

Myke Johnson
Portland
LD 785

Testimony for Judiciary Committee February 19, 2026
LD 395 & LD785

I am the Reverend Doctor Myke Johnson, and I am a retired minister living in Portland. I am writing in favor of LD395 and LD785. As a minister, I think a lot about right and wrong. Why do the right thing? How do we determine the wrong thing? I have been researching and learning about the early colonization process of Maine, and the role of the churches in that process. We don't like to think about it very much, but those churches in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries participated in the genocide of the Wabanaki people of this land. The churches held the attitude that European people were superior to the Indigenous people who had lived on this continent for millennia.

They didn't care that so many Native people were dying from diseases that were brought by Europeans. They wanted the land for themselves, and interpreted this disease as if God were clearing the land for them. They even thought it was right to kill men, women, two spirit people, and children, in order to get the land. I was horrified to learn that it was a minister who distributed the rewards to people who brought in the scalps of Wabanaki people to prove they had killed them.

Of course, not all church people did that. Some tried to get to know Wabanaki people, learned their languages, and were respectful. But most still felt that sense of superiority. Even in the 20th century, this attitude of superiority prevailed and white people attempted to control all aspects of Wabanaki life, including taking away the children of the community to try to assimilate them into white culture.

But, miraculously, Wabanaki people survived, and continued to live in the land they have loved for thousands of years, continued to revere their own cultures, speak their languages, continued to resist the dominating forces that threatened their lives and cultures.

I've learned that during that history, Wabanaki leaders were often communicating with settlers about how to beneficially share this land with their new neighbors, strategizing about how to welcome them into the neighborhood. But settlers kept taking more and more land and resources, and saw Wabanaki as adversaries. Until, sometimes, Wabanaki people did fight back against the settlers, to protect their own lives and the resources they needed to live. But at other times, Wabanaki people helped the settlers, even to serving in the American revolution.

Sometimes, people will say, we can't judge the past by the values of the present. I don't judge the people from the past, but I believe we must judge the rightness or wrongness of their actions. And we must articulate the values we hold, and try to live them, so that we don't repeat the wrongs of the past, as they show up in new ways in our own time.

I would ask, are we going to continue that attitude of superiority and domination which so afflicted our European settler ancestors, or are we going to choose instead a path of mutual respect? I believe in the value of mutual respect between peoples, that each of us have equal dignity and worth. It is for this reason that I support LD 395 and LD785, two bills that will restore a relationship of mutual respect between Maine and the Wabanaki nations.

Many others are speaking about the benefits of these bills, how they will restore to Wabanaki peoples the status of all other Indigenous communities in the United States, and enable Wabanaki peoples to access federal support and programs. I agree. But I want to close by saying that these bills will benefit all of us here in Maine. We too will have access to federal programs. But more importantly, when we live in mutual respect, we benefit. We grow more deeply into the people we hope to be. We grow into the neighbors I hope we can be. We need this healing.

With gratitude and humility,
Rev. Dr. Myke Johnson
Portland, Maine