of rail and truck transportation to move Bakken crude oil [from oil fields in North Dakota] to major U.S. markets to support American

energy needs.” The pipeline, if operational, is expected to move approximately 470,000 barrels of oil per day, with a capacity as high as 570,000 barrels per day.

Given long-standing resentment for the historic actions of the church, Floberg said, the gathering is the beginning of a long and complicated process of healing for indigenous peoples, especially those in central North Dakota.

“The Christian Church cannot have any daylight between it and the Standing Rock Sioux tribe in its stand,” he said. “Also, the Christian Church cannot have any daylight between it and people of color, [or] people who are here at Standing Rock, [or] with racism in any of its forms.”

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