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“A Shared Vision for Shared Life:
A Case for a Native and Non-Native Church Partnership”

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ABSTRACT

“A Shared Vision for Shared Life:

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By Wendi Neal

The historical interactions between Native American tribes and non-Native churches reflect a complex narrative of both intentional and unintentional harm, as well as moments of mutual respect and shared mission. This research explores the relationship between Norman First American United Methodist Church and McFarlin Memorial United Methodist Church—two congregations located in Oklahoma—seeking to understand and reinitiate a partnership that has been inactive for over a decade. This project aims to reimagine the relationship through a model of mutual engagement and shared ministry, emphasizing the awareness of history and culture and how those shape the relationship going forward. By examining broader historical tensions between non-Native and Native American Christian communities in Oklahoma and through interviews and focus group data, I find three practices that will help develop a mutually beneficial relationship between these two churches. The goal is to cultivate a relationship grounded in mutual respect, cultural awareness, and collaboration—one that not only strengthens the two congregations but also contributes to the well-being of the surrounding Norman community.

“A Shared Vision for Shared Life:
A Case for a Native and Non-Native Church Partnership”

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	2
Research Approach.....	3
Method.....	4
Historical Context and Background.....	7
Methodism in Oklahoma: 1830-1888.....	10
Methodism in Oklahoma: 1889-present.....	12
The Establishment of McFarlin Memorial and Norman First American	14
Fruitful Fellowship and Wild Onions.....	16
The Search for Shared Life in New Ways.....	20
A New Approach for Native and Non-Native Relationships.....	25
Recommendations for a Mutually Beneficial Partnership.....	31
Conclusion.....	37
Bibliography.....	39
Illustrations.....	41

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RESEARCH APPROACH

Interactions and relationships between Native American people and tribes and the non-Native Church involve a complicated and complex history full of stories of both intentional and unintentional harm, as well as moments of mutual respect and shared mission. This research project was born out of conversations between the pastor of a local, Native American congregation and me about how our churches might reinitiate a partnership that has been inactive for over ten years, a partnership that ended abruptly without much explanation. This project is an effort to dive deeper into the historical relationship of our two congregations— Norman First American United Methodist Church and McFarlin Memorial United Methodist Church— located in what used to be called “Indian Territory”. The aim is to explore sustained relational engagement based on mutuality-- an inter-community partnership that is centered on valuing our differences and intentionally learning from each other and respectfully supporting one another.

McFarlin had a relationship previously with Norman First American; however, the relationship was primarily transactional rather than relational—one side offering material resources to the other. McFarlin exemplified missiologist Sherron Kay George’s observation that the church’s historical role has been that of benevolent patron and dispenser of charity. She says, “One-way mission is basically gift giving by the rich and powerful to the less fortunate. We are professional givers who decide what is needed, what to give, and how to use the gift.”¹ Instead, George invites us to consider a different kind of relationship characterized as “gift exchange” where all partners are giving and receiving in a spirit of mutual respect that results in shared enrichment, not just for themselves, but for the community.²

¹ Sherron Kay George. *Called as Partners in Christ's Service: The Practice of God's Mission*. (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2004), 74-75.

² *Ibid*, 75.

In order to live into this vision of what it means for all of God's people to live together in community and to develop a partnership that focuses on sharing life together, we will need to discover together what the desires and assets of our churches are so that we can determine how we might best share God's love in ways that impact not only our churches, but other churches in the Oklahoma Annual Conference and Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference, as well as other churches of the Methodist tradition in other places where relationships between predominantly white and non-white churches have been fractured over the past five hundred years.

My hope in doing this research is that McFarlin and Norman First American, which are located just 2.4 miles from one another, can develop a mutually beneficial partnership as we strive to share the good news of Jesus Christ and share life together in culturally appropriate ways. The overall aim of this project is to explore what a mutually beneficial partnership would look like or entail. With this in mind, I sought to answer these questions:

- 1) What have been major sources of tension/friction between Anglo and Native American Christian communities in the United States and Oklahoma?
- 2) What would it take to overcome a history of mistrust and build an enduring partnership in ministry between McFarlin and Norman First American?
- 3) How would developing a mutually beneficial partnership between McFarlin and Norman First American impact the ministry of the church and its work within the Norman community?

Method

In addition to library research, data for this study were gathered using two ethnographic tools: semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. This project is an effort to discover how the relationship between these two churches has developed and changed over time so that we might learn from the past and move forward in ways that are mutually beneficial. The history of the relationship between these two churches is not contained in written documents;

therefore, interviewing people from both churches who were present and aware of the development and dynamics between the two churches is necessary to gain insight into the nature and development of the relationship, as well as to discover the current hopes of people from each church about developing a more robust partnership. I used semi-structured interviews and focus groups with open-ended questions that were non-threatening with the expectation that people would feel free to share their stories. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups allow for the conversation to happen naturally without much interruption, and follow-up questions flow from participants' comments.

I conducted interviews with the following subjects:

- representatives from each church who were present and aware of past relationships between McFarlin and Norman First American
- the founding pastor and two founding members of NFA who remember the partnership between McFarlin UMC and Norman First American UMC during that time
- the former senior pastor of McFarlin UMC who served during the height of our past relationship
- a member of McFarlin and staff person who was aware of when the partnership between the two churches waned

The interviews were conducted in the fall of 2024 in several ways depending on the location and availability of the person being interviewed: by phone, through videoconference, and in person.

The interview questions mainly focused on eliciting information and insights into the development and nature of the relationship between the two churches over time and reasons for why the relationship ended. The interview questions were framed in such a way as to gain maximum insight into the following issues, the questions being tailored to each respondents' particular experience and expertise regarding:

- Establishment of the prior relationship between NFA and McFarlin
- The nature or types of events and/or ministries that have been done together since NFA's beginning

- Persons instrumental in establishing the relationship
- How the relationship between NFA and McFarlin during that time is described-- what working together was like
- The level of involvement of each church in the events/ministries
- The nature of the relationship over time

In what follows, quotations or verbatim comments by respondents are often italicized for clarity.

The focus group discussion was conducted with two different groups-- one focus group from McFarlin and one focus group from Norman First American. These were conducted to probe issues of the churches' relationship to greater depths, drawing on a cross-section of ideas and inputs through guided conversation. McFarlin's Just Action Team, an executive team elected by the Charge Conference, has a mission "to promote the fulfillment of the United Methodist Church's call to action concerning racism in the *Book of Discipline* that we "shall confront and seek to eliminate racism, whether in organizations or in individuals, in every facet of its life and in society at large".³ This group was chosen because they are charged by McFarlin with leading the church in relationship-building in the community. The hope was to hear from members of this team not only what they know about past endeavors to work with Norman First American but also what a mutually beneficial partnership could look like moving forward, and to learn what questions or concerns they have that must be addressed before committing. This conversation took place in person at McFarlin.

