

The Memoria Indígena Declaration

Final Document of the Conference “Who Writes History?:
Indigenous Spirituality and Mission Identity”
(September 2015)

The Memoria Indígena¹ gathering “Who Writes History?: Indigenous Spirituality and Mission Identity” took place in Lima, Peru, September 11–13, 2015. Thirty people gathered together from eleven countries, representing twelve indigenous ethnic groups, as well as non-indigenous cultures, to listen to one another, learn, and share.

We especially want to thank those whose efforts made this event possible: Peace and Hope International, SIL Peru, the Evangelical Center for Andean-Amazonian Missiology (CEMAA), and the Latin American Theological Fellowship (Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana, FTL), as well as many individual donors from North American churches. We are also grateful to all the participants who spoke and shared their lives, thoughts, and passions.

We spent three days together focusing on three important themes for the indigenous church: identity, mission, and history, with an

1. Memoria Indígena is a non-profit organization that seeks to record the stories of God's work among indigenous peoples throughout history in Latin America, serve as a bridge between indigenous churches and those who accompany and serve them, and bolster the diverse identity of the body of Christ by facilitating understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous Christians. See <http://www.memoriaindigena.org/>.

The Memoria Indígena Declaration

overarching focus on the idea that the indigenous churches of Latin America must share their stories in order to enrich their own identities, shape their relationships with non-indigenous churches and their mission, and edify the global church.

A summary of what was discussed during these three days follows:

Identity

1. God has always been present among all peoples and manifested God's divine self through our cultures and traditions since before the arrival of the missionaries who brought us the gospel of Jesus. Truly understanding this reality necessarily changes the ways and means we use to approach our peoples with the Bible and the gospel. We need a contextualized hermeneutic and a Christian education that incorporates our own stories and cultures, and we must continue working for a church that recognizes the importance of the language, organization, and ways of thinking of each indigenous people group.

2. Each culture is an important part of God's creation and therefore each is a carrier of dignifying truths and principles. However, as Christians we affirm that important moral values do exist and that the gospel, besides redeeming and affirming our cultures, transforms them when we seek to live out the values of the kingdom of God. The gospel close to our hearts allows us to scrutinize and judge what is good and retain it, without damaging our ethnic identity. In this manner, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can discern what aspects of culture dignify indigenous peoples and their communities, dignify others, and, above all, glorify God. It is therefore necessary that the church recognize that the local community plays an important role and has the right to affirm its own culture in light of the gospel.

The Memoria Indígena Declaration

3. We desire to seek the face of God in our cultures and mythical histories which serve as a kind of old testament, revealing how God has been made manifest in our sociocultural and historical context.

4. The recovery and preservation of our cultures is of utmost importance, yet we also recognize that culture is dynamic and is constantly adapting. Therefore, we reject the nativist assertion of certain people and groups that claim we must preserve or recover a supposedly essential form of our cultures that does not respect those indigenous people and communities that practice a religion like Christianity. As indigenous Christians we reaffirm our cultural identity and recognize that we must study and critique any cultural standards that discriminate, subjugate, o exclude.

Mission

1. Fulfilling the church's mission within our context is the work of all Christians, and we trust the Holy Spirit to guide us in this path. While only the local community has the right to criticize its own culture in light of the gospel, we recognize that we need the support of the entire body of Christ, including the non-indigenous churches, in this task. All the members of Christ's body are interdependent, and we all share the responsibility to communicate Jesus' message as a message of charitably living together with peace, hope, and love.

2. We must seek appropriate methods for mission so that the root of the gospel grows deep in the soil of our cultures. We need a contextual pedagogy that incorporates our narratives and stories with the story of the God of the Bible in order to effectively communicate the message of Jesus from one generation to the next. The project of evangelization among indigenous peoples must be from the indigenous context and with the indigenous person so that the

The Memoria Indígena Declaration

gospel does not become a list of rules or a burden imposed from outside.

3. In our missional labor, the act of communicating the gospel of Jesus can generate conflict with some of the traditional beliefs and practices of our peoples. We must recognize that the more conservative sectors within different ethnic groups have often had a negative view of indigenous Christians. Therefore it is crucial for us to work with and serve them, demonstrating that before we were Christians God made us indigenous people and that we continue to be an integral part of our communities without having to engage in practices that infringe on our Christian values and principles.

4. We learn by watching and imitating what other people do. It is therefore necessary that we walk with Christian men and women as they mature in order to cultivate exemplary Christians that our peoples can imitate in their daily lives. Consequently it is important that we empower indigenous believers and evangelists, allowing them the space and voice to criticize foreign missions that have not been able to balance culture and the Bible, that is, the word of the people and the word of God.

5. When we think about our mission, we need to rethink our relationship with the rest of the body of Christ, both with the foreign missionaries and the non-indigenous churches that serve indigenous peoples and churches. We believe it is important for the church to be ever reforming; the church must also take on an intercultural perspective as part of living out the unity of the body of Christ with respect to the diverse cultures surrounding us. Thus, in regard to foreign missionaries, we must not allow them to control the definition of what is good and evil in our contexts. We also see that even today the urban, Westernized churches in our countries continue to foster stereotypical and often negative conceptions of indigenous peoples. Many publications about indigenous peoples never consult whether the indigenous people agree with their assessment. Therefore we need to undertake an intercultural

dialogue in the church so that we all can see that God also speaks in the language of cosmogony, from within our everyday lives, and through the Holy Spirit. Non-indigenous churches and missionaries must understand that in order to achieve a lasting work together with indigenous churches we must embark on a long process with the local community because discipleship must be done in our own language and from our own culture and because, just as we have learned from them, they have much to learn from us.

History

1. Within evangelical missionary practice we have to listen to the voice of the evangelized, our indigenous brothers and sisters. Until now, the little bit of the story of our peoples and churches that the world knows is from the perspective of the foreign missionaries, but we believe it is very important to also tell the story from indigenous perspectives. In the same way that we learn about God and God's works through the people of Israel in the Old Testament, in our churches we should learn about where we come from, who have been the key players in our history, and how God has worked through our own members.

2. We must raise awareness that our communities are actually living libraries. Many times we seek to understand life and our communities through a library or an institution, whose texts are usually written and managed by outsiders. It is our responsibility to motivate the younger generations to listen to the stories of their elders as a primary source of information.

3. Therefore, we need to encourage the younger generations to know our stories, employing strategies of dialogue with our elders; without understanding our past and without teaching our history to our children, we cannot comprehend our present and nor will

The Memoria Indígena Declaration

they be able to shape our future. We must also tell our stories for the good of the global church, especially for the sake of the church in Western society and for the reconciliation of non-indigenous and indigenous churches.

4. The need is great for a literate indigenous community to write our stories from our narratives, and, at the same time, we must take action to stimulate and motivate orality since it is the most dynamic and sure way to transmit indigenous knowledge and principles to the following generations.

Recognizing the importance of telling our stories, we have decided to embark on a project to write, record, compile, and publish all the stories which speak to the birth and life of indigenous/autochthonous/native evangelical churches in Latin America as well as their theological production. We will focus on biographies of individuals, stories of communities of faith, and historic events which have played a key role in the history of our churches. We also desire to look beyond the walls of the church and remember the stories of leaders among our peoples who have struggled, and sometimes died, to protect the continuation of our peoples on our lands, without whose work neither our peoples nor our churches would exist. Through the process of telling our stories we also hope to recover and give renewed value to our cultural practices that promote life and the values of the kingdom of God.