

Enmegahbowh, Priest and Missionary

(June 12th)



Enmegahbowh (c. 1820 – June 12, 1902); pronounced “En-meh-GAH-boe” from **Enami'egaabaw**, meaning "He that prays [for his people while] standing"), was the first Native American to be ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Enmegahbowh, given the English name “John Johnson,” was the only child of the chief of an Ojibwe Band on [Rice Lake](#) near [Peterborough](#), Canada. Because this group of Ojibwe "trade Indians" remained behind while the others pressed farther up the Great Lakes in search of furs, some consider Enmegahbowh an Ottawa.

He was raised in a Christian [Anishinaabe](#) (Ojibwe) village near Petersburg which was affiliated with the Methodists. An Episcopal clergyman of the vicinity, Mr. Armour, persuaded Enmegahbowh's reluctant parents to send him to be educated with the clergyman's own sons. Enmegahbowh did learn to read and speak English, but after three months, the homesick boy ran away in the night and walked for two days to return to his own people. About 1831, Enmegahbowh's grandfather, a medicine man of high rank, inducted him into the tribal religious organization [Midewiwin](#).

He became a Methodist missionary in 1832. At one point, Enmegahbowh attempted to abandon missionary work and return to Canada, but the boat was turned back by storms on Lake Superior, providing him a vision: “Here Mr. Jonah came before me and said, ‘Ah, my friend Enmegahbowh, I know you. You are a fugitive. You have sinned and disobeyed God. Instead of going to the city of Nineveh, where God sent you to spread his word to the people, you started to go, and then turned aside. You are now on your way to the city of Tarsish....’”

On July 4, 1841 Enmegahbowh married Biwabikogeshigequay (aka “Iron Sky Woman” and baptized with the English name “Charlotte”). He met the Rev. Ezekiel Gilbert Gear, chaplain at [Fort Snelling](#) at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, and became an Episcopalian. Gear eventually introduced Enmegahbowh to the Rev. [James Lloyd Breck](#), a missionary who had arrived in Minnesota in 1851, and who baptized Enmegahbowh.



Enmegahbowh (left) with Rev. [James Lloyd Breck](#) (right) and Isaac Manitowab (center).

Enmegahbowh invited Rev. Breck to Gull Lake, where together they founded St. Columba's Mission in 1852. The mission was later moved to White Earth, where Enmegahbowh served until his death in 1902. Although he was unwelcomed for a time among some Ojibway groups because he warned the community at Fort Ripley about the 1862 uprising, Enmegahbowh nonetheless was consistent as a man of peace, inspiring the Waubanaquot (Chief White Cloud) mission, which obtained a lasting peace between the Ojibway and the Dakota peoples in 1869.

Bishop [Jackson Kemper](#) ordained the youth a deacon in 1859, and assigned Enmegahbowh to [Crow Wing, Minnesota](#) to assist in founding [St. Columba Mission, Mille Lacs](#) Chief Fine-Day was an early member of Enmegahbowh's church, and took over the mission in 1861.



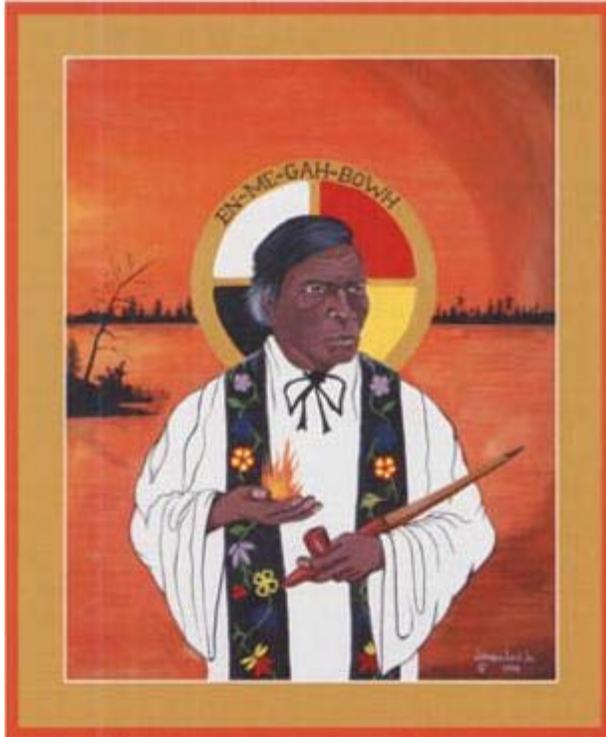
Enmegahbowh as an ordained Episcopal priest

In 1867, Bishop Henry Whipple ordained Enmegahbowh a priest in the cathedral at Faribault, Minnesota. Enmegahbowh helped train many others to serve as deacons throughout northern Minnesota. The powerful tradition of Ojibway hymn singing is a living testimony to their

ministry. His understanding of Native tradition enabled him to enculturate Christianity in the language and traditions of the Ojibway. He tirelessly traveled throughout Minnesota and beyond, actively participating in the development of mission strategy and policy for the Episcopal Church.

