



Who Is My Neighbor? Native Americans as Neighbors

LINDA E. WEBSTER

Context is everything. For me, being a good neighbor means you have to first understand who your neighbors are and then learn about what is important and meaningful to them.

I am the pastor at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church on the Rocky Boy's Reservation, the home of the Chippewa Cree tribe. The reservation is located in north central Montana about twenty-five miles south of Havre (pronounced Hav-er) and about sixty miles south of the Canadian border.

Established as a nondenominational mission in 1920, Our Saviour's became Lutheran in 1928. Over the years, buildings have been added and changed, but four of the existing buildings are original, or nearly so. The small log barn, which is currently used for storage, was the home of the first missionary families. The Log Chapel and the Parsonage are both log structures (though the parsonage is now sided). The Mission House, which has a variety of uses, i.e., offices and gathering space for sewing and meetings among other things, burned down and was rebuilt in 1932.

In the late 1990s a large worship space and four cabins were added. The worship space, called the Big Church, is a large round building that is completely open inside and has a skylight in the center. It gives the appearance of being in a large

We who are more recent immigrants to North America have not always been the best of neighbors to the Native Americans who arrived here before us. Linda Webster reflects on the task of being neighbor to the Native Americans from her position as pastor at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church on the Rocky Boy's Reservation in Montana.

tepee. There is also a commercial-sized kitchen that is great for cooking for groups, and two bathrooms. This building is often used by the Rocky Boy community for gatherings, celebrations, meetings, and ceremonies, including two-day wakes and funerals.

Often Chippewa Cree and Christian traditions meet and blend into one. As one listens and learns more, you begin to understand that our practices may look different, but our beliefs are not so different from one another. When people are gathered, it is not unusual to hear English and Cree being spoken at the same time, with some of the fluent speakers switching back and forth.

The four cabins are used to accommodate servant groups (*not* called mission trips, which is something I explain on our website¹), retreats, cultural immersion events, and groups such as the local Girl Scout troop having an “overnight” for the girls. Three of the four cabins were not finished until after Rocky Boy’s major flood in 2010. Through the hard work of four couples from the ELCA Mission Builders² and several servant groups, all the cabins were finished, hooked up to the tribal water and sewer systems, and, eventually, five sets of bunk beds made for each cabin. To complete the inventory of buildings, there are two maintenance garages, one heated and one unheated.

All in total there are eleven buildings and a small outdoor chapel on our approximately 80-acre site. It is a complicated and multifaceted facility to maintain. It is quite a responsibility and challenge for us, as we still basically function as a mission, even though we were officially organized as a congregation in 1958.

The ministry here has a long history with the Chippewa Cree people. It has intertwined in various ways over the years. One memory many of the older people share from their youth is having received a Christmas bundle from the “Lutheran Mission.” At one time, as many as 600 bundles were given out. This gift contained mostly practical things like clothing items and, for the children, school supplies. There is a continuing respect for this ministry and the work that has happened over the years. But, today, there are expectations that can no longer be met due to funding limitations and lack of manpower.

I have been at Our Saviour’s since May 2008. Thinking to prepare myself for ministry in Indian Country, I took classes at seminary that pertained to cross-cultural and multicultural ministry. I did numerous cross-cultural experiences through the seminary and other organizations. My internship was at the Lutheran Lakota Center, in the town of Pine Ridge, and Makasan Presbyterian Church, in Oglala, on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. At the invitation of Pastor Mary Louise Frenchman (Oglala Lakota), I spent one summer during seminary at Living Waters Lutheran Church on Qualla Boundary, which is the home of the Eastern Band of Cherokee in North Carolina. During my last two years at seminary, I worshiped at All Nations Indian Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and

¹Our Saviour’s Lutheran Church website, <http://oslcrb.org/SummerGroups/ServantGroups.html>.

²ELCA Mission Builders website, <https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Related-Ministries/Mission-Builders>.

worked with Pastor Marlene Helgemo (Ho-Chunk), who was then the interim director for all the UCC Indian congregations. I went to several AI-AN (American Indian-Alaska Native) Lutheran Association gatherings where I met many who would become my future colleagues in ministry. All these experiences started to form me to be someone to work in Indian Country, but the experience of living and doing ministry on one specific reservation year-round continues to form and shape me. I am constantly learning to see the world in new and different ways and seeking to do ministry that is meaningful to the people at Rocky Boy and to those who come for short visits.

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Sunday worship, which is typically very small, sometimes has a sermon and sometimes has informal Bible study incorporated into the service. The scripture lessons are read by willing readers who are present that day. If there are children present, I read a lesson from the Spark Story Bible with them, which is always a highlight of the day for all present. The prayers of the people are truly just that as members of the congregation pray each petition. Each week we lift up the prayer concerns known within the community and together we share the Lord's Supper.

We do not have a regular Sunday school or weekday church school, but we do have special children's and youth ministries. Hopefully, we may soon have Sunday children's program as more mothers and grandmothers are bringing their children and grandchildren to Sunday worship and are expressing the desire to have something more for them.

