

# Frequently Asked Questions about Mid American Indian Fellowships with answers given by MAIF Consultant/Helper Robert Francis

## Is Mid American Indian Fellowships Baptist?

No. Although Mid American Indian Fellowships has reciprocal relationships with some Baptist churches and entities, this does not make MAIF Baptist any more than it makes the Baptists into members of the Mid American Indian Fellowships. Some MAIF members retain membership in Baptist churches, just as others continue as Methodist, Catholic, etc. MAIF members enjoy freedom of association. As for me, I was once a Baptist minister, I am no longer a member of a Baptist church or any other church. Mid American Indian Fellowships is not organized according to Baptist polity or in keeping with commonly held Baptist beliefs.

## Is Mid American Indian Fellowships a Christian organization?

No. While some Mid American Indian Fellowships members may describe themselves as Christian, others reject that label along with the theological belief systems that go with it. On the whole, MAIF does not look favorably upon Christian efforts to proselytize or convert those of other spiritual traditions.

## Since Mid American Indian Fellowships is not a Christian organization, why do you continue to use or make reference to the Christian Bible?

This has been a point of confusion for many. After all, the Bible has been and continues to be used as a tool of colonization or as a weapon against our people and other peoples around the world. Through the use or misuse of the Bible, theologies of conquest are devised to encourage and justify the theft of lands and the genocide of nations.

But, consider this: The enemy comes to you quietly saying, "Here is a terrible and deadly weapon. I have used this weapon to destroy your people, but try as I might, I can't kill them all. I need your help. I will now put this weapon in *your* hands. Take this and finish the destruction of your people and yourself as well. Finish the job that I have begun."

- A fully colonized person may say, "Alright, I accept this weapon on the terms in which it is given. I will use it to destroy my people and myself as instructed."
- Another person may say, "I reject any contact or connection with this weapon."

- Still another may say, “I accept this weapon but on my own terms. I will become skilled with its use. I will help others who wish to become skilled with its use. We will then turn this weapon against our enemy, that our people may not be hurt by this weapon ever again!” This is why I continue to use the Bible.

Do I believe the Bible? My understanding is that the Bible is a valuable collection of sacred stories containing and revealing eternal truths.

Do I believe Creator speaks through the Bible and nowhere else? I understand Creator has and continues to speak both directly and indirectly to *all* people in any number of ways.

Do I believe a person must have the Bible for salvation? My understanding is that salvation: wholeness, health and healing is of Creator. Creator is the Everywhere-Spirit, not confined to any one people’s holy text or set of sacred stories. The major principles and understandings conveyed in the Bible were with the indigenous peoples of this land long before any of us had association with the book.

Do I believe we are better off by having the Bible? My understanding is that we are better off following Creator according to the original instructions: the sacred stories, ceremonies, ethics and lifeways given to *our* people before we ever had the Bible. My understanding is that these instructions and the relationship we always enjoyed with Creator and with creation were and are sufficient. We were better off as uncolonized peoples. It would have been good if the Bible had come to us in a better way, without the horrendous violence and from a people willing to listen before speaking, in accordance with proper etiquette. However, we are taught to listen and consider, taking all in our hand, to pick out the good, to blow the rest away with the breath of kindness. The Bible is now in *our* hands, and it’s up to us to decide what to do with it. We may decide to reject it, or we may decide to accept it. We have this freedom of choice. If we decide to accept the Bible, we must accept it on Indian terms, in keeping with the original instructions given to *us* by Creator. Nothing supersedes those instructions. If we take the Bible, we must read it with Indian eyes. To do otherwise puts us in violation of the very principles the Bible conveys. Who knows? It may well be that a thorough and healthy understanding of what the Bible *really* says could protect our peoples from those who continue using the book as a genocidal weapon against us.

### **Is Mid American Indian Fellowships a traditional tribal organization?**

Not precisely. A truly traditional tribal organization must exist within a tribe or within a single tribal tradition. While Mid American Indian Fellowships honors and promotes tribal traditions, MAIF is inter-tribal. Rather than a traditional tribal organization, MAIF may be more properly considered as a bridge for typically colonized

and Christianized Indian people who feel a spiritual leading to reconnect with the traditional spiritualities of their own people. MAIF helps people make those connections.

