



Participant Reflections

As part of the USA Mission Experience, many participants developed reflections that recount people met, moments experienced and insights acquired that have special meaning for them. The reflections, included below, are prefaced by a letter sent to participants from LaVonne Looking Elk, one of our hosts in South Dakota. Her words convey a heartfelt message that is important for everyone in Presbyterian Women to hear.

Letter from LaVonne Looking Elk

Dear friends,

Thank you for coming to visit us on the Pine Ridge Lakota Reservation.

It was a pleasure for Madeline and me to host you when you visited our Lakota people on Pine Ridge Reservation. The day you arrived in Kyle (South Dakota), at Lakota Prairie Ranch Motel, and visited Piya Wiconi, the Oglala Lakota College headquarters and historical center—that was truly a proud and humbling moment for us. We wanted to share the story of our people with you—their way of life, the history, the culture, the importance of and love for family, the vast kinship system . . . the list could go on, but, most importantly, the spirituality and generosity of our people. Our church members were greatly honored to have you come to our churches (Porcupine and Makasan) to eat, visit and worship with us.

You heard about the many social and health issues that plague our people, especially the young people—high rates of diabetes and cancer, alcohol and drug addiction, suicide and feelings of utter hopelessness. You heard our Tribal president, Theresa Two Bulls, speak to you about how she's trying to lead the people in a good way, and the difficulties she faces sometimes because she is a woman. You heard Eileen Janis talk about the suicides (primarily among young people), and how the Sweetgrass Project is trying its best to address the problem and provide support to the community. You heard Tom Shortbull speak about how Oglala Lakota College has impacted the reservation in a positive way, with so many students taking classes, thus ensuring a future for themselves and their families. And the list could go on . . .

Equally important, you heard about how the Good News came to our people back in the 1800s, when it was brought by early Christian missionaries in Minnesota, and how the work eventually came west. In spite of the challenges and obstacles that arose, the missionaries persevered with the Lord's help and direction, and our Presbytery of Dakota came into being in 1844.

It has been a long journey, but the Lord's work continues in our Dakota/Lakota/Nakota churches to this day, with 1 church in western Minnesota, 1 church in North Dakota, 5 churches in eastern Montana and 14 churches in South Dakota. Presbyterian Women of the Dakota Presbytery is not as strong as it used to be, but we continue to be active in our churches and support the Lord's work in our communities and reservations. Like any other mother, grandmother, aunt or great-grandmother, we each have our struggles and challenges daily, but with a strong belief in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we know that God will provide for our needs. We have a great dependence on prayer, because we know there is tremendous power when we pray in Jesus' name.

We also are thankful that you were able to drive through a small portion of our beautiful and sacred Black Hills. May God bless each one of you as you strive to share with your women, churches and communities what you heard and learned during your visit with us. We look forward to continued work with you.

Peace and blessings,

LaVonne J. Looking Elk
Rapid City, SD

Reflection from Marjorie Boyer, Synod of Southern California and Hawaii

Brushing tears from our eyes, we stood around the mass gravesite on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation where victims of the Wounded Knee massacre are buried. The Reverend Simon Looking Elk told us the history of Wounded Knee and the tragic events that took place there on December 29, 1890. As we listened to his heartfelt prayer in Lakota and English, we were overcome with the historical grief and loss that the American Indian community has experienced for the past 400 years.

American Indians come to this gravesite to honor, to remember and to pray. They often tuck flowing ribbons, small packets of sacred tobacco and sweetgrass bunches into the cyclone fence. Our group also stood in silence, remembering and reflecting upon the devastation of so long ago and praying for our Indian brothers and sisters. We prayed for those who lie in that space and those who still grieve, who suffer the overpowering sense of loss that the Lakota people have experienced.

The most powerful thing, however, is that the sense of loss American Indians have experienced has not diminished their deep and abiding faith in God, nor their hopes for the future. They hold these hopes in their hearts and spirits. We were honored to spend time with them.