I also conducted a similar-sized focus group with members of Norman First American, made up of active participants chosen by the pastor, to probe issues about the relationship among these churches in greater depths, drawing on a cross-section of ideas and inputs through guided conversation, learning from them what a mutually beneficial partnership could look like moving

³ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2020/2024*. (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2024), 26.

forward, and hearing what questions or concerns they have that must be addressed before committing. This conversation was scheduled to take place in person at Norman First American. The pastor let me know on that day that the persons who had been contacted to participate had not responded. She did not believe anyone would come and thought it would be better to reschedule. Later that day, she called and let me know that members had shown up for the focus group. I had left Norman by that time and was not close enough to return that day and so we decided to do the focus group over the phone.⁴

I asked open-ended questions in hopes that participants would feel open to sharing their stories and that the conversation would flow naturally without much interruption. The focus group questions were framed in such a way as to gain maximum insight into the following issues:

- How McFarlin and NFA have worked together in the past
- How reinitiating and expanding the relationship is perceived
- How expanding the relationship would impact the church and community
- What skills and assets each church has to offer the other

This research provides insight into the past nature of the relationship between our two churches, offers an evaluation of past fellowship between the two churches, and discovers possibilities for the development of a mutually beneficial partnership going forward.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The history of relationships and encounters of Non-Native and Native peoples in what is now the United States of America is complex and complicated, characterized by a history of forced assimilation and a colonial mindset that valued the culture and ideology of white

⁴ All participants in the interviews and focus groups were made aware that their responses would be used for the purpose of this research project and gave verbal consent for their use in this publication. Consent to use their names was not given, so I have left participants unnamed, identifying only the church which they represent.

immigrants over that of Native Americans. The history of Methodism in this country began with John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement within the Church of England in the 18th century. In 1735, John Wesley left England as a missionary for the colony of James Oglethorpe in Georgia. During Wesley's time in Georgia, he came in contact with Creek tribespeople, yet he left in 1738 feeling saddened and disheartened by what he perceived to be unfruitful ministry.⁵ He continued to send missionaries to the colonies and expressed some concern for the conversion of Native peoples, yet American Methodism's primary focus for the first thirty-five years was providing ministry and resources for white immigrants who were starting to move westward and occupy land that was already occupied by Native peoples.⁶

At the 1820 General Conference, the Methodist Missionary Society was established. This development likely resulted from the federal government's establishing of the "civilization" fund in 1819 which gave money to churches that were willing to build schools among Native tribes.⁷ The Methodist Church, along with other predominantly white denominations, believed that the path of least resistance in moving west was an assimilation approach regarding Native peoples. Army Captain Richard Henry Pratt gave a speech in 1892 to the National Conference of Charities and Correction in which he famously said, "Kill the Indian in him, save the man."⁸ These words reflected the long-held assimilationist mindset that drove much of the government's and church's relationship with Native tribes.

⁵ Homer Noley. *First White Frost: Native Americans and United Methodism*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 35-36.

⁶ *Ibid*, 61.

⁷ *Ibid*, 83.

⁸ *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction at the Nineteenth Annual Session Held in Denver, Colorado June 23-29, 1892*. Edited by Isabel C. Barrows. Boston: Press of Geo. H. Ellis, 1892. p. 46.

It was during the early 19th century that Methodists in America began to take seriously how to relate to Native peoples. In the 1820's, Methodism saw some success among the Choctaw, Cherokee, Muscogee/Creek, and Chickasaw tribes in the areas now known as North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee and Mississippi. Methodist membership among the tribes grew into the thousands due to missionaries who worked with Native leaders and interpreters, employing Native speakers and seeking input from tribal leaders when wanting to establish schools. The Methodist Choctaws and Cherokees each claimed membership over 1,000 in 1830.⁹ The attraction to Methodism by Natives peoples could have been for a variety of reasons. In the book *A Native American Theology*, the authors state that Native Americans “have accepted Christianity as part of the process of assimilation into American society. Some may have voluntarily converted to gain what they saw as the advantages of contact with white society; others, especially children, received Christianity through a process not always of their own choosing [primarily through boarding schools].”¹⁰ And some Native Americans were attracted to Christianity through affirming personal experience, as they saw no conflict between their Native American traditional beliefs and Christianity.

Unfortunately, the success of Methodism among Native peoples during this time was undermined by broader political currents. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed into law the Indian Removal Act, which allowed the federal government to negotiate treaties with Native tribes to remove them from their lands and move them to “unsettled” lands west of the

⁹ Tash Smith. *Capture These Indians for the Lord: Indians, Methodists, and Oklahomans, 1844-1939*. (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2014), 23. This is the primary text used in this project for outlining the history of Methodism in Oklahoma from a Native American perspective as other works of this nature were not readily available.

¹⁰ Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George E. “Tink” Tinker. *A Native American Theology*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 8.

Mississippi River. Some tribes accepted the treaties, while most resisted.¹¹ Military troops were sent in where there was resistance to ensure removal. While some missionaries working among Native tribes opposed this forced removal, the Methodist Church in general supported it. Homer Noley, a historian and United Methodist pastor, writes about the church's role in the removal:

The era beginning at the turn of the century and extending well into the nineteenth century was a period of powerful contradictions. On the one hand, church denominations geared themselves up to take the souls of Native American peoples into a brotherhood of love and peace; on the other hand, they were a part of a white nationalist movement that geared itself up to take away the land and livelihood of Native American people by treachery and force.¹²

While not all Methodists supported forced removal of Native Americans from their lands, and some actively worked against it, the Methodist Church overall was complicit in the government's efforts to take Native American lands and force Native peoples to other parts of the country, thus contradicting the church's mission to share the gospel following Christ's example of compassion, love, and respect for all people.

Methodism in Oklahoma: 1830-1888

The first Methodists in Oklahoma were Native peoples who arrived in the area in the 1830's from the southeastern part of the United States under forced removal by the US government and were settled in the eastern part of what was then called "Indian Territory".¹³ This forced removal, which required people of the Choctaw, Cherokee, Seminole, Chickasaw and Creek tribes to walk from their homes in the southeast to Indian Territory, is known as "The Trail of Tears."

¹¹ Library of Congress. "Indian Removal Act: Primary Documents in American History" Accessed Oct. 16, 2024. <https://guides.loc.gov/indian-removal-act#:~:text=The%20Indian%20Removal%20Act%20was,many%20resisted%20the%20relocation%20policy.>

¹² Homer Noley. *First White Frost: Native Americans and United Methodism*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 85.

¹³ *Ibid*, 124.

The national church continued its missionary outreach to Native peoples in Indian Territory. In 1844, the Methodist Church officially established the Indian Missionary Conference (IMC). The IMC's first meeting was held in October of that year at Riley's Chapel in the Cherokee Nation. Although overseen by the predominantly white, national church, the IMC was an "Indian-dominated" organization formed on Indian land.¹⁴

As a mission conference, the IMC relied on funding from national sources outside of the conference, which brought up questions about financial control of those funds within the IMC. The IMC was also involved in the negotiations between tribes and the government, which was tricky because of the conflict of interest between sharing the gospel and growing the church among Native peoples and expanding the landholdings of the government and, therefore, of non-Native peoples and the church. The IMC pushed schools as the primary means by which they would raise up the next generation of Native church leaders, promoting traditional American and Christian values.