For children's and youth ministry we currently are doing two things. Each summer we have two weeks of Vacation Bible School Day Camp with counselors from Flathead Lutheran Bible Camp (FLBC). Near the end of summer, we take kids from Rocky Boy to a week of camp at FLBC. Being involved with FLBC serves at least two purposes: 1) we are helping to educate young leaders of the church in cross-cultural ministry and 2) we are introducing the children and youth of Rocky Boy to "safe," non-Native people in their own context. We then take some of them to camp where they meet some of those same counselors, but in the camp context. We raise money in various ways for our youth (grades 4 to 12) to go to camp. FLBC has promised to provide camp scholarships to fill in any financial gaps for our

youth. As our neighbor, you could help with the costs of our VBS program or, as we pool all of the money we raise together, adopt our entire group of youth who are going to camp and help pay their way.

For college-bound young adults, we have a scholarship program. This was first started when a designated gift was given to Our Saviour's. The original gift has been completely used, but we do our best to continue this program as a way to encourage our young adults who are seeking higher education. Each year we select up to six college students to receive a scholarship from Our Saviour's. This is paid as a monthly stipend. It is a fairly small amount, between \$50 and \$100 per month, but we know it helps because most of our recipients have said so. One young man we helped for the past three years started law school in the fall of 2016. Contributing to our scholarship fund is a way to be a neighbor to the college students we help support.

Layettes are given out, upon request, for newborns on the reservation and for relatives who may be living elsewhere. We have a specific list of items that we include in the layettes. All of these things get wrapped up in a baby quilt or afghan. These quilts and afghans are gifts from many quilting groups and knitters and crocheters across the country. I have heard of our layettes going to faraway places to meet the needs of grandbabies or great grandbabies! Many people send us new and used baby clothes. Though we only put new things in our layettes, the gently used things go into our Thrift Store and are greatly appreciated. You can be a neighbor to one of our families and help take care of our newborns with contributions to our layette ministry.

Quilts of all sizes are sent to us from very industrious quilting groups. Just this past summer, a men's quilting group from Missoula came and delivered a few to us personally. We also receive blankets, new and gently used. These are given out primarily to seniors in our community, but anyone in need can have one as long as we have it to give away. One year we did a quilt giveaway at the Sweet Grass Pow-wow, which is organized yearly by the Native American students at Montana State University-Northern in Havre. Elders from Rocky Boy and other reservations gladly received these new quilts. As our neighbor, you can give quilts and blankets that will help take care of the elders in our community.

Knitted and crocheted hats, gloves (no mittens, please, as the kids won't wear them!), and scarves are sent to us. These are put out on a table for anyone who needs them to take during the winter months. Kids are constantly losing things, so we go through lots and lots of hats and gloves and scarves in one winter. We take some to the Rocky Boy schools, which are just down the road from us, and we take some of the smaller items to the Rocky Boy Headstart programs. These gifts are one way to help keep the children of Rocky Boy healthy. We receive these things all year long from neighbors who are diligent knitters and crocheters.

Half of the basement in the Mission House is home to our small Thrift Store. It is stocked with gently used and new items that are given or sent to us. Because of

our space limitations, we only keep the very best of the best. Except for brand new items, which are priced separately, things are sold by the bagful. We ask for five dollars for a large, brown grocery bag, but we never turn anyone away who is in need. All the proceeds are used to help fund our children's and youth ministries.

Hoping to serve as a bridge between cultures and foster better understanding between people, Our Saviour's hosts servant groups, retreats, cross-cultural immersion events, and seminary cross-cultural experiences.³ These vary in length from two or three days for retreats up to ten days for the seminarians. Each experience has cultural learning pieces and, for most groups, includes work projects. There is space for individuals to come for personal retreats or extended stays for sabbatical work. Information concerning these things can be found on our website. We do not do extensive advertising, so people learn about us mostly by word-of-mouth. Social media has certainly helped people learn about us; Our Saviour's has its own Facebook page.⁴

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The Montana Synod of the ELCA, of which we are a part, has taken some real steps toward healing negative history between Native and non-Native people. An "apology" was written and adopted by the Montana Synod on June 6, 2010. It follows here:

Recognizing the long history of injustice towards the Indigenous Tribal Peoples of the United States, we, the Montana Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, express our profound sorrow and repentance for the grief and pain suffered in the past and in the present. For too long, we have remained silent, ignored the violence perpetrated against the Tribes, ignored the violation of treaties, and ignored the tragic aftermath that haunts the original peoples of the land.

We ask for forgiveness, forgiveness for what we have done, and what we have failed to do.

As a sign of our repentance and a desire to be reconciled, we pledge to walk with our brothers and sisters of the Tribal Nations. We offer our support for the honoring of treaty rights, the healing of lives torn asunder by forced cultural changes, loss of language, racism and poverty. We will stand with The Tribes in honoring the sacred sites and ceremonies. Let it be known to all the Tribes that our door is open to you and we are here to listen and to work for a better tomorrow for all of the Creator's people.⁵

³Our Saviour's Lutheran Church website, <http://oslcrb.org/>.

⁴Our Saviour's Facebook page can be found at "Our Saviour's Lutheran Church – Rocky Boy, MT."

