

Cross-Cultural Experience for Seminary Students at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church on the Rocky Boy's Reservation, Montana

by Pastor Linda Webster

A Short Introduction

I would like to share the comments of one of the participants from the August 2018 Seminary CCE – *“Over the course of 11 days, our group shared a multitude of experiences. We visited historical sites that shed light on contemporary conditions on the reservation. We engaged in reading and Bible study that opened our eyes to the theological dimensions of Native American life, and in particular the ways in which Christianity and colonization have often gone hand-in-hand. We engaged in conversation with Indian leaders and saw rays of hope in new programs and initiatives forwarded by those leaders. We also toured tribal facilities such as a new medical center, that brings together a multitude of services under one roof. We covered an enormous amount of ground--measured in van miles and emotional growth--in such a short time, and all in a beautiful landscape like no other. It is a trip that will change your life.”* (Connie Monson, Distance Leader from Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, IA)

Since May 2008, I have been blessed to be called to serve as pastor at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church and as chaplain to the community on the Rocky Boy's Reservation. I am non-Native, but feel called to serve within the Native American community in the ELCA and its ministry partner denominations. Since beginning this journey, I have received strong support from many within the ELCA Native community and the American Indian-Alaska Native Ministries of the ELCA. I have had and continue to have wonderful mentors from within the religious community and the Rocky Boy's community.

While in seminary, I did a 6-week long cross-cultural experience and my internship on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. While there, I worked with Pastor Larry Peterson (a non-Native, Lutheran pastor at the Pine Ridge Lutheran Retreat Center in the town of Pine Ridge) and Pastor Asa (Maricopa-Pima) and Tresita (Standing Rock Sioux) Wilson (who served at Makasan Presbyterian Church, Oglala, SD). After internship, I worked with Pastor Marlene White Rabbit Helgemo (Hochunk) at All Nations Indian (UCC) Church in Minneapolis, MN for two years. During seminary, I spent one summer with Pastor Mary Louise Frenchman (Oglala Sioux) while she served at Living Waters Lutheran Church in Cherokee, NC. Liz Gaskins, former president of the American Indian-Alaska Native Lutheran Association of the ELCA, has been an adviser since I arrived at Rocky Boy. These people are wonderful mentors and role models for me in Native ministry.

The Rocky Boy's Reservation is in north central Montana. This is the home of the Chippewa Cree Tribe. It was established by Presidential decree in 1916. This is the smallest and most recently established of the reservations in Montana.

Our Saviour's Lutheran Church was founded in 1920. It is a congregation of the ELCA. Our ministry has several parts. These include the following: 1) as a congregation, we provide a Lutheran presence on the Rocky Boy's Reservation through the light of the Gospel, which we believe is for all people, 2) as a congregation, we seek to work with the Tribal government to provide programs that will help alleviate hunger and poverty, particularly through the ELCA Domestic Hunger Grant program, 3) individually and as a congregation, we work at promoting dialogue and acceptance between traditions and faiths, 4) because of various grants and donations we are able to offer two weeks of VBS Day Camp with camp counselors from Flathead Lutheran Bible Camp, 5) through various grants, donations, and special fund-raisers we are able to take kids from Rocky Boy to a six-day summer session at Flathead Lutheran Bible Camp, and 6) to the wider Church, the congregation sees its ministry as being a place to provide cross-cultural learning opportunities through servant groups, retreats, and immersion events.

Our Saviour's is currently one of two Native ministries of the ELCA on reservations in Montana. There are other ELCA congregations on reservations in Montana, but they are mostly non-Native. Our worship basically follows traditional Lutheran liturgy, using the ELW hymnal. We are working to incorporating more Native American elements into our worship. The worshipping congregation is small and mostly of Native heritage.

Because of the long-term Lutheran presence on this reservation, about 1/3 of the 5,000 residents of Rocky Boy claim Lutheran heritage.