The same strategy was employed when the Plains Tribes were removed from their land and forced to settle in the southwestern part of Indian Territory in the 1870's. Even though western tribes and eastern tribes were culturally different, and western tribes had much less contact with Christianity before removal than eastern tribes did, they were seen and treated as if they were one homogenous group. White missionaries viewed Native spirituality as nothing more than superstitions and paganism, while Native peoples saw no conflict between their beliefs and the way of Jesus.¹⁵ As Tash Smith writes:

Kiowa terms for God (Daw-k' ee) and Jesus (Daw-k' yah-e), for instance, could be connected to their concept of *dwdw* [the larger spiritual power that embodied all elements of the universe], thereby

¹⁴ Tash Smith. *Capture These Indians for the Lord: Indians, Methodists, and Oklahomans, 1844-1939*. (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2014), 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 84.

introducing perceptions of Jesus as a positive power, which appealed directly to the Kiowas. In other instances, Kiowas were puzzled when they found missionaries trying to introduce concepts already fundamental in their society. As Alice Apekum Zenella, a relative of the Kiowa chief Standing Bear, related, missionaries tried to teach Indians how to pray, even though “we already knew how.”¹⁶

Donna Pewo, current member of the OIMC, recalls “my mom telling me a long time ago that we were spiritual before Christianity even came to our people because we already had a connection, a relationship with the Creator. We are a people of hospitality, we are a giving people, and we have much to offer to our communities and those outside of our realm.”¹⁷

Methodism struggled at times because of a lack of awareness of Native culture and spirituality and because of its assimilationist strategies that valued white culture and religion above all others. Yet, the success of Methodist work among Native peoples depended on the agency and initiatives of Native lay preachers, pastors, and interpreters who were able to make connections between Christian faith and Native spirituality, to work that respected tribal authority, and to the respect from the church for Native peoples maintaining traditional, spiritual practices in community.

Methodism in Oklahoma: 1889-present

The Land Run of 1889 saw thousands of immigrants flock to Indian Territory to stake their claim of land in a race on April 22nd. Members of the MEC, South and MEC participated in the Land Run claiming land where new churches would be built for white settlers, including the MEC, South and MEC churches in Norman, OK. The growth of non-Native settlements in Indian

¹⁶ Ibid, 84-85.

¹⁷ Ginny Underwood. Oklahoma Conference of the United Methodist Church. “Our Brother in Red: The Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference.” Accessed Oct. 16, 2024. <https://www.okumc.org/newsdetail/our-brother-in-red-13437182>.

Territory shifted the focus of the IMC away from missions with Native peoples towards establishing churches for white settlers, which also shifted the distribution of resources.¹⁸

During this time, more segregation between Native and non-Native churches developed. The IMC was content to let Native congregations tend to themselves with little interference. Although this left Native congregations with fewer financial and material resources, there was an unexpected benefit:

...these churches also reinforced Native culture by requiring their own ministers and workers who understood Native customs and languages, and the reality of the mission field meant making compromises with Indian communities. Though the IMC considered some concessions too extreme, such as the growing use of peyote among the Plains Indians, it had to allow a degree of autonomy in its Native congregations to tend to their own spiritual needs.¹⁹

The IMC realized its dream of becoming a legitimate Annual Conference in the MEC, South in 1906 and was renamed the Oklahoma Annual Conference. And Indian Territory became an official state in the Union in 1907 and was renamed Oklahoma. The years following these changes saw a significant drop in membership among Native churches. In 1907, there were 7,400 Native Methodists in Oklahoma. By 1916, that number dropped to 2,700.²⁰ The Oklahoma Annual Conference focused on building new church buildings and schools for white congregations and money designated for missions was distributed according to Conference leadership, often finding its way into mission efforts for white communities.

In 1918, the Oklahoma Annual Conference established the Indian Mission with a renewed effort to evangelize Native peoples. Camp meetings, though by then considered relics of the past among white Methodists, were significant for Methodism to grow and flourish among

¹⁸ Tash Smith. *Capture These Indians for the Lord: Indians, Methodists, and Oklahomans, 1844-1939*. (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2014), 106-107.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 108.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 136.

Native peoples during this time. This was because they were places of tribal and intertribal gatherings, sanctioned by the church, where Native American Methodists could gather to express their faith, exhibiting elements of Native society without much criticism or interference from the larger (white) church. These camp meetings were also a means of survival for tribal people:

One Southern Methodist Choctaw preacher testified before a Congressional subcommittee in 1931 that camp meetings allowed Choctaws to pool their resources, especially their food, for the larger church community. In some of these cases, Christianity and Christian practices insulated Native members from some of the pressures of an encroaching white society and gave direct relief to communities increasingly at risk.²¹

Being Christian brought some legitimacy to Native peoples in the eyes of the dominant, white Christian culture and gave them a safe place to gather, speak their languages, practice their traditions, and support one another.

Native Methodists continued to gather and advocate for self-determination within the church. The result of Native American advocacy for over two hundred years led to the creation of the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference, an independent Conference with the same authority of all other Conferences to ordain and license clergy and to oversee its own work. Today, the OIMC has eighty-seven churches in Oklahoma, Kansas and Texas.²² The Oklahoma Annual Conference and OIMC have shared a bishop since 1972 while remaining independent Conferences, and starting in 2024, also share a bishop with the Arkansas Annual Conference.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF MCFARLIN MEMORIAL AND NORMAN FIRST AMERICAN

McFarlin Memorial United Methodist Church's history began shortly after the Land Run of 1889. Members of both the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) and Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) staked a claim for land and built two, small churches in the new town of

²¹ Ibid, 166.

²² Oklahoma Volunteers in Mission. "Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference." Accessed Oct. 15, 2025, <https://coor.umvimncj.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/OIMC-VM.pdf>, 1.

Norman, which would eventually join together as one church in 1938.²³ When World War I veterans began returning to the University of Oklahoma in Norman in 1919, members of the MEC, South church along with the pastor decided a new, larger church building closer to the university was needed.²⁴

Seeking how to fund a new church building, the pastor of the MECS went to visit Robert McFarlin, a beneficiary of care from the MECS when he and his wife lost their nineteen-month-old son in Norman in 1891. When asked about supporting the building, Mr. McFarlin agreed that, if he survived his illness, and if there was a fortunate outcome to a lawsuit in which he was involved with another oil company, he would build a new church in Norman himself in memory of his infant son.

Today, McFarlin is the largest United Methodist Church in Norman and in the Oklahoma Annual Conference. Its current mission statement is “Changing Lives that Change the World.” McFarlin is a church that is known for outreach and care for people in the surrounding community, as a leader in the Norman community and United Methodist Church, and as a church with excellent worship, music and outreach ministries.

Norman First American UMC (hereafter NFA) was founded in 1994 when a group of Native Methodist students at the University of Oklahoma began looking for a church where Native culture, language and expressions would be expressed. The students met at The Wesley Foundation on OU’s campus but soon asked Bishop Dan Solomon (Bishop in Oklahoma from

²³ Mary Joyce Rodgers. *A Priceless Heritage: A Record, Past and Present, of McFarlin Memorial United Methodist Church- 1924-1999*. (Norman: McFarlin Memorial UMC, 1999), 13.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 18.

1988-1996) if they could start a new church in Norman. He agreed on one condition: namely, that the church would be a place where Native culture, traditions and spirituality were upheld.²⁵

Current Bishop David Wilson was the founding pastor appointed in 1995 to serve the new church. Nine years later, NFA bought eight acres of land in east Norman and built their current building. Members of McFarlin's United Methodist Men helped frame and drywall the building, and the pulpit used in worship was donated by McFarlin.