In 1821, the Sioux on the upper Minnesota River entered into two treaties with the United States government, the [Treaty of Traverse des Sioux](#) and the [Treaty of Mendota](#), which together ceded their claims to millions of acres and enabled white settlement in Minnesota. In exchange, the Sioux were to receive a reservation and annual payments totaling more than two million dollars, but ultimately received little other than a few trade goods. Most of the payments were actually made to white traders (supposedly for goods provided to the Sioux) or stolen through corruption within the [Bureau of Indian Affairs](#). When Minnesota became a state in 1858, the tribes sent representatives to Washington, D.C. led by [Little Crow](#) to complain about not receiving the benefits negotiated in the treaty, but had little success. The land on their reservation proved not arable, and new settlement practices restricted hunting.

During the [Dakota War of 1862](#), which began as treaty payments were due for distribution to the starving Sioux at [Fort Ridgely](#), the Gull Lake Band of [Mississippi Chippewa](#) rose to attack nearby [Fort Ripley](#). Enmegahbowh prevented other Ojibwa bands from joining the Gull Lake Band, for which the rebels imprisoned him. Enmegahbowh escaped and traveled thirty miles at night to warn Fort Ripley. This discouraged the Gull Lake Band from attacking the fort. However, many Ojibwe resented Enmegahbowh's actions for years, even though he followed his people (and the Gull Lake band and other Ojibwa) when they were removed to the environs of the [Leech Lake Indian Reservation](#) and then eventually to the [White Earth Indian Reservation](#).



Painting of Enmegahbowh by Rev. Johnson Loud

In March 1880, Enmegahbowh and Chief Fine-Day traveled across the eastern United States for three months in order to raise money for a new St. Columba Episcopal Church at White Earth. While in Ohio, they impressed the governor, and also addressed the Ohio state legislature, raising \$6000 for their project. After Chief Fine-Day died in 1883, Enmegahbowh referred to him as "our noblest chief" and recommended that a stained glass window in the church memorialize him.

Enmegahbowh died at the White Earth Indian Reservation in northern [Minnesota](#) on June 12, 1902 at the age of 95, and is buried in St. Columba's churchyard. The people of St. Columba's honor him each June during the White Earth Pow-Wow. The [Episcopal calendar of saints](#) remembers Enmegahbowh on June 12. Owanah Anderson, in her book *Jamestown Commitment: The Episcopal Church and the American Indian*, states that "Church historians have slighted the role of an Indian man, Enmegahbowh, in chronicling the coming of Christianity to the Ojibwa of northern Minnesota. While Whipple was the broker, Enmegahbowh was the implementer. While Whipple would come to be known as Apostle to the Indians, it was Enmegahbowh who served as the bishop's enabler, loyal companion, associate, and interpreter for more than 40 years." He is memorialized in the Enmegahbowh Healing and Reconciliation Station at St. Mark's Cathedral, Minneapolis.

Collect

Almighty God, you led your pilgrim people of old with fire and cloud: Grant that the ministers of your Church, following the example of blessed Enmegahbowh, may stand before your holy people, leading them with fiery zeal and gentle humility. This we ask through Jesus, the Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Assigned Lessons for the Day (June 12)

A Reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (52:7–10)

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'
Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.
Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

Psalm 129

- 1 "Greatly have they oppressed me since my youth," *
let Israel now say;
- 2 "Greatly have they oppressed me since my youth, *
but they have not prevailed against me."
- 3 The plowmen plowed upon my back *
and made their furrows long.
- 4 The LORD, the Righteous One, *
has cut the cords of the wicked.
- 5 Let them be put to shame and thrown back, *
all those who are enemies of Zion.
- 6 Let them be like grass upon the housetops, *
which withers before it can be plucked;

7 Which does not fill the hand of the reaper, *
nor the bosom of him who binds the sheaves;
8 So that those who go by say not so much as,
"The LORD prosper you. *
We wish you well in the Name of the LORD."

A Reading from the First Letter of Peter (5:1–4)

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.

The Holy Gospel of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, according to Luke (6:17–23)

Jesus came down with the twelve and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.