

MNI WICONI
(Lakota for “Water is Life”)

The people of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation are leading a growing protest against the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline designed to carry a half-million barrels of oil daily from the Bakken oil fields in northwest North Dakota to Patoka, Illinois.

Protests against the pipeline have been ongoing since a prayer vigil began in April. They intensified on August 10, when construction was scheduled to begin on the pipeline’s crossing of the Missouri River under Lake Oahe, just a half-mile north of the reservation’s boundary. The protests have since grown to over 1,000 supporters from more than 80 other Native American tribes, several faith communities, Hollywood celebrities, as well as organizations such as the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations.

With the support and assistance of the San Francisco-based environmental law firm Earthjustice, the Standing Rock Tribe filed a federal lawsuit objecting to a permit issued by the Army Corps of Engineers on July 25 to cross the Missouri River. This has resulted in a temporary halt to the construction of the Missouri River crossing portion of the pipeline. The protesters continue their non-violent vigil, waiting for a federal judge to rule by September 9 on the tribe’s injunction against the Army Corps of Engineers.

The Standing Rock tribe believes the construction and operation of the pipeline threatens its environmental and economic well-being and would damage or destroy sites that have great historical, religious, and cultural significance to the tribe. The tribe’s lawsuit contends that the pipeline violates the National Historic Preservation Act and the Clean Water Act, among other laws.

Their protest is informed by the memory of broken treaties and disingenuous promises. Their protest reflects that water and ancestral grounds are sacred to the Lakota and Dakota peoples and cannot be owned or controlled or desecrated by themselves or others. Their protest is on behalf of all who rely on the Missouri waters for drinking, irrigation, and recreation all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. Their protest invokes the alteration of the sacred Missouri and the displacement of many native families when the river was dammed, creating Lake Oahe. Ultimately, this is a protest about the stewardship of God’s creation and justice for the indigenous peoples of the Great Plains. Ultimately, this is a spiritual battle.

This is a very difficult and complex issue for our country, and for me personally. I grew up in the oil fields of northwest North Dakota. My father earned his living and supported our family working for an oil exploration company. My grandparents homesteaded on land less than 20 miles west of Watford City, the epicenter of the Bakken oil fields. I have farmed and cared for that land and its precious water resources. I attended a Bureau of Indian Affairs school during my junior high years. After college, I spent two years living and working on the Standing Rock Reservation. I was living there during the American Indian Movement’s protest at Wounded Knee. I grew to love the Lakota and Dakota people, their spirituality, and their deep respect for God’s creation and creatures. I have a unique history and perspective on the current conflict.

We came to this impasse—with Energy Transfer Partners (pipeline construction company) and law enforcement on one side and Standing Rock tribal members and supporters on the other—in large part because of the reckless, greedy, and largely unregulated exploitation of the Bakken formation before environmental and human consequences could be determined and appropriate infrastructure built. One

of the saddest ironies of the Dakota Access Pipeline controversy is that pipelines are necessary to capture and utilize the millions of cubic feet of natural gas (a by-product of seeking the more lucrative oil) that are flared every day in the Bakken. This is one of the primary sources of atmosphere pollution and climate change on the planet today.

The United Methodist Church's Social Principles offer helpful guidance on the issue of energy resource utilization: "The whole earth is God's good creation and as such has inherent value. We are aware that the current utilization of energy resources threatens this creation at its very foundation. As members of The United Methodist Church we are committed to approach creation, energy production, and especially creation's resources in a responsible, careful, and economic way" (2012 *Book of Discipline*, p. 106).

Ultimately, environmental justice and creation care require that we embrace the power God has given us to protect and care for the planet. This is precisely why this is a matter of the soul. The creation story in Genesis teaches us that God, the Creator of a universe so large we cannot imagine it, created us—human beings—in God's image and blessed us with power. We have the power to destroy the life of all living things. We have the power to clone living creatures. We have the power to start wars or make peace. We have the power to lay down our lives for the sake of others. We have the power to harness the energy of atoms, sun, wind, and fossil fuels. We have the power to use so much energy that we pollute the rest of creation—land and water. We have the power to hoard the resources God has given us to steward. We have the power to deny others their identity, disregard their voice, destroy their culture, even enslave them. We also have the power to honor all created in God's image and protect their rights and heritage. We have the power "to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God." And, we have the power to submit, as Jesus did, in loving obedience to the God who created us.

I stand with my Lakota and Dakota brothers and sisters because I believe the central question of the creation story is at the heart of their lament and their protest: What will we do with the blessing of power God has given us? This is a particularly poignant God-question for those of us who have the power of privilege in our country and the world. I urge all Dakotas United Methodists to wrestle with this question so central to our faith and witness.

Whatever the outcome of the court's ruling, this may be the moment God is giving us all to come together, not as antagonists in bondage to our traumatic past, but as mutually empowered advocates for the common good and the sacredness of the waters and all of life. This may be the moment God has given us to use our power to define a just and life-giving future.

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