Norman First American UMC is a vibrant church with a missional emphasis on "Christ, Culture and Community". As the only Native congregation that provides regular fellowship gatherings for Native students at the University of Oklahoma, it serves as the spiritual home for Native peoples across Oklahoma and the United States. It provides Christian ministry and witness, and evangelizes Native peoples through weekly worship, Bible studies for all ages, and prayer groups. NFA also provides cultural learning opportunities and partners with community organizations to offer classes such as Native foods cooking classes, basketweaving, Native language classes, Native storytelling, stomp dances, sweats, and Indian taco dinners, among many other opportunities. Throughout the year, NFA serves over 5,000 people in the community and throughout the United States.²⁶ The church is currently raising funds to add a sanctuary and educational classrooms, in keeping with its original vision.

FRUITFUL FELLOWSHIP AND WILD ONIONS

The findings from interview sessions and focus group discussions provided important insight into past relationship dynamics between NFA and McFarlin that offer opportunity for

²⁵ Jacob Tsotigh. "Reclaiming Our Voices... Telling Our Stories." Panel Discussion. Norman First American UMC Fundraising Gala celebrating Indigenous Peoples' Day. Norman, OK. October 14, 2024.

²⁶ Justine Wilson. "Indigenous Peoples' Day Gala Dinner and Fundraiser" flyer. Accessed Sept. 6, 2024. Norman, OK.

reflection as the two congregations seek to build a mutually beneficial partnership. McFarlin and Norman First American worked together in various ways from around the years 2000-2012, with an abrupt end to the relationship in 2012. The most enduring form of interaction during that time was when McFarlin provided space for NFA's wild onion dinners. One of the primary fundraisers that Norman First American has undertaken from early on in its existence are wild onion dinners. A wild onion dinner consists of sacred, Native foods, with the main dish being eggs cooked with specially procured wild onions. The first time McFarlin offered space for this fundraiser is not clear; however, it seems to have started around the year 2000 or 2001 because elders of NFA remember that the first wild onion dinner was held in Meyer Hall at McFarlin, the fellowship space used before McFarlin's new addition was built in 2000. They remember that it was not long after that that the dinners were moved to Fenn Hall- the new, larger fellowship space with attached, professional kitchen. A representative from McFarlin recalls that the dinners started being held at McFarlin around 2001.

Norman First American elders shared that having the wild onion dinners at McFarlin offered major benefits. Fenn Hall and the kitchen were much larger than what they had available in their church and so it allowed more space to serve more people, which brought in more money for fundraising. The kitchen at McFarlin is a professional-sized kitchen and so more people were able to be in the kitchen helping prepare the food at a faster pace than would have been possible in NFA's building.

Each person I spoke with from Norman First American recalled that the dinners suddenly stopped being held at McFarlin, but no one offered any understanding as to why. Only one person I spoke with from McFarlin knew the reason McFarlin decided to stop hosting the dinners. The person who confirmed this was on staff at McFarlin during this time and remembers

receiving the request to hold the wild onion dinner at McFarlin around 2012 and McFarlin's executive team denying the request. The reason given by the executive team to the staff person was that the smell in the building after a wild onion dinner was "terrible." Since the staff person I interviewed was not part of the executive team's conversation, they do not know all the details about this complaint. They do not know if many people in the church were upset by the smell or if any McFarlin members outside of the executive team were complaining. The staff person was told by the executive team to simply let Norman First American know that McFarlin could no longer host the dinners without offering an explanation about the reason why. This person remembers calling the Norman First American representative and letting him know the decision of the executive team without stating the reason for the decision. None of the members of NFA who I spoke with expressed an understanding as to why McFarlin stopped hosting the dinners, but everyone knew that it was not Norman First American's decision.

The main consequence of this decision was over a decade of dissociation between McFarlin and Norman First American. When relationships are not mutually beneficial, decision-making is done by prioritizing the individual rather than prioritizing the relationship. If being in and maintaining the relationship is not the priority, the relationship is easily terminated by one member without consultation with or explanation to the other. McFarlin exemplified the observation shared in *Towards Braiding* that the dominant group "sets the terms of inclusion and maintains the power to issue (and rescind) the invitation to be included."²⁷ This has been the norm throughout history between the predominantly white church with Native Americans. Decisions affecting Native Americans are made without consultation or in conversation with

²⁷ Jimmy Elwood and Vanessa Andreotti with Sharon Stein. "Towards Braiding." (Published by the authors with support from Musagetes, (June 2019), 27.

Native Americans. McFarlin made the decision to stop offering space for the wild onion dinners because it did not recognize the value of fellowship with NFA, nor did McFarlin recognize the positive contributions of this fellowship for both churches. Instead, McFarlin made a decision to terminate the relationship based on a sense of disgust, believing that the relationship was only about providing tangible goods, that the relationship required giving of its resources without any gain, and that there was a negative impact on its building and ministries.

In this case, the reason for ending the relationship given to the McFarlin staff person was that there was a terrible odor lingering in the building after a wild onion dinner; however, superficial reasons like a bad odor are often symbolic of underlying sentiments and attitudes towards “the other”. Rejection of “the other” was not new for McFarlin at this time. In McFarlin’s “Local Church Profile,” an annual state-of-the-church report offered to the annual conference, previous pastors have answered the question, “What prejudices, if any, need to be dealt with to enable your church to grow spiritually?” with comments such as, “*There is conspicuous racial prejudice among some elements of the church and a reluctance to acknowledge the feasibility of receiving either an ethnic or a female pastor,*” and “*There may be some racial and gender prejudice among elements of the church, and there is less diversity than we would like, but the church does not have an overriding prejudice that would inhibit its spiritual growth.*”²⁸ When racial prejudice is present, spiritual growth is inhibited because it contradicts the Christian belief that, as the Body of Christ, we are a community of equals called to discipleship and fellowship with one another.²⁹ Members of the Body of Christ are defined not

²⁸ Local Church Profiles quoted were from 1997-1998 and 2002-2003. The same answers were reported on each Local Church Profile from the years 1997-2004. McFarlin has had several female pastors, having its first and only female senior pastor appointed from 2011-2020. McFarlin has not received a non-white person appointed as clergy in either the senior or associate role in all its history.

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:12-30; Romans 12:3-8; Ephesians 4:1-6; Galatians 3:23-29

just by what they profess but by how they live out God's calling. The Christian witness is strengthened and cultivated in respectful relationship with people of varying racial, cultural, national, and ethnic backgrounds, recognizing the value that comes from being in relationship with one another.

The result of the decision to stop hosting the wild onion dinners not only resulted in dissociation for over a decade but also resulted in hurt feelings and questions from members of Norman First American. In a conversation I had with the pastor of NFA, she shared that, when talking about the relationship with McFarlin at NFA, members asked her, "*Do they still like us?*" Clearly there were questions from NFA about what happened and assumptions about why the sharing of space ended—that the decision was personal and the people of McFarlin did not like them. And because marginalized peoples and groups often adopt a posture of "go along to get along" and seek to avoid conflict with members and organizations representing the dominant, white culture, silence is often the response of those who have experienced harm and hurt feelings. McFarlin may have believed that the relationship was only one of sharing material resources; however, for Norman First American, the ending of the relationship felt personal. Relationships fall apart when harmful behavior is not acknowledged and addressed, and it is the responsibility of the one who has caused harm to initiate the process of acknowledging and addressing it.

