

# Jerry Kuester: My Spiritual Journey

My first sermon presented at Seekers worship

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by Jerry Kuester

## My Spiritual Journey

### Story about Seneca women freeing the prisoners:

*Many years ago before the white man came to North America, the Seneca Indians roamed freely over the Eastern United States. Often they would travel from upstate New York down into the Carolinas to trade. Seneca Creek, a little ways up the Potomac from here, was one of their crossing points along their trail from the Susquehanna River to points south.*

*One day, a large group of Potawamini attacked a group of Seneca men, which was returning from a trading trip south. Although they put up a brave fight, they were defeated. The survivors of that attack were taken prisoner and held in a camp on the lower Potomac.*

*Fortunately, one of the Seneca braves was able to escape and returned to his people. When he got back to his village in the Finger Lake region of upstate New York, he found only women, old men and children there. The rest of the men were out on an extended hunting trip.*

*When the lone brave told his people what had happened, the women of the village became enraged. They decided among themselves that they would try to free their men themselves instead of waiting for the other men to return from their*

*hunting trip.*

*After making provision for their children, they set out for the Potawamini village. Driven by the fear of what might be happening to their men, it did not take them long to make their way to the village. Then during the middle of the night, they stealthily crept into the village, killed the few men who were guarding the prisoners, and set the prisoners free. By the next morning when the Potawaminis realized what had happened, the Senecas were long gone.*

*When the Senecas returned to their village, the men tried to tell how brave they were in freeing themselves from the Potawamini, but the women would have none of it. Eventually, the full story came out of how brave the women were. In gratitude for the bravery of the women, the Seneca chiefs decided that from then on, the Seneca women would elect the chiefs of their tribe.*

*So many years later, when the white settlers occupied the Seneca land in upstate New York, they learned of the custom in which the Seneca women would elect their leaders and saw how wise they were in selecting great leaders. Although it cannot be proven, I suspect that this may have been the reason why one of the principles of the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, which inaugurated the women's suffrage movement, was that women should have the right to vote.*

Well what does this story have to do with why I am here? The reason I shared this story was not to get on the good side of the feminists in this church. The reason is that, according to the lectionary reading for today, the writer to the Hebrews urges them to "Remember those in prison as though you were in prison with them" (He 13:3). According to one bible commentary that I read, the writer meant that they should be actively engaged in providing for the needs of the prisoners, not just passively thinking about them. I doubt that he wanted the

Hebrews to be as engaged with prisoners as the Seneca women were, but he definitely wanted them to be more involved in the lives of prisoners than they had been.

I believe that the author of the Hebrews epistle exhortation to the Hebrews is just as valid for us today as it was for those early followers of Christ. Certainly, there is more that we can do for prisoners than remembering them. What can we do? For one, we could write to prisoners. It has been found that prisoners who receive regular contact from the community while in prison are less likely to return to a life of crime when they are released. Another possibility is to get involved in prison reform. Although our jails and prisons have come a long way from where they had been, there is much work to be done to assure the humane treatment of prisoners. The recent news report about the death row inmate who was held in jail for two years even though he should have been released highlights the need for reform and citizen oversight.

Another way that you can get more involved with prisoners is to join me in visiting prisoners on death row. Yes, you heard me correctly. You can join me in visiting prisoners on death row. Besides being an intern here at Seekers Church, I am also an intern with the National Coalition against the Death Penalty. As part of that internship, I plan to interview the forty-five Native Americans who are on death row. This will be a difficult task because of the type of people that I will be interviewing, and because it will require me to travel around the country to the ten states where Native Americans are on death row. Unfortunately, National Coalition cannot afford to pay for my travel expenses; therefore, I will have to raise my own funds. I would love to have help in conducting the interviews as well as in raising the funds to meet the travel expenses. Moreover, I suspect that once I meet some of these men, there will be additional work in petitioning for their release. For I am sure that some of them have been unjustly accused and convicted, especially in a state like North

Carolina which has twelve Native Americans on death row, versus other states around it that only have one or two.

The reason that I decided to be an intern at Seekers Church and with the National Coalition against the Death Penalty is that I believe I have been called by God to work with Native Americans in institutions such as prisons and mental hospitals. Therefore, in preparation for this ministry, I will need experience working with Native Americans, which I will get while visiting them on death row. In addition, I will need experience in organizing a group who will work with me and who will be a source of support for this work. This is where the Seekers Church comes in. You know how to organize mission groups – I need to learn from you how to do it. I am particularly interested in the artists' mission group here because I plan to use art as a way to help people get in touch with their spirituality.

Now you may be wondering how my faith journey brought me to this point in my life. Well it started when I was a teenager and initially answered the call to ministry. At the time, I was a freshman in a Catholic high school. I decided to answer God's call and I entered a Catholic Seminary. I did not finish my seminary education then because I became more interested in a career in medicine while doing volunteer work in a hospital emergency room. Like many young people in their early twenties, the religion that I was raised in lacked meaning in my life; I was only marginally involved in it as my wife and I started a family. However, on January 1, 1972, God knocked me off my horse, so to speak, and I received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. For a couple of years, I was actively involved in the Catholic Charismatic movement in Boston. After moving here to DC in 1974, I did not find a Catholic group that met my needs; however, I did find a Pentecostal group that did. I worshiped in that church for about five years until I decided that I was not being nurtured by it. Then for many years, I just floated. I guess I was going through a mid-life crisis.

About four years ago, my wife and I decided to go our separate ways. For the first time in my life, I was living on my own. I felt that it was important for my wellbeing to be involved in a religious community. Being of liberal bent, I decided to see if Unitarian Universalism would satisfy my spiritual hunger. For three years, I did find spiritual sustenance at [Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church](#) in Bethesda. I was involved in their meditation groups and pastoral care committee. I even ran their fund raising event a couple of years. During that time, I decided to explore again God's call to ministry and I started Divinity studies at Wesley. About a year ago, the Unitarians decided that I did not have a call to be one of their ministers and as a result, I have been seeking a congregation that would. I have looked into the United Church of Christ, but I have some reservations about them. Knowing that I was seeking a church with a liberal perspective, my spiritual adviser suggested that I check out the Church of the Savior and that is why I started attending your services a few months ago.

I have told you about my calling and I have told you how I came to Seekers Church. Now I will share with you my Christology. Like most folks, my Christology has changed over the years. The Christ that I knew as a child was imposed upon me. His divinity I had to accept under penalty of being consigned to the fires of hell if I did not. Later, when I was involved with the Catholic Charismatics and the Pentecostals, the question of who is Jesus was not addressed, the focus was on the Holy Spirit. More recently, as a Unitarian, intellectually, I could accept their teaching that, although Jesus was an exceptional human being, he was not divine. Yet I have an inkling, a strange feeling deep within me, that there is something about Jesus that is vitally important for me. Like his disciples who also did not recognize his divinity, I am going to seek after him as we journey along the path that we follow.

In closing, I ask for your help. I need your help as I gain experience as an intern here. To that end, I would hope that you would point out my faults and weaknesses so that I would know where my growing edges are. I would hope that some of you would join with me in ministering to Native Americans and others on death row. Most especially, I need your help in seeking the reality of Jesus, the Christ, in my life.