### **Is Mid American Indian Fellowships a religious organization?**

Technically yes. The IRS says it is; this is the terminology the government uses to place us in a pigeon hole of understanding or comprehension. However, from my own observation, it seems that most organizations exist primarily for purposes of perpetuating themselves. MAIF does not exist, and I hope will never exist, for the purpose of self-perpetuation or expansion as an organization. Furthermore, I personally find it very tiring, even exhausting being around groups of religious people! Around religious people I have the uncomfortable feeling that I must be on my guard, say the right words, not say the wrong words. By contrast, I can be myself around the people who gather in the Mid American Indian Fellowships, and I think, others feel free to be themselves too.

### **What is meant by the statement “following Jesus within the context of our Native cultures”?**

In all honesty, this statement means different things to different people even within our Indian Fellowships circles. That being said, I'll try to explain what this statement means to me.

I once listened as a highly esteemed Chickamauga Cherokee traditional elder explained that the life of Jesus as described in the Bible, the life of one going about healing diseases, casting out hurtful spirits, teaching people to live in harmony, bears more resemblance to the life of a traditional American Indian spiritual person than it does to the average Christian minister.

I no longer call myself a Christian. I do not ascribe to any Christian creed or statement of faith. However, I do consider myself a follower of Jesus which to me means this: I look at this Jesus, the things he did and said in the context of his situation and take his life as an example for my situation, keeping in mind that while our situations have similarities, there are also radical differences. I am a Cherokee follower of Jesus. Our ancient Cherokee understanding of Creator-Offspring is big enough to include Jesus, even if the understanding of Jesus held by many Christians is too small to include or even tolerate those outside their tight little circles.

Jesus was born a Jew and remained a Jew. Jesus never became a Christian! Jesus was willing to help those of other ethnicities but never attempted to convert them. As indigenous peoples of the Americas, we have our own cultures. We are neither Jews nor Hebrews. We are not Asians, Europeans or Africans, but our cultures are no less blessed, no less chosen than any other. To follow Jesus in the context of our Native cultures means valuing the presence and teachings of Creator within our own Native cultures; it means being true to our own Native cultures even as Jesus was true to his.

## **Do you have to be Indian to be a part of Mid American Indian Fellowships?**

It certainly helps, but No. While the majority of our members are of or descended of American Indian tribal groups, there are also non-Indians among our membership. Some of these are non-Indians who have married Indians and want to enter American Indian community along with their spouses. Other are non-Indians who are attracted to and wish to in some level properly assimilate into an indigenous culture of the land in which they live.

## **Is Mid American Indian Fellowships pagan?**

The answer to this question depends on what is meant by “pagan”.

“Pagan” is a Latin word, the literal meaning of which is simply “country dweller”. The word was used by the Roman Empire in reference to those living outside the cities, out in the country, where they could not be controlled. The word was also used in reference to followers of any spirituality which was not imperially sanctioned. By Roman imperialistic definition, Christianity began as a “pagan” or unsanctioned spirituality. However, the time came when Christianity entered into a close alliance or marriage with the Roman Empire and enjoyed status as the only sanctioned spirituality or religion of the Roman Empire. All other spiritualities were thereafter referred to as “pagan”.

## **To what God do you pray?**

Go outdoors and look around you. We pray to the Creator of all that you see.

## **What is Mid American Indian Fellowships?**

Simply put, Mid American Indian Fellowships is a network of American Indian spiritual groups in Missouri, Kansas and Arkansas. Fellowship meetings involve purification and prayer ceremonies, gathering around the drum to sing in the indigenous languages of this great land, sharing of our oral traditions and passing the talking stick so that everyone, from our elders to the smallest child, has a chance to share what Creator has placed on their hearts. Of course, there is always a shared meal. In addition to regular Indian Fellowship meetings, an annual three-day gathering is held. Some Indian Fellowships helpers also serve as outside sponsors for Native American spiritual groups in prisons. MAIF may be considered as a bridge for typically colonized and Christianized Indian people who feel a spiritual leading to reconnect with the traditional spiritualities of their own people.

## **What is the purpose of Mid American Indian Fellowships?**

The overarching purpose of Mid American Indian Fellowships is the decolonization of colonized peoples. Decolonization, of necessity, includes the promotion and restoration of indigenous cultures. Mid American Indian Fellowships has taken a direction of cultural restoration through active promotion of indigenous language, oral tradition,

ceremonies and agriculture. If you would like to be involved with indigenous cultural restoration, let us know.