THE SEARCH FOR SHARED LIFE IN NEW WAYS

Acknowledging and addressing potential pitfalls is also important if these two churches want to move forward in working together. While there is great optimism for developing a mutually beneficial partnership between McFarlin and NFA, a few participants in interviews and focus groups expressed caution about the relationship being dominated by the larger church. One

representative of NFA said, “*the caution is that the bigger church with more resources tends to give more than the others in terms of physical things.*”³⁰ And a representative from McFarlin also expressed that, “*There are challenges with a large church working with a smaller church. The challenge is how the larger church can partner with the smaller church in a non-domineering way.*”³¹ Members of McFarlin’s focus group also expressed caution, saying that it is important that the relationship is mutually desired and not forced. One participant also shared that building relationships as a form of community witness and outreach will be a new concept for many at McFarlin and she is not sure many people will change their routine and do something new.³² In seeking to build a partnership that is mutually beneficial, a new approach that breaks with past failures and intentionally addresses power dynamics and cultural differences must be clearly articulated and embraced.

I believe a decolonial approach that emphasizes listening, learning, and discovery of shared values will benefit the development of this kind of relationship. In *Re-Membering the Reign of God: The Decolonial Witness of El Salvador’s Church of the Poor*, the authors who are Christian scholars who have developed a decolonial theological approach from their experience and study with ecclesial base communities in El Salvador, define “decolonial” as involving “critical reflection on (a) the enduring reality of coloniality in Western economics, politics, culture, and religion and (b) the praxis of decoloniality embedded in myriad forms of resistance to Western modernity that are embodied and enacted by historically marginalized groups and their allies.”³³ Decolonial partnerships respond differently than colonial partnerships and ask different

³⁰ Interview. Oklahoma City, OK. November 15, 2024.

³¹ Interview. Oklahoma City, OK. November 12, 2024.

³² McFarlin’s Focus Group. Norman, OK. December 15, 2024.

³³ Elizabeth Gandolfo and Laurel Marshall Potter. *Re-Membering the Reign of God: The Decolonial Witness of El Salvador’s Church of the Poor*. (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2022), 4.

questions. The decolonial partner asks, “What must be done to us? How must we be changed so that we can fully participate in God’s reign,” rather than “What should we do to change the reality of [the other]?”³⁴ The decolonial partner does not ask, “What do we know?,” but “How are we known?” Rather than ask, “What must we create?,” the decolonial partner asks, “How should we be recreated?” Instead of asking, “What do we have to teach?,” asking, “What do we have to learn?”³⁵

Decolonial partnership also recognizes that, while we may share God’s dream of a just and equitable society for all people, we live out that dream in different contexts, cultures and experiences. McFarlin must first ask questions that lead to honest reflection about its own culture and history, learn from past failures, and appreciate different ways of expressing faith when seeking to build a partnership with NFA. In this new partnership, rather than seeing McFarlin and NFA as walking along the same path, they must see themselves as walking different paths towards each other. In this way, they acknowledge and respect the diversity of experiences of God’s people and open themselves up to new ways of being in relationship together.

To develop a mutually beneficial partnership, McFarlin must reconsider what it means to be in a relationship with NFA. The value of the relationship cannot simply be in terms of offering tangible resources. The churches must not only be welcoming of one another’s physical presence in a shared space but also must be welcoming of one another’s cultures through observation, sharing and learning. Leslie Newbigin observed that we need cross-cultural relationships in order to understand one another and the fullness of what it means to be human.³⁶ Churches do this

³⁴ Ibid, 337.

³⁵ Ibid, 340-341.

³⁶ Leslie Newbigin. *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Mission*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 129-130.

through encounter and conversation. When we enter into fellowship and conversation, we come to appreciate one another, we learn more about who we are, and we become more aware of what God can do and is doing in and through us to share the gospel witness of love and hope. As Nestor Medina attests, we are really only made aware of our cultural traditions when we come in contact with people of other cultures and experiences cultural differences.³⁷ Understanding the history and culture of a people is crucial when wanting to understand how those people relate to other people of other cultures, and awareness of our own culture and ways of relating must be part of the process of relationship-building so that decision-making and outcomes are shared and mutually beneficial, and one partner's expectations do not dominate the other's.

When seeking to develop a mutually beneficial partnership, the intentions for establishing the partnership must also be clearly articulated. Living in cooperative fellowship with God and neighbor is a biblical mandate. Hebrew scripture tells of Adam and Eve being created to live in partnership. The tribes of Israel were to work in partnership. Psalm 133 declares that God is at work empowering the community when people live together in unity. And the New Testament witness calls followers of Jesus to live and work together as the Body of Christ, appreciating the blessing of differences and contributions of all, as previously noted.

Another motivation is the current reality of political, social, ideological, economic, and religious division and conflict in the world. Unity, collaboration, and increased understanding help to reduce conflict and strengthen communities. When asked whether there is value in the churches partnering more, a member of NFA said, "*Partnering breaks down walls. We come to understand one another. We share common values of God and man and that builds a more*

³⁷ Néstor Medina. *Christianity, Empire and the Spirit: (Re)Configuring Faith and the Culture*. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2018), 25.

effective partnership. We learn from each other. We are consciously inclusive of one another. We get past personal prejudice. We get to a better comfort level because we know one another and learn from one another.”³⁸ Another representative from NFA commented that it is sometimes harder in larger communities like Norman for churches to work together, but he said the value is in building community: *“The church [NFA] is very unique right now in terms of its embracing of culture and... [that] doesn't happen everywhere in our churches. Norman First is very unique in that way. And they [McFarlin] could learn much from that.”*³⁹

Another NFA representative commented, *“There is... always a desire, I think, [among a] large number of Native folk who are so willing and want to share who they are with others. It breaks down stereotypes, creates some relationships and helps folks to be... more bound together.”*⁴⁰ A member of McFarlin’s focus group observed:

I do think that we should continue to grow our relationship with them. It seems like... Norman [town in OK] is fairly white, and I think our congregation is very white, and I think it's good for us to have... understanding of other groups that are in Norman, and I think it can grow our faith to see other groups that have shared... values and Christianity..., but maybe have parts of their culture that are different than ours, and they're practicing those things together.⁴¹

For another member who participated in the NFA’s focus group discussion, *“Any time we can reach out to each other, it's good. We see what's on the other side... Goodwill increases. Presence goes a long way. There are so many people in Oklahoma who don't know anything about Indians. People don't know there are different tribes, different languages, different cultures. We can share that.”*⁴² Learning about Native people from Native people, showing up for one another, and learning about culture are key ways to build a mutually beneficial partnership.

³⁸ Interview. Norman, OK. November 8, 2024.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Interview. Oklahoma City, OK. November 15, 2024.

⁴¹ McFarlin’s Focus Group. Norman, OK. December 15, 2024.

⁴² Norman First American’s Focus Group. Norman, OK. December 20, 2024.

A NEW APPROACH TO NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

McFarlin and Norman First American are different churches with different histories and represent different cultures in the same community. As siblings in Christ, we both strive to share the good news of Jesus Christ and strengthen the community, yet we go about living out our God-given mission in different ways. In order to develop a mutually beneficial partnership, McFarlin must be aware of the historic trauma inflicted on Native people, especially in the Church in Oklahoma, must become aware of its own culture and grow in intercultural development, recognizing how values are expressed differently in different groups and valuing those differences, must be willing to delink from its colonial heritage and seek another way of being in relationship with Native people, and must be committed to a long-term process of showing up and getting to know the people of Norman First American. This research project indicates that living this out requires an increase in awareness about self and others, and three practices will help develop a mutually beneficial relationship between these two churches.

