

Sweetwater Cultural Center

By Turtle MacDermott

On Christmas Eve of 2017, after serving the Stony Point, NY, community for over 150 years, Stony Point Presbyterian Church held its final service; in Quaker terms, it was laid down. And like a Meeting which has been laid down, the question arose, what to do with the Meetinghouse?

The buildings and land of a Presbyterian Church belong not to the Session (governing body of that congregation), but to the Presbytery, a larger grouping of churches in that area. Thus, when a Presbyterian Church closes, the decision of what to do with the real property lies with the Presbytery. In the case of the Stony Point Church, the Hudson River Presbytery made a bold new decision – to seek a way to return the land and buildings to Native American descendants of those who lived on this land before the arrival of Europeans.

In consultation with the local Ramapough Nation, a new not-for-profit corporation has been formed. The Board of Directors of the Sweetwater Cultural Center (“Sweetwater” is one interpretation of the name Ramapough) is over 50% Native Americans, and includes several local Presbyterians as well as others concerned with the Earth. Title to the property was transferred November 20, 2019, with the intention “to promote the education, health and welfare of indigenous or native peoples and to preserve their cultures and ceremonial practices locally, regionally, and around the Western Hemisphere.” The Sweetwater Cultural Center is now a fully recognized 501.3(c) corporation, and is planning Opening Ceremonies for May 31st of 2020.

As Friends strengthen our relationships with our own Native American neighbors, descendants of those who cared for this land long before we arrived, it can be meaningful to both sides to look for ways to return care and ownership of this land to them.