As I coordinate this 10-day experience (12 days counting the travel days on each end), I am with the students for a good part of every day, sharing devotions, reflections, educational opportunities, and discussion/processing time. Upon arriving, students receive some orientation from me, which gives a non-Indian perspective. This includes what it means to be on an Indian Reservation, some historical insights and perspectives, ways of being here within this culture, etc. There will be some racism/anti-racism discussion.

While the students are here they will participate in the daily life of the ministry, which could mean working alongside the ladies of our congregation putting together layettes that are given to families of newborns and/or spending time with our ladies' sewing group. There are possibilities of volunteering at the Tribal Headstart and Daycare (with appropriate background checks on file at the Seminary), visiting elders in their homes and/or talking with them at the Senior Center, going door-to-door to deliver quilts given to Our Saviour's by congregations across the country, and inviting people to come to worship. Wakes (which may be 1 or 2 days long) and funerals often take place here. If one occurs while the students are here, involvement (visiting during the wake and attendance at the funeral) is optional, but recommended.

Tribal members are invited to speak to the group on Chippewa Cree history, language, and governance. Others are invited to share their talents in bead working and fry-bread making and have the students experience these things along side those sharing their culture. For the May group, a mini pow-wow is arranged, where students and members of the community come and enjoy a dance and drumming demonstration. In lieu of this experience, the August group will actually attend the Rocky Boy Pow-wow. Tours of Stone Child College, the Rocky Boy Clinic, and Rocky Boy Wellness Center may be part of the experience. Participating in a sweat lodge is an option (there may be an additional cost associated with this).

Several trips off-site are planned and may include: a visit to the Blaine County Museum in conjunction with a trip to the Bear Paw Battlefield, which is where Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce surrendered; visits to the Lewis and Clark and Missouri Breaks Interpretative centers in Great Falls and Fort Benton; a visit to the Assiniboine-Gros Ventre Reservation at Fort Belknap; a visit to a near-by multi-point rural parish; and, a visit to a local Hutterite colony. Visits to the Havre Buffalo Jump, an archeological dig, and to the site of the original Fort Assiniboine are also possibilities. A trip into southern Canada, which is about 50 miles north of Rocky Boy, may be included if students have passports they can bring along and are not restricted in crossing the border. (We recognize this could be a problem for some international students.)

The Rocky Boy Wellness Center is open to everyone on the Reservation (including guests) at no cost. The Center has an indoor pool and jacuzzi, basketball court, indoor walking track, exercise/weight room, men's and women's locker rooms with sauna, steam room, and showers.

Required Reading: (these are subject to change)

Students are required to read and be prepared to discuss **both** of the following books:

The History of the Chippewa Cree of Rocky Boy's Reservation edited by Ed Stamper, et al. and Chief Joseph and the Flight of the Nez Perce by Kent Nerburn.

Students are required to read and be prepared to discuss **both** of the following books which promote racial understanding and anti-racism:

White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism by Robin Diangelo and Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians But Were Afraid to Ask by Anton Treuer.

Several books on Native American theology by Native writers are recommended. Students should be prepared to read **one** of these books, give a verbal synopsis, and lead discussion and/or Q&A. In order to promote the best coverage in reading these books, every effort will be made to have students read different books.

Depending on the total number of students present, a small group may be formed to read and present each book to the entire group. These are:

A Native American Theology by Clara Sue Kidwell, et al., or Native and Christian edited by James Treat, or

God is Red by Vine Deloria, Jr., or Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation by George Tinker, or Coming Full Circle: constructing Native Christian Theology edited by Steven Charleston & Elaine Robinson, or Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys by Richard Twiss.

The following non-fiction books are recommended to give insight to different Native writers and tribes. Students are required to read **one** of these books, participate in small group discussion, present a synopsis of that discussion to the large group, and lead large group Q&A.

You Don't Have to Say You Love Me: A Memoir by Sherman Alexie; or Bitterroot: A Salish Memoir of Transracial Adoption by Susan Devan Harness.

