

Hope Presbyterian Church of Lakewood, New Jersey, Sends Mission Team to North Dakota

Hope Presbyterian Church (HPC) is a small church with a big heart and a desire to reach out and serve others. HPC had sent a team to Mississippi in 2007 to assist with the clean up after hurricane Katrina and in the fall of 2008 there was talk of undertaking a similar effort in 2009. We reviewed the listing of opportunities to volunteer published by the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Program and came to a general consensus that we would like to learn more about a relief effort to be undertaken on the Spirit Lake Dakota (Sioux) Indian Reservation. Our primary on site contact point was identified as Sharon Georgeson of the Bdecan Presbyterian Church, Tokio, North Dakota, about 20 miles south of Devil's Lake, North Dakota. Our initial attempts to reach Sharon were unsuccessful, but we finally got through. Sharon talked about the continuing impact of floods occurring in years past, her church, the needs of families in the community, and, most importantly, the need for outreach to the children of the community.



What Sharon communicated would have a significant impact on bringing the proposal before the congregation and planning for the trip. The Bdecan (Woodlake) Presbyterian Church is located on the Spirit Lake Dakota Indian reservation. The church has about 36 members with a support group of about 42 who are not members of the church. The church has a youth group numbering about 42 and serves the needs of children in the community numbering about 140. Sharon talked about the flood that took place in 1997 flooding out the north side of the reservation – fifty homes were washed out. Because of limited access to funds many of the families are still living with relatives. The highway feeding into the area was under water from May 1997 through the year 2000. Today there continues to be problems with access to clean water, sinks are left with sediment. Sharon talked about the high unemployment rate, substance abuse, and the high incidence of suicide among the teen age population. The conversation then shifted to needs which our group could address if we were to come to the reservation in July. Specifically needs fell into two basic categories construction and working with the youth of the community. Regarding construction assistance was needed in helping families cope with the severe winter weather temperatures dropping to 40 degrees below zero with strong wind. Specifically, there were homes that needed enclosed porches to transition the entrance into the home. There was also talk of assisting with the replacement of storm windows, as well as repair and repositioning of access ramps. Louis Garcia would be our primary contact for coordinating construction activity. The conversation then shifted to needs of the youth of the community. From Sharon's point of view the outreach to the youth of the community was as important as our ability to address the construction needs. Sharon suggested a vacation bible school format if we were able to work this type of activity into our planning.

After the conversation with Sharon e-mail contact was made with Louis (Louie) Garcia, an elder of the Bdecan Presbyterian Church, to discuss the construction of enclosed porches and other possible construction projects. Louis is originally from Brooklyn, New York, who observed Indian cultural events in New York City and was so moved that he ultimately relocated and established his home on the Spirit Lake Dakota reservation. Louis currently teaches shop at the Little Hoop Community College in Fort Totten. Based on our discussions we projected that we could possibly construct three enclosed porches during our week stay, assist with the storm window replacement, and possibly assist with the relocation/rebuilding of one or more access ramps. Louis provided us with a list of building material requirements for the construction of three porches. He also advised that we would have to bring our own tools.

The Team and Financing the Trip



With the information developed we were in position to recruit a team. We reached out to both adults and members of our senior high youth group. We also communicated that we needed one or more persons with construction skills who could assume the lead in organizing and carrying out the construction activity. In all, nineteen persons made up the team comprising ten adults and nine youth.

With the team in place the focus shifted to financing the trip. As with most churches today funds were limited. The team undertook several fund raising activities including both a benefit dinner and a car wash. A member of the team negotiated the price of building material with Lowe's for delivery in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Another member of the congregation negotiated air fares with Northwest Airlines. Van rental fees were negotiated over the phone with the Hertz Fargo office. Three members of the team agreed to drive out with a truck pulling a trailer lent by a member of the congregation. The truck/trailer combination eliminated baggage fees and made possible the transporting of tools which would otherwise have been cost prohibitive. One nights lodging to and from North Dakota was provided by a family in Muscoda, Wisconsin – a family affiliated with PC (USA). Members of the congregation as well as individual and corporate sponsors contributed generously.

Getting the Job Down



Our team was in place on Saturday, June 25th, and we were ready to begin our work on the following Monday. As matters worked out our construction/maintenance activities would be limited to three activities:

inserting a closet door within the church, cutting back brush in the church cemetery, and the construction of three porches. Our construction leader had the door done in short order. Cemetery maintenance extended over a period of several days and had an emotional impact on those involved in the activity. Death is not a stranger to Spirit Lake community including the children.



Construction work on the porches began on Monday morning with a trip to Grand Forks to pick up the building material. The initial plan was to have the construction work completed by Thursday afternoon. Well, plans have to give way to reality, the construction work continued through early afternoon Saturday, the 4th of July. There were no complaints; we had accomplished what we had set out to do – put in place three storm porches



Our day to day activity with the youth of the community didn't get into full swing until Tuesday, but it was a committed effort which was a rewarding experience for our team if not somewhat exhausting. On a typical day we would use one of our vans to pick up the children and return to church. Activity was undertaken both in the class room and outside. A light lunch was provided the children at mid day. The children were on their way home around three or so.



Time Spent Together



There were numerous opportunities to come together during our week stay. The opportunity to worship together at beginning our week and at the end of our stay symbolized and made clear our oneness in Christ. We sang hymns in the Sioux language. The services were led by the elders and lay leaders of the church, the church not having a full time minister assigned. On our last Sunday the Reverend Barbara Hicks celebrated communion with members of the two congregations reinforcing the fact that we are a connectional church. The children of the families were very much present at both services emphasizing for us the importance of family and community inherent to the Indian culture.



We celebrated the Fourth of July with the Spirit Lake community. In the afternoon there was a picnic at the community center at which our team was invited to serve the food prepared by the various families. In the evening we watched the fireworks display with the community.

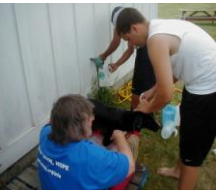


Sunday evening, July 5th, was our last evening with our new friends and Louie gave a presentation on the Sioux culture. Louie has obviously done his homework. It was sad to learn that aspects of the culture, such as language, are slowly being lost over time. Chandler, Louie's grandson,



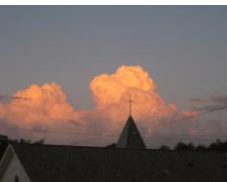
sang, and donned Sioux dance attire providing us a demonstration of a typical Indian dance. Later that evening our church was presented with a beautiful quilt thanking us for our efforts in support of the congregation.

A Member of the Community Returns with Us



During our stay on the reservation a member of the community befriended us – a little dog mostly black with patches of white. Common to the region the dog was infested with ticks, but a dog that one could not help but fall in love with. Soon there was some banter whether the dog could go back to New Jersey Inquiry was made regarding ownership and what began as only a slight possibility began to emerge as a real possibility. The young dog now named “Tokio” was cleaned up, treated for tick infestation, and on the day of departure taken to the vet for clearance to fly. Tokio was on her way to New Jersey. Several days after her arrival she gave birth to a puppy which was named Dakota. Tokio and Dakota are now adjuncts to our congregation and reminders of what we undertook and the church we served in North Dakota.

What We Got Out of the Trip



We were a small part of an ongoing effort to assist the Spirit Lake Community. The outreach spans back years and the need will continue into the future. We were blessed to have this opportunity to serve. We gained in our understanding of another culture, we learned about their past, and we learned something about our own heritage. But most importantly we reaffirmed our oneness in Christ.