

Almost 11 years later, my wildest dreams came true as I was able to return to the Rocky Boy Indian Reservation.

11 years ago, as I was heading to internship in Kalispell, Montana, my new bride & I drove across the country to experience the West. A little over a week after we were married, I put her on a plane for Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where she was to start medical school. I had a few weeks before internship was scheduled to begin, so my roommate from Seminary, Dan Smail, who was doing a summer internship with Pastor Joe Bailey, invited me to spend a week or so with him.

I immediately feel in love with the place! The church campus was awash with excitement as people came from across the country to build the "round" church. For two & a half weeks, I pounded nails, took on the job of cook for a few days, ran to town for supplies & generally had a great time: sweat lodge ceremonies, a large pow-wow, sleeping outside in a teepee, were all new & wonderful experiences!

Throughout internship year, I returned several times with youth groups from Northridge Lutheran Church. We were on hand for the dedication of the "round" church on Reformation Sunday, 1999. We took 12 youth & several adults for a week long building project in July, 2000. During that time we framed up one of the retreat cabins. It was also extremely hot that summer & hard to find any respite...I remember the youth being mad at me for "making" them drink water every hour!

Each time I returned to Rocky Boy I was blown away by the warm welcome, the intimate sharing of culture & history & the ability of the people of Rocky Boy to welcome us as a people of faith who came to share in their lives, culture, religion & everyday life experiences.

After driving away in July, 2000, I was not sure I would ever return. As I left, Alan & Derek gave me an eagle feather & said something to the effect of: "we do not say good-bye; instead, we say 'till we meet again'".

Fast forward 9 years to 2009. A group of people from Grace & St. Paul Lutheran Churches (The Rural Retreat Lutheran Parish) began to meet & discuss a possible mission trip. On a whim, I raised the possibility of a trip to Montana. Much to my surprise there were 8 people willing to join me on this adventure.

After much talk, planning & fund raising, we took off June 20, 2010, for Montana. Six of us rode together in my pick-up truck as we traveled across this nation of ours, we were constantly reminded of how big, open and awesome it is. From the rolling hills of Virginia & West Virginia, to the plains of Ohio, Indiana & into Wisconsin. Through the rolling plains & hills of Minnesota to the wide open spaces of North Dakota & eastern Montana, we were constantly amazed out how far off places could be!

We were relieved to finally arrive in Montana & began to get excited (we were also surprised by how much cell phone coverage we had). We spent a night in Havre, took in a few tourist attractions & finally followed Pastor Linda onto the reservation. We were shocked to discover the damage from flood waters & dismayed to see so much hardship & suffering as water services were slowly returning.

We spent a wonderful week celebrating the life of a long-time tribal member, doing repair work around the church complex & even got to help out a few families whose places were touched by rising water. But mostly we were humbled by the warm welcome, the open sharing of culture, religion & faith & the willingness of the Chippewa Cree people to welcome us with open arms & hands.

Thanks to Pastor Linda for all her hard work in making it a wonderful experience for all involved. Thanks too to Mike Lamebull for keeping us busy & sharing from his deep knowledge of culture. It is my hope & prayer that someday, hopefully sooner than 10 years from now, we can once again return to see, experience & share in the hope, faith & commitment of the people of the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation!

Till we meet again,

Jonathan Hamman  
Pastor of the Rural Retreat Lutheran Parish, Virginia