We will also plan to watch several documentaries and movies that are based on novels written by Native and non-Native writers, i.e. Sherman Alexie and Tony Hillerman.

Depending on the seminary that each student is attending, other requirements for papers, etc. may vary. Journaling this experience is recommended. Wi-Fi is available in the Mission House. Cell phone coverage on the Reservation is fairly good, but is limited to 4-G phones (or better) with Verizon service. Other service options are accessible when we travel off the reservation.

Two sessions are being offered in 2019. The number of students required are: Minimum – 4, Maximum – 29. Registration forms for Our Saviour's can be found on our website at www.oslcrb.org. Follow the Seminary CCE link in the left-hand column on our home page. Each seminary will also require you to register with them.

Summer Session: June 3 (Monday) to June 14 (Friday), with June 3rd and June 14th being travel days.

Fall Session: August 3 (Saturday) to August 14 (Wednesday), with August 3rd and August 14th being travel days.

The total cost to be paid to Our Saviour's Lutheran Church is **\$680**. (*This cost may vary slightly depending on the current price of gasoline.*)

This fee includes *tuition costs* for the work at Our Saviour's, but does not include the tuition required by each seminary and it *covers lodging, on-site transportation, and at least one meal with the community*. Sleeping accommodations are in four on-site, communal bunkhouses. Each bunkhouse has 1 bathroom and 5 sets of bunk-beds with twin-sized mattresses. Pillows with pillow cases, towels, and quilts are provided. It is necessary to bring a sleeping bag or twin-sized sheets.

Each individual is responsible for her/his own breakfast and lunch. As we may have guests for evening meals, the entire group will be responsible for the evening meals. (This can mean cooking together or having people responsible for cooking on certain days.) Depending on the size of the group, the Mission House or Big Church-Round House kitchens will be used. You will be put in contact with the other students in your group several weeks before you come. It is good to try to plan food ahead of time, as shopping trips into Havre (27 miles away) cannot be made every day.

Transportation options:

Travel to our site may be by car, by Amtrak (the station is in Havre, MT, which is 27 miles north of us), or by plane to Great Falls, MT (which is 105 miles south of us). Amtrak arrives and leaves from Havre between 1 pm and 4 pm, generally, depending on the direction you are traveling. Be prepared to wait to be picked up or/and dropped off early.

1. Flights are available in and out of the International Airport in Great Falls. No matter when you arrive or depart, we plan only one trip into Great Falls as it is about a 1-1/2 hour drive to Rocky Boy. For arrivals, we will plan to be in Great Falls no later than 6 pm. (This means you should try to arrive in the afternoon, but no later than 6 pm.) For departures, we will plan to leave Rocky Boy no earlier than 6 am. (This means your flight should be no earlier than 9 am.) Please fit your flight plans into this time schedule as best as possible. You may have to plan to stay an extra night in Great Falls if your flight plans cannot fit within this schedule.
2. From previous experience, we **do not** recommend you fly in and out of Havre. These flights are not reliable. You may get stranded mid-travel somewhere or not be able to leave when you are scheduled to.

3. From previous experience, we **do not** recommend anyone take the bus to Great Falls (which is the closest bus station). You may get stranded mid-travel somewhere and not be able to make the necessary connections.

Please note: If you can only arrive after 6 pm, please plan to come in the night before the scheduled pick-up date, spend the night in Great Falls, and get picked up with the rest of the group on the following day. If you can only leave before 8 am, please plan to go in when the group is leaving, spend the night in Great Falls, and leave the following morning. (The Crystal Inn is near the airport and has shuttle service available.)

Shuttle transportation:

Transportation to/from either the Havre train station or Great Falls airport can be provided by Our Saviour's Lutheran Church. The 2019 IRS mileage rate will apply. The cost will be split among the number of riders. Therefore, it is good to have groups arrive together in order to alleviate too much driving on our part and too much expense on your part.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call, write, or e-mail.

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