In *Towards Braiding*, a booklet written by Elwood Jimmy and Vanessa Andreotti, with Sharon Stein which offers guidance for collaboration among Native and non-Native organizations and individuals, the authors emphasize the importance of non-Native people recognizing the diversity that exists among Native people as a way of breaking with colonial patterns of the past:

Indigenous communities have always been heterogeneous. But beyond this internal complexity, colonial apparatuses have also operated in ways to further divide and separate community members. For instance, Indigenous people who live(d) on reserve have different experiences than those who live off; Indigenous peoples who are white-passing have different experiences than those who are read as visibly racialized; Indigenous peoples who come from middle-class families have different experiences than those who come from low-income families; Indigenous peoples who grew up speaking their language and/or having access to their ceremonies have different experiences than those who did not; and Indigenous peoples who grew up with their Indigenous family members have different experiences than those who grew up in non-Indigenous adoptive

families, or in families where Indigenous heritage was minimized or hidden or only “discovered” or revealed later in the person’s life.⁴³

When entering into relationship with Native American people, it is important to recognize the complexity present in Native American identity and remember that not all Native Americans relate to their Native American heritage in the same ways. They do not all share the same life experiences, social, political, religious beliefs, worldviews or ideologies, and should not be reduced to stereotypes or preconceived ideas of what it means to be Native American. One Native American person does not represent all Native people or tribes, and non-Native people should be aware of this and be open to and seek out a variety of Native voices and experiences when wanting to learn about what it means to be Native American from Native Americans.

It can be helpful for racial and ethnic groups to identify overarching cultural and historical commonalities shared among people who identify as part of that group for shared meaning-making and solidarity. Randy S. Woodley found through interviews and surveys of over 100 Native American persons throughout the United States that Native people tend to share some common values, such as:

- the earth and everything on earth is sacred
- everything on earth is at its best when seeking peace, harmony, and balance
- community is essential
- humor is sacred and necessary
- cooperation and diversity are strengths
- oral communication and traditions have primordial power and should be used cautiously
- present-minded orientation overrides future planning
- an open work ethic that seeks work that is meaningful
- hospitality and generosity shown in ceremonial gift-giving and sharing resources in daily living
- reciprocity with all Creation.⁴⁴

⁴³ Jimmy Elwood and Vanessa Andreotti with Sharon Stein. “Towards Braiding.” (Published by the authors with support from Musagetes, ISBN: 978-0-9877238-9-5, June 2019), 52-53.

⁴⁴ Randy S. Woodley. *Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview: A Decolonized Approach to Christian Doctrine*. (Baker Academic- A division of Baker Publishing Group: Grand Rapids, MI, 2022), 92-94.

Yet, the ways and extent that these values are expressed among Native American individuals and tribes varies. So, it is important to remember that Native Americans are unique individuals, and no Native American person speaks for all Native people.

Learning from many Native people about their unique histories and traditions and hearing their stories directly helps non-Native people break away from commonly held misconceptions about Native Americans and broaden their awareness and understanding of Native peoples, seeing Native persons as real human beings, rather than viewing Native Americans as one, monolithic group. One of the ways we can break down stereotypes is to hear one another's stories about how we identify ourselves- where we come from, who our people are, important life experiences, what shapes our decision-making, our faith stories, our hopes and dreams for our families, community, and world, etc. This kind of learning leads to the building of a relational partnership- a partnership where value is derived from knowing one another and being known.

For Boe Harris/Nakakakena, of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa/Spirit Lake Dakota tribes, identity is important and complex:

...I am reminded that Jesus comes from a tribe, with the cultural traditions of language, clothing, songs, dance, festivals and prayers... Jesus, a man created in the image of God, God's own son, traveled the earth with cultural and spiritual identity to share the news of his father above... When thinking about identity, I find that it is multifaceted. I have a spiritual identity, cultural identity, physical identity, and identity formed from life experiences and choices made, and the identity of being created in the image of God. It has taken most of my life's journey to understand how each facet of my identity is interrelated, and how each facet can come into balance and move me, with confidence, onto the path that I recognize I have been called to walk.⁴⁵

As human beings, we all have many layers to our identities that make us who we are, and yet we all belong to the Creator. The more we know about and reflect on our own layers of identity and

⁴⁵ Henrietta Mann and Anita Phillips. *On This Spirit Walk: The Voices of Native Americans and Indigenous Peoples*, "Chapter One- Identity: Jesus a Tribal Man" by Boe Harris/Nakakakena. (Native American Comprehensive Plan: Muscogee, OK, 2012), 9-10.

the layers of others' identities, the more we truly know ourselves and one another, and can see God in one another.

Second, it is important to be personally present when developing a relational partnership. Outreach and missions can be accomplished in the church without much personal interaction among participants. Gifts of money and material goods may be offered to meet the needs of individuals and organizations. Groups may give their time, resources and energy offering services of construction, teaching, medical care, etc. Knowing people's names and stories is not necessary when sharing these gifts. This kind of partnership can be characterized as transactional- partners giving and receiving goods or services. This kind of partnership can be good and beneficial if it is sought out and welcomed by those receiving the gifts. McFarlin and Norman First American's past and present relationship has mostly been transactional- McFarlin has provided space so that Norman First American can maximize its fundraising. Yet, when reflecting on the value of the relationship through these events, members of Norman First American commented that people from McFarlin being personally present to support them meant a lot. And one member said that this presence increases goodwill.⁴⁶

Transactional partnerships often seek to meet short-term needs- providing gifts and services that are needed at one moment. Transactional relationships can be enduring and last for many years, yet the goal over time remains the same— meeting immediate needs through providing tangible gifts and services. Relational partnerships can also be short-term; however, they often seek to meet longer-term needs, such as building trust, strengthening community, and breaking down stereotypes. To meet these longer-term needs, partners must engage together in

⁴⁶ Norman First American's Focus Group. Norman, OK. December 20, 2024.

learning about one another and their unique contexts and walking with one another on their journeys in life and faith. McFarlin and NFA would benefit from going to one another's places of worship, to events that are important to the community to watch, listen, and learn what is valued by one another. This requires humility, attentiveness and an openness to experiencing other ways of being and doing. When we enter into partnership with this level of intentionality, we learn more about who God is and what it means to be God's people—that God loves diversity as is reflected in the diversity of human beings created in God's image. When we enter into relational partnerships, we acknowledge the truth of our Christian identity and live out the values of our faith-- that each of us is an equal member of the Body of Christ, that the gifts of the Holy Spirit poured out on all people are many and varied and that the Church needs all of these gifts.⁴⁷

Third, understanding cultural differences and power dynamics in cross-cultural partnerships is vital for a fruitful partnership. Geert Hofstede was a pioneer in cross-cultural research. He describes six cultural dimensions that all cultures express to some degree: Individualism/Collectivism, Power Distance, Masculine/Feminine (this category has been renamed "Competitive/Cooperative" by some recent scientists), Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term/Short-Term Orientation, and Indulgence.⁴⁸ Every culture has ways of expressing these dimensions but does so in different ways and to different degrees. Often misunderstandings arise in cross-cultural partnerships because expectations of certain ways of communicating and behaving by each group are not met, and partners are not aware of how culture is at play in those interactions and feelings may get hurt. The culture of the majority group tends to dominate interactions which can lead to members of the minority group suppressing their voices and

⁴⁷ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989). 1 Corinthians 12.