Reflection from Mary Lou Williams, Synod of the Pacific

Imagine, if you will, 19 Presbyterian women, all involved in leadership, in two vans and a small church bus named Charlotte, driving more than 1,300 miles across the state of South Dakota together. Imagine also, that when those women are getting ready to go anywhere, they each have their own ideas—ideas that they are not afraid to express. Now, imagine how after only eight days together those 19 women formed a community.

Community: a concept that we discovered is central to Native American life. There are aunties, uncles and grandparents, many of whom are not biologically related yet are integral parts of the family community.

Then there is the church community. LaVonne Looking Elk, a commissioned lay pastor for the Dakota Presbytery and one of our trip hosts, discussed the faith community of Native people. She described how people come to the annual mission meeting of Dakota Presbytery for fellowship, spiritual nourishment and strength . . . and, ultimately, to experience community.

Our community of Presbyterian women went home feeling educated, transformed and motivated. We observed community in South Dakota in various Presbyterian churches, in the community center for several congregations on the Sisseton Wahpeton Reservation, at the Presbyterian Retreat Center, which provides a sanctuary for a community of children, at Oglala Lakota College where the mission is “learning Lakota ways of life in community,” and where college learning sites are embedded in various communities on Pine Ridge Reservation. We went home with a new understanding of community and an authentic feeling of being part of a community in an entirely new way. What a gift!

Reflection from Virginia McCook, Synod of the Covenant

Historical Reflection—The American Holocaust

While in South Dakota for the USA Mission Experience, we visited First Presbyterian Church in Flandreau and had the pleasure of meeting 92-year-old Native American Sidney Byrd, a retired Presbyterian pastor. When he talked with us about Native American history, he used the phrase “The American Holocaust,” in reference to historical events that occurred during the westward expansion of the United States. Hearing him use this phrase was a powerful experience for me.

I wanted others to try to see things the way Sidney and other hosts conveyed them to us. Imagine the Plains area in the 1800’s—a swath running south toward Texas from North Dakota at a width of about 250 miles. Try to see hundreds of thousands of buffalo roaming from north to south as the seasons changed. This was hunting ground for the Sioux, who depended upon the buffalo personally and economically. One of our hosts even used the phrase “buffalo economy.” Native Americans consider the buffalo a sacred being. Prayers traditionally were offered before a buffalo hunt, that the buffalo would willingly give up its life so that the people might eat and live.

During westward expansion of the United States, many of the Sioux were resettled to what are now the Dakotas. Resistance to forced relocation led to violence between Native Americans and the U.S. government; many Natives died as the result of the greed, fear and ignorance of non-Natives. The Dakota uprising of 1862 and subsequent hanging of 38 Native Americans, the Battle of Little Big Horn, and the massacre at Wounded Knee are some of the significant events that help explain the history of “The American Holocaust.” One sure way to get Native Americans onto reservations was to remove their economy, and this was done through the mass slaughter of herds of buffalo. Removal of the buffalo led to the demise of the Sioux economy; accepting forced removal to reservation lands was, for many Natives, the only way to avoid starvation and death.

My heart aches for the merciless and compassionless slaughter of any of God’s creatures, particularly Native Americans and the animals they once depended upon. We owe a debt to our Native American brothers and sisters; we need to honor their culture, spirituality and uniqueness. They have been through so much pain, and they have much to teach us. They were the first Americans.

Reflection from Joy Temple Ray, Synod of the Trinity

Repairer of the Breach

Since my arrival home from our trip to visit with Native American Presbyterians, I have given much thought to what we witnessed and heard. I had thought to write a few lines about building bridges to address societal needs. But I find that this is not what is calling out to me—this is not what my heart needs to address. For me, it is not so much about building a bridge. Rather, it is about helping to repair the breach.

Presbyterian missionaries arrived in the area known today as South Dakota in the early 1800s. They built a bridge by learning Native languages and introducing the path of salvation through Jesus Christ into the Native culture. We witnessed the respect that the Dakota people have had for these missionaries through many generations. Those missionaries were the bridge-builders. However, there is a breach forming in the bridge today. I believe we are called to be repairers of that breach and partners in the restoration of ministry with Native people.

