

Small Talk – June 16 2021
By Michael Small

The month of June is a time of endings and new beginnings. As Covid-19 restrictions are gradually lifted folks are able to gather safely in all kinds of settings. (Please wear mask in public if not vaccinated) June also is a month with graduations, weddings, and times of transitions. For some denominations (Lutheran and Methodist) June used to be a month when clergy appointments were made for clergy to move from one parish to a new place of appointment and ministry.

Recently I was informed of legislation in some states, including the state of my birth, Oregon, that protect the right of Native High School seniors to wear items and clothing that represent their culture during their graduation ceremony. I thought to myself, this is a no brainer. When digging deeper I discovered that Minnesota is not included as a state with such legislation. I am surprised. Below are remarks from *Indian Country Today*¹ that speaks to this issue. I think it is important to read and share.

Some Native students continue to face push back from schools prohibiting the wearing of eagle feathers and traditional regalia at graduation ceremonies due to strict dress codes, according to Matthew Campbell, staff attorney with the Native American Rights Fund, the largest legal nonprofit organization defending Native American rights.

Schools' insistence on uniformity of dress as an expression of discipline places Native students in a position of having to choose between participating in graduation or following their religious or cultural traditions, according to Campbell.

In defending their policies, school leaders express concern that if they open the door to Native students wearing feathers or regalia, they will have to allow all students to decorate their caps and gowns in any way they choose.

Minnesota State Senator Mary Kunesh hopes that more states will follow Arizona's lead. "For so long schools emphasized uniformity, hopefully we are moving away from that and celebrating our students' diversity," she said.

"It's just one of those issues, like mascots, that never seem to go away," said Kunesh of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.

"We have a split legislature in Minnesota, with a Democratic majority in the House and a Republican majority in the Senate," Kunesh said.

"It continues to be a bone of contention that generates strong discussion; opponents complain that schools will be opening the door to other expressions of religion and free speech such as wearing Confederate flags or a Nazi symbol," she said.

Some fellow legislators also believe that the state government gives too much to Native people.

"I remember a legislator asking me, 'why are we always giving Indians so much?' I told him we aren't giving them anything; we're meeting our previous agreements guaranteed in treaties," Kunesh said. "Although we can't go back and do everything over again, going forward we have opportunities to do things the way they should be done, with integrity and generosity of heart." (The practice at Walker-Hackensack-

¹ <https://indiancountrytoday.com/news/graduations-shouldnt-be-another-form-of-erasure>

Akeley is that all students wear the same cap and gown. It has not been challenged as of this time)

How lifeless and boring would be our world if nature demanded uniformity, conformity in all things. There would be many grays, in contrast with brilliant colors and diversity. Sometimes School Boards are called to not be fearful, but to listen to the needs and all the desires of those they serve. A decision to allow a Native student wear traditional garb, a decision to invite Native drummers to participate does not mean that School Boards should allow symbols of hate and destruction to be present in critical ceremonies and rites of passage.

Until the State of Minnesota affirms the right of native students to wear traditional clothing, may we affirm and celebrate all students desire to express that healthy life-giving diversity that, in part, expresses the good for the whole.

During this time of summer, may it be a time of new beginnings "with integrity and generosity of heart"!

In the spirit and agape love of Jesus, Michael

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