

# TALES OF IMMERSION FROM A FORMER RED RAIDER

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## TALES OF IMMERSION FROM A FORMER RED RAIDER

I grew up on Long Island in New York. I graduated from Patchogue-Medford High School—home of the Red Raiders, or Raiders for short. In the middle of my varsity jacket was the face of a Native American in full chiefly headdress. On our sidelines was the “Raider Indian.” A student in a Native American suit and head, again with a full headdress, would run and dance up and down the sidelines during football games. I loved my varsity jacket and wore it proudly. I was heartbroken when my father donated it to charity when I moved out, never asking me if I wanted it. I was proud of my school and never once thought anything was wrong with our emblem or mascot. In reality, it wasn't that I thought about the issue and didn't think anything was wrong with it; I never considered the question at all.

That was 1992, and I was a much younger and different person. Life experiences have led me to understand what was wrong with that imagery. The school has gotten rid of the mascot and changed the name to just “Raiders.” As I understand it, the emblem is either just a ‘PM,’ or there are also images of two pirate swords—apparently, no one worries about offending pirates! These changes are all good, and I support them. However, I had nothing to do with them. I never spoke up about the “Raider Indian,” I never protested, wrote a letter, or signed a petition. I never even thought about it. It was one thing, and then it was another, and at both times, I agreed with the choice. I was a completely passive participant in the process.

Moving forward to today, I am a middle-aged woman and a seminarian of the Episcopal Church of the United States of America. My little school, known to most by the name of its town, Sewanee, is a school primarily built by enslaved people on land stolen from the Cherokee people. I knew nothing of this when I applied or agreed to go. I did no research, asked no questions, and didn't worry about it at all in my decision-making process. This is white privilege.

As part of my seminary education, I am spending our summer holiday doing a cross-cultural immersion in Aotearoa New Zealand. Why am I here, you might ask. Some days, I have no idea. We are required to do something of a cross-cultural nature connected with the Episcopal Church. However, I could have gone much less far or stayed far less long. I planned this trip with others for over a year. I intended to study Anglicanism amongst the Māori people. I could not refine the topic for some time. Over time, that became studying how the Māori have enculturated Anglicanism and how the New Zealand Anglican Church has enculturated Māori culture. As I arrived, that further morphed into the effects of colonial Anglicanism on the Māori culture. My head spun around on my shoulders, trying to comprehend the breadth of the topic I was exploring.

Now that I am here, now that I have a more specific issue to ponder, what do I do? I am privileged enough to be hosted by the Reverend Jacynthia Murphy, who has put together a thorough itinerary to indoctrinate me, as much as possible, into the history of the Māori people, the origins of Christianity for the Māori, and the state of things today. That's what I will practically be doing, but that still didn't answer the question, what do I do?

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So, what do I do? I must keep going. I don't know if this is the correct answer to my question or not. Perhaps God will show that to me before my journey ends. This story is no longer just about learning about Māori culture or the effects of colonial Anglicanism in Aotearoa New Zealand. This is also about understanding how colonialism and Christianity have affected all First Nations peoples. It is about understanding how colonialism and racism are two sides of the same coin. How is that affecting the people in my own country?

This immersion is also about my growth and understanding that I am uncomfortable confronting these issues. That it is uncomfortable to confront these issues. But my discomfort is for three months, not generations. This immersion is about the realization that my privilege will always allow me to walk away from this discomfort. A privilege that is not available to so many others. On this journey, I must confront the reality that while my cultural privilege allows me to walk away, my life with Christ does not. What I will do, more than anything else I have said thus far, is pray. I will ask for God's mercy and grace to help me to understand and confront these feelings.

I understand far more than I care to admit why so many of my white siblings in Christ worldwide, are resistant to change. Change is scary, unfamiliar, and, most of all, uncomfortable. I hate that I can identify with those feelings. It is time to push past that and realize that God's economy calls for us to care for one another and one another's pain. God's economy calls for us to walk with one another, not over one another. God's economy calls for us to live into Christ's example of humanity and to shed that which provides comfort and alienates us from one another and God. Living in God's economy is challenging...uncomfortable. Maybe it shouldn't be, but it is. I will pray that I do it better. I will pray that we all do it better.

I am thankful to all the Māori people I have met and will meet on this journey. I am grateful to all of Aotearoa New Zealand's people, for hosting me during my summer holiday. I am grateful for this education and this discomfort. I am thankful to God for this calling. I pray that, at the end of my time, I will have more knowledge about Māori culture and more awareness to take home. I pray I will be more comfortable in the discomfort and that through this immersion, I will be a compassionate ally to all who need it in my country. I pray that all Christians shed the fear of discomfort and step into the reality of walking with Christ and loving one another as He loves us.

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*Kristen is a rising senior at the School of Theology at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. God-willing and the people consenting, Kristen will be ordained in the Diocese of Maryland to the Transitional Diaconate in December 2023 and to the Sacred Order of Priests in the Episcopal Church in June 2024. Kristen is spending her 2023 summer holiday in a cross-cultural immersion with the Māori Mihinare o Aotearoa, studying inculturation and the effects of religious colonialism.*

*In addition to her studies, Kristen is also a licensed attorney in the state of Maryland, a Licensed Graduate Professional Counselor, and a Licensed Graduate Marriage and Family Therapist. She maintains a part-time counseling practice in Maryland and operates a small wellness company focusing on holistic healing practices. Upon graduation and ordination, Kristen is eager to work with her bishop and diocese to discover where God will call her next.*

*Kristen would like to thank the many hosts and wonderful Māori people who have guided her along her cross-cultural journey in Aotearoa.*