

The Report of the Dakota Partnership Committee

Last year's report introduced Toni Buffalo, a native of the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota. Many of you have come to know Toni either through her work with CAIM (Council on American Indian Ministry), or her involvement with the national church - she has been a featured speaker and workshop leader at three of the last General Synods.

Three years ago, Toni was asked to fill the large void left by the death of Freddie Boub, longtime director of the Dakota Association of the United Church of Christ. She reluctantly stepped into the breach and has, with much sacrifice, attempted to make the best of a very, very difficult situation.

However, the past year has not been kind to Toni and the Dakota Association for a number of reasons: First of all, the merger of three conferences into Tri State Conference, shifted a network support further away from the Cheyenne River Reservation - from the Dakotas to Iowa. Also, the pool of money to pay lay pastors continued to shrink, and the number of ordained ministers to lead local parishes decreased to zero. And worst of all, Toni's husband of many years, and lay pastor of two reservation churches, Byron Buffalo, tragically died while Toni was returning from the Partners in Peace program in July. Her overwhelming grief at his passing, as well as the ongoing struggles of reservation life and dwindling resources, has led Toni to question her role in the church and her leadership in the Association. But she's still at work, fighting the good fight, for the churches and the people of the Dakota Association.

Over the years our Conference partnership with the Dakota Association has changed. Years ago, it was not uncommon for as many as four churches from our Conference to visit the reservation to participate in workcamps. Early on workcamps had their place, but they did not lend themselves to establishing enduring cross-cultural relationships. So, gradually visits became cultural exchanges focusing not on building structures but building relationships. Sadly, in recent years, even these visits have decreased, in part because the distance one has to travel, and frankly shrinking local resources are funneled into ministries closer to home. Still, these are no reasons for us to walk away from a partnership that has existed for more than 30 years. Just because the personal contacts between our Conference and the Dakota Association have decreased, they remain our brothers and sisters and we still can help.

One way that you can help is through a Horse Ministry that was introduced last year. This ministry benefits young adults on the reservation. These young adults who confront the daily curse of drugs, alcohol and suicide, and little to no work opportunities, have a refuge in unique outreach program. Conceived by Toni's late husband, this ministry provides a safe haven for young people to gather, develop a sense of purpose by caring for and riding horses, and confront together the many challenges of reservation life. For these natives this ministry is a light and a hope in a land, which for far too many, is a place of darkness and despair.

The Dakota Partnership Committee believes that this ministry is vital to the people of the Dakota Association, so much so that we are asking you to support what we call the "Adopt a Horse" Fund. Because the cost to feed and care for horses, that number as many as 25, far

exceeds resources available to the Dakota Association, the hope is that individuals and churches consider “Adopting a Horse” to offset costs. All you need to do is send a check to the Conference made out to the Dakota Association, designating your gift to “Adopt a Horse”.

For more than 30 years Penn Central Conference has partnered with the nine churches of the Dakota Association of the United Church of Christ. From afar, and close at hand, we have participated in many wonderful moments of shared ministry and mission. We have also witnessed the struggles of the churches as they try to meet the needs of a people who are confronted with staggering challenges.

The Dakota Association greatly appreciates its partnership with Penn Central Conference, and it is my hope that this partnership will continue for years to come. I pray that you too will recognize and support this is vital partnership as well, either through your financial gifts or by joining us on the Dakota Partnership Committee.

Finally, I encourage you, to continue to pray for the well-being of Toni Buffalo, the lay ministers, the churches, and all our sisters and brothers in the Dakota Association and on the Cheyenne River Reservation.

Respectfully submitted by
Peter W. Emig, Dakota Partnership Chair