⁴⁸ Geert Hofstede. "The 6-D Model of National Culture." Accessed January 6, 2025.
<https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/>.

developing an attitude of “go along to get along.” A certain level of politeness may characterize these partnerships with the minority group accepting the challenges in the relationship because the reasons for remaining in relationship outweigh the costs, and yet these relationships may not contain a high level of trust.

Developing a new kind of relationship between Norman First American and McFarlin should be entered into slowly, taking time to learn and reflect on the history, culture and context of both churches to avoid causing further harm, to proceed with respect and to develop a relationship that is mutual and reciprocal. The new social principles of the United Methodist Church state: “We... call on individuals and congregations to educate themselves about the troubling legacies of colonialism,” and “we call on congregations and on pastors, bishops, and other church authorities to educate themselves about the root causes and manifestations of racism, ethnocentrism, and tribalism within communities of faith and to develop strategies for overcoming these kinds of social divisions.”⁴⁹ For McFarlin to enter into this kind of partnership that seeks to break with the harmful ways that non-Native churches have related to Native people, McFarlin needs to understand its own history and culture and how they have shaped and continue to shape its interactions with Native people.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL PARTNERSHIP

With data from this research, observations, and implications for a fruitful partnership in mind, the question then is, “Where do McFarlin and Norman First American go from here?” The people I spoke with in interviews and focus groups shared that McFarlin and Norman First American both have assets to share with one another, as well as challenges. One of McFarlin’s

⁴⁹ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2020/2024*. (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2024), 126, 133.

main assets is its building, which can host large-scale events. Another asset of McFarlin is generosity. McFarlin is a church that values outreach and sharing. It has the largest food bank in Cleveland County and provides more utility assistance for OG&E customers than any other organization. McFarlin has a variety of ministry opportunities for all ages and is known in the community for excellent music ministries.⁵⁰

Norman First American representatives said that their people, history, culture and faith is an asset to be shared. People in Oklahoma do not always know much about Native Americans and they would benefit from getting to know their neighbors and learn about the history of the land they inhabit. At Norman First American, they embrace culture and are a model for other Native Christians in how the Christian faith and Native culture can be expressed together. They also mentioned Native hymns as an asset. Some Native hymns are translations of hymns from English or other languages; however, many Native hymns were written by Native people and give voice to the Native American Christian experience. Norman First American is also a generous church with outreach ministries that serve thousands of people each year.⁵¹

And yet, the most significant challenge these churches are facing, along with all United Methodist Churches, is the decline in membership and participation. Baby Boomers, which make up the majority of church membership, will all be at least 65 years old by the year 2030.⁵² With the decline in church attendance and aging out of the Baby Boomers, it becomes harder for churches to do the work of ministry. Norman First American and McFarlin are experiencing this

⁵⁰ McFarlin's Focus Group. Norman, OK. December 15, 2024.

⁵¹ Norman First American's Focus Group. Norman, OK, December 20, 2024.

⁵² United States Census Bureau. "2020 Census Will Help Policymakers Prepare for the Incoming Wave of Aging Boomers." Accessed March 15, 2025. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/12/by-2030-all-baby-boomers-will-be-age-65-or-older.html>

trend and so supporting one another helps both churches continue to offer a Christian witness in the Norman community.

From the recommendations in the interviews and focus groups, there emerged two recommendations that would help to develop a more relational partnership: 1) McFarlin should engage in its own learning about its particular history, culture and values, and about the history of relationships between non-Native and Native people in the United States and in Oklahoma, especially in the Church, and 2) McFarlin and Norman First American can join together in ways where people get to know one another, learn from one another, and support one another.

McFarlin's Just Action Team carries out the United Methodist Church's call through educational opportunities, building relationships, and actions in the community. McFarlin's Just Action Team has created a strategic plan that will be implemented in 2025. This plan is not limited to but includes continuing to develop a relational partnership with Norman First American and includes opportunities for learning and growth.

For McFarlin to engage in learning about its history, culture, and ways to foster relational partnerships, I recommend that McFarlin's Just Action Team offer four studies over the next year. These studies address the history of Methodism in Oklahoma, offer an introduction to culture and cultural awareness, give voice to Native American spirituality, and offer guidance for working relationships between Native and non-Native groups:

- 1) *Capture These Indians for the Lord: Indians, Methodists, and Oklahomans, 1844-1939* by Tash Smith. This book details the history of Methodism in Oklahoma, particularly the relationship between the non-Native church and Native peoples. McFarlin is mentioned

in the book, although briefly. It offers important insights as to how the Oklahoma Annual Conference and OIMC came to be and why they are two, separate conferences.⁵³

- 2) *Intercultural Development Inventory*. This is a cross-culturally valid assessment used to build cultural competence. Participants take the assessment and learn where they and the group lie on the continuum. “The IDI describes orientations toward cultural differences ranging from the more monocultural mindsets of Denial and Polarization through the transitional orientation of Minimization to the intercultural mindsets of Acceptance and Adaptation.”⁵⁴ The IDI helps individuals and groups develop a vocabulary surrounding culture and offers a trained facilitator who helps individuals and groups find ways to grow in intercultural competence. The Just Action Team and McFarlin’s staff have taken the IDI previously and follow-up is needed to see what opportunities for growth would be most beneficial.
- 3) *On This Spirit Walk: The Voices of Native American and Indigenous Peoples* by Henrietta Mann and Anita Phillips. This book includes the voices of the authors as well as ten guest contributors who have conversation about topics including Identity, Values, Relationship, Storytelling, Creation, Worship, History, Justice, the Earth, and Visions. It also includes guides for acts of confession, repentance, and forgiveness by the Church, and each chapter has discussion questions. This book offers insight into some of the culture, faith, and traditions of Native American Christians.⁵⁵

⁵³ Tash Smith. *Capture These Indians for the Lord: Indians, Methodists, and Oklahomans, 1844-1939*. (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2014)

⁵⁴ Intercultural Development Inventory. Accessed January 5, 2025. <https://www.idiinventory.com/>.

⁵⁵ Henrietta Mann and Anita Phillips. *On This Spirit Walk: The Voices of Native American and Indigenous Peoples*. (Native American Comprehensive Plan of the United Methodist Church: Muscogee, OK, 2012)

- 4) “Towards Braiding” by Elwood Jimmy and Vanessa Andreotti with Sharon Stein. This is a booklet put together by the authors with the support of Musagetes, “an international organization that makes the arts more central and meaningful in people's lives, in our communities, and in our societies.”⁵⁶ This booklet was created for organizations who are in relationship with, employ, or would like to grow in partnership with Native people. This study would be helpful for the Just Action Team to undertake itself as it continues to learn and lead others in building relationships in the community.

The expected outcome of these studies would be growth in self-reflection and group reflection among McFarlin leadership about the complexity of cross-cultural partnerships and an increased intentionality in developing a more fruitful relationship with Norman First American. These studies would hopefully lead to subsequent studies that would continue to grow and enhance the intellectual, cultural and emotional intelligence of people at McFarlin and the wider community.