Native American Presbyterians have been missionaries and ministers to their people since the 1840s. Yet, today, the Dakota Presbytery is struggling financially due to poverty on the reservations.

There is a critical need for immediate funding. These ministers and lay pastors are the vital outreach of the Presbyterian Church to the impoverished, depressed and largely forgotten Native people in our midst. Funding to equip current ministers and lay pastors, and provide educational scholarships for ministry training for young Native Americans, is a breach we can and must help repair. And with our financial aid, Native American Presbyterian ministers and lay pastors can continue the vital work they began more than 160 years ago, that of bringing hope and the good news of Jesus to their communities.

“The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in” (Isaiah 58:11–12).

Reflection from Norma Sherman, Synod of the Pacific, and LaDonna Fay, Synod of Lakes and Prairies

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.” These words are written in our memories from the family table, and again from the Sunday school classrooms at Porcupine Presbyterian Church in South Dakota. We know them well. We were guests of Porcupine Presbyterian Church on Pine Ridge Reservation.

At Porcupine Presbyterian, we enjoyed a delicious meal prepared for us by members of the church. The meal included a decorated cake made in honor of Presbyterian Women. Following the meal, a beautiful star quilt was brought into the room. LaVonne Looking Elk told us that it had been made by her aunt, then told us she was presenting it to our group. To say we were overwhelmed doesn’t begin to cover it. The generosity of our sisters on Pine Ridge Reservation was

sobering; we were humbled and grateful for our time with them and for the gift of the quilt. We were given something in nearly every place we visited, but when the star quilt was presented, it truly took our collective breath away. The quilt not only was beautiful, it was given to us as a way to honor our time together.

This was just one of many acts of kindness shown to us by our Native American sisters. We learned that they are a very caring and giving people who have respect for their elders and family and who have a great faith. We decided that the quilt should be hung in Presbyterian Women's office in Louisville. It is also hoped that it can be displayed at the 2012 Churchwide Gathering in Orlando.

Reflection from Patricia Clark, Synod of the Mid-Atlantic

At First Presbyterian Church of Flandreau, South Dakota, we met Sidney Byrd, a retired pastor and Native American historian who is 92 years old. He spoke with a clear, confident voice as he told stories of the Dakota history—stories of events that still affect the Dakota Sioux today. We received copies of these stories and reflections that he had recorded so his grandchildren would know their history and culture.

Sidney explained that Native Americans continue to have great reverence for everything in nature, that they honor the Great Spirit, that they hold elders in great esteem and value their wisdom, and that they consider all relatives as immediate family.

As a result of Europeans invading the western plains in the 1800s, claiming land, making treaties that were later broken, forcing Native Americans onto reservations and conducting massacres in which Native Americans were killed by the hundreds, the Dakota suffered great grief that they still carry today. Known as historical grief, it continues to affect their culture.

Sidney asked us: How would things be different if Native Americans had had a strict immigration policy and had required Europeans to learn their Native language? Such powerfully-charged questions really opened my eyes to seeing things a different way. I look forward to continuing my friendship with Sidney and others whom we met in South Dakota. They have so much to teach us, if we are willing to stop and listen.

Reflection from Debbie Esselman, Synod of Mid-America

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

I cannot think of a better Bible verse to describe what I saw and experienced among our Native American sisters and brothers in South Dakota. These are people who walk in humility and lead by example. These are people who honor respect, sacrifice and honesty in their communities.

Through our time with them, we learned many things about the priorities of Native American culture in South Dakota. Affirmation is not sought by the individual but, when deserved, is openly given by the community. People are not boastful, but quick to recognize and praise others.

Our Native sisters and brothers concentrate on listening more than speaking, recognizing that words have power and that this power must be used carefully. They do not draw speedy conclusions because they believe that the messages they hear from others should be felt deep inside—they know how to listen with their spirits and their hearts, recognizing that only after careful consideration can a proper response be made.

There is a strong sense of community and cooperation, rather than competition. The sense of extended family is as real as that of any blood relationship. Both the inclusion of children and the involvement of elders as mentors and teachers are vital parts of community activities.

