



White Earth (Anishinaabeg): A Case Study for Change

By: The Oneida Trust and Enrollment Committee

This series of articles is designed to inform Oneida citizens about enrollment issues. The total number of Oneida enrolled members is expected to decline within the next 10 years. The goal of these articles is to generate community conversations about citizenship and belonging so that we may explore our options.

On Nov 19, 2013, the White Earth Nation did something historic. They voted to change their tribal constitution and scrap their ¼ blood quantum rule. The rule, which was adopted in 1963 by the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, of which White Earth is a member nation, was changed in favor of citizenship based on family lineage.

Today there are many Native nations talking about changing their constitutions, but only a few make it to ratification (make it official). Paying close attention to how other Native nations are handling this issue is important. So how did White Earth do it? And what lessons can we bring to Oneida? In this article, we will take a closer look at the process used to change the White Earth constitution.

White Earth is an example of an inclusive, community-led grassroots effort. In her 2007, State of the Nation address, White Earth Chairwoman Dr. Erma Vizenor called for a constitutional convention to start the process. In preparation for the convention, Dr. Jill Doerfler, a descendent of White Earth who has researched identity and tribal citizenship, began writing newspaper articles to stimulate community discussion. Advertisements were placed in the tribal newspaper asking for members to participate as constitutional delegates. Everyone who applied to be a delegate was accepted. From the outset it was established that citizens, not the tribal government, would make this decision. The government helped create an environment for change, but avoided dominating the discussion.

Reform efforts centered around four constitutional conventions, held between 2007-2009. Constitutional delegates engaged in extensive debates over criteria for White Earth citizenship. There had been earlier efforts in recent decades in which constitutions were drafted, but no action was taken.

In the first convention in 2007, delegates discussed the need for reform, the history of tribal citizenship and blood quantum. They tied everything into core Anishinaabe values and cultural practices. During the second convention in 2008, delegates asked, 'What are Anishinaabe values?' 'How can they be applied to our constitution?' Delegates reviewed a list of citizenship requirement alternatives that were previously created. "Many delegates seemed ready for change, but some were hesitant to let go of the blood quantum requirement due to concerns about resources," according to Doerfler.

The third convention in 2008 focused on tying constitutional reform to cultural revitalization. Traditional Anishinaabe stories were used to move people forward. At this point, delegates decided to no longer consider any blood quantum citizenship criteria. Chairwoman Vizenor designated a constitutional proposal team to draft a new constitution based on the conventions.

At the fourth convention in 2009, a new proposed constitution was presented to the delegates. According to Doerfler, "It requires lineal descent for citizenship and also addresses concerns about resources and a larger population by separating services and entitlements from citizenship. It states that services and entitlements will be regulated by a range of laws and policies." After considering the entire constitution, delegates ratified it by a vote signaling that it would move forward to a referendum where all White Earth citizens would have the chance to vote for or against the document.

In August 2013, the tribal council unanimously passed a resolution calling for a referendum vote on the proposed Constitution. On Nov 19, 2013, 80% of voters approved the new constitution, which lays out three distinct branches of government with a set of checks and balances among the branches, several advisory councils, and a lineal descent citizenship requirement.

So what are the take-home lessons for Oneida?

1) **Know your government.** We must understand both our traditional governance systems and the origin stories of our current tribal constitutions. This knowledge is necessary so that we are in the right frame of mind to begin discussing constitutional change.

2) **Define citizenship.** This is one of the most fundamental activities a nation must undertake. It is a difficult because citizenship can be an emotional issue with many different opinions. However, redefining citizenship requirements can offer possibilities to transform what it means to be a "sovereign" nation.

3) Keep core Oneida values at the center of the debate: This helps motivate community members and encourages group thinking.

4) Change takes time. Several of the White Earth delegates had been involved in different efforts for reform over the past 30 years. So persistence is key to getting things accomplished!

Ultimately, these are critical conversations we must bring to Oneida. The Trust and Enrollment Committee is currently exploring opportunities for the Oneida people to be heard on these issues.

For more information about Sustain Oneida please visit:

<https://www.facebook.com/OneidaTrust>

<https://oneida-nsn.gov/bcc/TrustEnrollmentCommittee/>

For comments or questions please email: sustainoneida@oneidanation.org.