

## STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

# The evil wrought by the doctrine of discovery

**OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS,** historians of Christianity have devoted a great deal of attention to the 500-year anniversaries related to the Protestant Reformation in Europe. But far less attention has been paid thus far to another series of momentous events in the history of the Christian church—the 500th anniversary of the conquest of Mexico and the inseparable association of Christianity with the immense human suffering that accompanied that event.

On April 21, 1519, a military expedition led by the Spanish general Hernán Cortés landed near San Juan de Ullúa on the gulf coast of Mexico. That summer, Cortés set about to formalize alliances with local enemies of the Aztec emperor, Cuauhtémoc. Two years later, the coalition army he led captured Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec Empire, marking the beginning of Spanish rule in central Mexico and the introduction of Christianity to the region. In a significant gesture, the Spanish occupation army destroyed the Aztec temple at the heart of the city, using the stones to build a cathedral on the same spot where it still stands.

The Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire was part of a much larger effort by European powers to colonize and Christianize the world beyond Europe.

Although Christians today are quick to disavow any connection between their faith and the political interests of Western colonizers, the deeper links are undeniable. In 1452, Pope Nicholas V formulated the basis

for the “doctrine of discovery” by formally granting King Alfonso V of Portugal the right to “capture, vanquish and subdue the Saracens, pagans and other enemies of Christ,” to “put them into perpetual slavery” and “to take all their possessions and property.” When the Spanish conquistadors arrived in the New World, they did so with the explicit blessing of the church.

**We cannot ignore the fact that themes of this story are deeply woven into our history.**

In 1823, those same arguments made their way into U.S. law when the Supreme Court unanimously affirmed that when Christian European nations “discovered” the lands of America, the native peoples lost “their rights to complete sovereignty as independent nations” and only retained a right of “occupancy” in their lands. According to the opinion written by Chief Justice John Marshall, the United States had acquired the power of “dominion” with its independence from Great Britain and became a successor nation to the right of “discovery.”

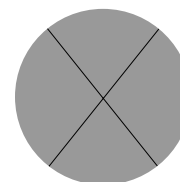
All of us can identify the layers of complexity in this larger story. Like the African slave traders, Cortés depended heavily on the complicity of indigenous groups—the human capacity for evil can be found in all cultures. We can also

recognize, as the careful research of sociologist Robert Woodberry has shown, that in many parts of the world Christian missions have resulted in numerous benefits to indigenous peoples. And there is no pure culture, “untainted” by encounters with others.

But nothing in those nuances should detract from the brutal reality of evil wrought by the “doctrine of discovery.” Neither can we ignore the fact that themes of this story are deeply woven into Anabaptist-Mennonite history, even if references to the Nogai, the Potawatomi, the Nivacle, the Anishinaabe, the Arapahoe, the Kekchi, the Wounaan or the Lenape appear only rarely in our narratives.

In 2018, Mennonite World Conference affirmed a Declaration of Solidarity with Indigenous People, stating in part, “As a global family of Anabaptist churches, we repent of our participation in this violence and ask for forgiveness from our indigenous sisters and brothers.”

Celebrations of milestone events in the history of the church will be incomplete if they do not also include space for confession, repentance and a commitment to stand with indigenous groups in the pursuit of justice, restoration and reconciliation.



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