Respondents in interviews and focus groups offered recommendations for moving forward in our partnership, such as continuing to offer support by working together on Norman First American’s annual fundraiser gala was important for everyone. The first gala was held in October 2024, and the profits will help build a new sanctuary and educational facilities onto NFA’s existing building. We are planning to partner on that event again in September 2025, taking into consideration what we learned from feedback about 2024’s event. Representatives from Norman First American and McFarlin also had recommendations for new ways to partner:

- 1) Support one another by volunteering with ministry events when needed. Norman First American holds a taco sale every second Friday of the month from 11 am-2 pm. This is a fundraiser that supports the ministries of the church. Norman First American also holds

⁵⁶ Musagetes. Accessed January 5, 2025. <https://musagetes.ca/>.

stomp dances and gourd dances in the spring and fall where they feed people. McFarlin can increase its promotion of these events so that more people attend and help support NFA. A member of Norman First American recommends promoting and attending the Annual OU Powwow in the spring. This is a large powwow attended by people from all over the world and it is a good opportunity to observe Native traditions and to spend time together. One NFA member said they would teach McFarlin people the Indian Two-Step dance.⁵⁷

- 2) Learn together. A way to learn together, as already mentioned, is to learn from Native Americans about Native Americans; however, we can also learn together by joining together for study on any topic. A way to learn together is to have a small group Bible study with members of each church participating. The churches could do a “pulpit-swap” where a McFarlin pastor could preach at NFA and Dr. Wilson could preach at McFarlin. Representatives of NFA spoke about coming to McFarlin to share Native hymns in worship.⁵⁸ These are possible ways to share in worship together without trying to combine services into a blended-style service, which is not desired. The first Sunday in October is World Communion Sunday in the United Methodist Church and Native American Ministries Sunday is observed on May 4 in 2025. These two Sundays could be opportunities to learn together on a Sunday morning when most congregants are present. Another exciting possibility for learning together could be taking educational trips together, such as to The Holy Land, or England to learn about the beginnings of Methodism, or the southeastern part of the United States to learn about early Methodism in North America, especially the interactions of Methodists with Native tribes, to name a

⁵⁷ Norman First American’s Focus Group. Norman, OK. December 20, 2024.

⁵⁸ Norman First American’s Focus Group. Norman, OK. December 20, 2024.

few. Traveling together not only provides opportunities to learn together but provides opportunities to get to know one another personally.

- 3) Fellowship with one another. To develop a more relational partnership, opportunities to get to know one another on a personal level are vital. Because of the size differences of our congregations, church-wide gatherings would not allow the kinds of interactions where deeper relationships are built. Creating opportunities for smaller gatherings will be more beneficial. One possible way to do this is to bring college students from each ministry together. Both NFA and McFarlin are actively engaged with students at the University of Oklahoma and the United Methodist Church has a campus ministry called The Wesley Foundation. Students could gather to play games, learn together, or share a meal. The games, topics of learning and food could be focused on history and culture or could simply be informal opportunities for gathering and getting to know one another. Perhaps one of the best ways for members of each church to get to know one another and build trust is through sharing meals and conversation. Sitting at table with someone and being willing to share your story requires vulnerability and is a powerful way to connect. To begin, the conversation at these meals could be guided by a prompt-- questions written on a piece of paper, reflective conversation after listening to a speaker or watching a movie, or some other given topic. Prompts help strangers get talking. Prompts can be created by leaders of the groups, or there are many conversation cards available that can be helpful. "So..." cards were created by Miguel Luis Calayan and include 52 cards with questions that lead to deeper conversation, such as "Describe a moment that made you feel like a grown-up," and "Which day in your life do you wish you could erase from

history?”⁵⁹ After some time, though, the conversation at meals or other gatherings would not always need a prompt.

These recommendations are a way for McFarlin and Norman First American to connect.

Relationships and trust are not built quickly, so the frequency of serving together, learning together, and gathering for fellowship cannot be forced and will depend on what makes sense for both churches.

By learning and sharing life together in these ways, we live out our calling to be the Body of Christ who prays together, eats together, supports one another, and shares the good news together. As members of the Body of Christ, none of us has all gifts needed, but together we have more gifts to share with one another and the community than we do on our own.

CONCLUSION

When seeking to develop a mutually beneficial partnership and a relationship characterized by unity, it is important to remember that unity does not mean uniformity. Diversity is a creation of God as attested to in Genesis 1 and 1 Corinthians 12. God calls us beyond seeing this diversity through monocultural lenses and invites us to experience how good it is when God’s people share life together where everyone’s uniqueness is known, valued and expressed equally. Norman First American and McFarlin both have gifts to share with one another that can strengthen our connection and community, if we are willing to invest the time and intellectual, spiritual and emotional energy it will take to learn about ourselves and our shared history, build trust and get to know one another.

There is a desire among members of McFarlin and Norman First American to rebuild a relationship that has been inactive for over ten years, and there are hopes for partnering in new

⁵⁹ Luis Miguel Calayan. “So... A Collection of Questions for Deeper Discussions.” Accessed January 6, 2025. <https://www.socards.org/>

ways. While the transactional part of our relationship will continue in some ways as we continue to support one another in ministry, entering into an era of relational partnership has potential to broaden our understanding of what it means to be human and to be God's people, to break down stereotypes and model what it means to love another as we show up for one another with mutuality and respect, and to increase goodwill between our churches and our annual conferences. At a time when the United Methodist Church is looking to live out its mission with renewed optimism and love for all people after the 2024 General Conference and many churches leaving the denomination through disaffiliations, the witness of two churches that have experienced a fractured relationship in the past which resulted in a decade of disassociation reengaging and working together could serve as an example of the possibility of new life as we go beyond the walls of the church building to share life and grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

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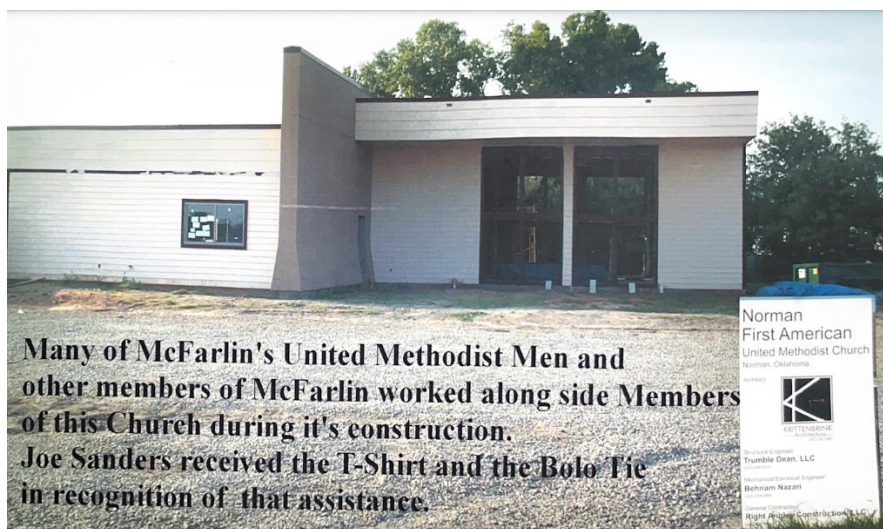
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Illustrations



Aerial view of McFarlin Memorial Methodist Church, 1924- McFarlin Archives



Norman First American United Methodist Church 2004- McFarlin Archives



NFA t-shirt and hand-beaded bolo tie

Gift from NFA to McFarlin's United Methodist Men 2004- McFarlin Archives