Qualities such as these are the standards for everyday life. There is a respect for all of creation—it is viewed as sacred because it is seen as a special gift from the Creator (and for Native Christians, the Creator is God). All gifts from the Creator

are respected, cared for, appreciated and treated with honor. Spirituality (both traditional and Christian) is integrated into everyday life. Prayer is a way of life. Art, music and dance are used as means of prayer and praise. The notion is that we do not need to pray to *invite* God to join us in our services and activities. Rather, God is always everywhere! Instead of asking God to be with us, we just need to make God feel welcome.

The generosity we were shown in South Dakota was humbling. One of my most cherished gifts is a personal copy of the Dakota hymnal. This hymnal is precious to me not only because of my love for music, but because it is a constant reminder to me of the joyful way the people were always ready to sing unto the Lord. They were always ready to offer thanks and praise.

I want to leave you with what became most impressed upon my heart. During our time with our Native sisters and brothers I saw the family of God. I saw the church. I experienced a church with *a hope that thrives in the midst of despair, a generosity that abounds in the midst of poverty and a spirituality that negates the word impossible.*

How dare we be anything less than such a church, when we consider the blessings that surround us? How dare we neglect opportunities for mission? We should be supporting mission with our time, talent and treasure as often as we are given opportunity. How dare we not care for the youth (those of the Dakota Presbytery and our own presbyteries) as the precious jewels they are in God's eyes?

Will you join with me in making a commitment to pray for our PW sisters and the churches in the Dakota Presbytery? That is the single most-repeated request that they *all* asked of us. It also is something *all* of us *can* do.

Reflection from Hsin-Mei Weng, Synod of the Sun

When I visited South Dakota, I was struggling with many things. But God opened my spiritual eyes and guided me. God led me to notice that, compared to the distress of my Native American brothers and sisters, my problems were not nearly as big as I might have thought. God also led me to realize that the Sioux Tribe (they call themselves Dakota, Nakota and Lakota) are not treated with justice and peace. They have been struggling for their independence for generations and are trying to heal their brokenness.

Lakota people have a saying that Native Americans are the most broken-hearted people in the world. One of the most memorable quotes we heard was, "If you cannot put a bandage on someone's wound, you should not touch the wound." These are powerful words. I believe that the time I spent in South Dakota made it possible for God to teach me about the culture and history of the Lakota Indians.

My father had a great influence on my siblings and me. He taught us that one must love everyone. But he also had a heart for indigenous people. He taught us that often they represent honesty, goodness and beauty in humanity, through their connections with each other and with the land on which they live. My father served as director of the social service department of the association of Taiwanese Presbyterian churches, and he saw the need for a church for indigenous youth. Many youth went to the city to work, and there they encountered social problems as they tried to adapt to city life.

I found many parallels between indigenous youth in Taiwan and indigenous youth in South Dakota. During our time in South Dakota, we learned that many children live with their grandparents, and this is a very positive thing. In these situations, they can gain wisdom by learning from their elders.

But not every Native child is this lucky. Some parents work great distances from home and leave their children without the company and guidance of grownups. We learned that in December of 2009, a 16-year-old boy committed suicide. Two weeks later, a 14-year-old girl in the same community did the same. What is so worrisome is that the suicide rate among Native American youths is much higher than the national average. We heard from many that it seems that young people have no hope for their future. Some feel isolated, and some are worried about finding a way to make a living, let alone finding meaning in their lives. I was shocked and saddened to learn of the high rate of teen suicides in the Native American communities we visited.

Still, there were many moments of joy during our visit to South Dakota. Every evening we prayed and had dinner with local people at various churches across the presbytery. There was no preset schedule during worship. Rather, it seemed that whatever song you wished to sing, you could request, then sing to your heart's desire. I played a piano that is more than 100 years old. Children circled around me while I played. They were shy at first, but, because of music, were drawn closer. This was how many things were during our visit. With time, we all became closer.

I left South Dakota remembering two thoughts that meant so much to me, spoken by my Native American sisters and brothers: "*You* put the bandage on a broken heart" and "Follow your dreams, for as you dream, so shall you become."