⁵Montana Synod's Apology to the Native American Tribes, http://www.montanasynd.org/uploads/3/0/9/6/30961995/montana_apology.pdf.

The work concerning the Apology did not stop with the writing of it. The current bishop of the Montana Synod of the ELCA, Jessica Crist, is working to see this Apology personally delivered to each of the seven reservation tribes and the one landless tribe in Montana. To date the Apology has been given to the Tribal Council on the Fort Peck Reservation (Assiniboine Sioux), the Tribal Council of the Rocky Boy's Reservation (Chippewa Cree), and the Tribal Council of the Salish-Kootenai Confederated Tribes. Those that remain are the Blackfeet, the Crow, the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre on the Fort Belknap Reservation, the Northern Cheyenne, and the Little Shell Chippewa (who are a landless tribe and do not have a reservation).

I want to share a little about the struggles and difficulties we have in dealing with our own mainline denomination, the ELCA. It is a mostly white and mostly middle or upper middle class institution.

Sometime after the Apology was given to the Rocky Boy Tribal Council, a person asked me what difference offering it had made in our relationship with the Tribe. I reflected on that for a few minutes, then replied I had not noticed any particular changes. I continued by saying that was not the issue of offering the Apology in the first place. The Apology was offered because it was, and still is, the right and just thing to do. Just as repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery⁶ at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly this past August was the right and just thing to do.⁷ If you do not know what the Doctrine of Discovery is I encourage you to start with the website I have referenced above.

In light of both of these documents, I want to share a little about the struggles and difficulties we have in dealing with our own mainline denomination, the ELCA. It is a mostly white and mostly middle or upper middle class institution. Sometimes this church that I love being a part of drives me crazy. Why? It is because the institution itself is racist. Before anyone wants to criticize that statement, it is important to understand what racism is and what it is not. Racism is not individual prejudice. It is institutional in nature. It is, very basically, when power and white privilege come together in systems and institutions to have control over groups who are nonwhite and, therefore, are inherently less powerful in our present-day society. This is a very simplistic definition for a very complex problem. Creating a community of justice for all can only come about by seeing what we are and what we are not. As non-Native people we often do not see or understand the privileges we are given by these systems and institutions. I believe we are called to

⁶Doctrine of Discovery Study Group within the Anglican Church, <http://doctrineofdiscovery.org/index.htm>.

⁷ELCA Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery, August 2016, New Orleans, Louisiana, http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Legislative_Updates_for_the_2016_Churchwide_Assembly.pdf?_ga=1.267174222.1500814175.1424039466.

become aware, on a daily basis, of these “white-skin privileges” we receive and then, on a daily basis, work to become people of justice by helping those very systems and institutions become antiracist. This is hard work, but, I believe, it will be worth it.

The congregation I serve is not white and not, on average, middle class, though some of my parishioners work for the Tribe and have good jobs and some have retired from good jobs. But, that is not the case for all who come to worship, and certainly not true of our community as a whole. When our ministry is asked to fit our “square peg” into the “round hole” definition of what a ministry should look like, act like, and just be, we cannot do it. It is not possible. This happens every year (no joke!) when it comes time to review the grant support we receive from the ELCA.

It is at times like this that we at Our Saviour’s hope to be a good neighbor. We work at helping the powers and structures that exist within our denomination, those that we must interface and interact with, to understand what it means to be a predominantly Native American congregation on a Native American reservation. We work at helping this institution understand, in a practical way, what it means to work in a community that has varying degrees of poverty and need—physically, mentally, and spiritually. When questions like, “When do you expect this ministry to be self-supporting?” are asked, this shows there is an inherent lack of understanding of what it means to work among the poor and within communities of poverty. How I understand this question that comes from a predominantly white, middle-class institution is, “When do you expect to look like us?” Truthfully, the answer is, “Never.”

I have had numerous people say to me, “Is there any way you could do without this particular grant?” There probably is, but why should we let the church off the hook from having to look at and face its very nature? Any of us can only change when we are confronted with the need to change. Confronting an institution with its need to change is a big job and not one that is happening quickly. You can be our neighbor, and a neighbor to all communities of color within the ELCA and most mainline denominations, by working to make those systems and institutions antiracist and places of justice.

There is a bigger picture to see in order to understand the systems, structures, and institutions that affect not only those at Rocky Boy, but all of Indian Country. When I came to Rocky Boy in 2008 one issue was very pressing for me. That was the issue of Indian health care and the lack of will with Congress to do anything about improving it. One of the first things we as a congregation did together was write to our Congress people to encourage them to refund the Indian Health Care Improvement Act (IHCIA). It “is the cornerstone legal authority for the provision of health care to American Indians and Alaska Natives. The authorization of appropriations for the IHCIA had expired in 2000.”⁸ I believe that none of us who

⁸Indian Health Service, Indian Health Care Improvement Act, <https://ihs.gov.ihcia>.

belong to the dominant culture would deal well with having our health care insurance underfunded or not funded at all. With the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, the IHCIA was made permanent and now has no expiration date. President Obama had the following to say:

Earlier today, I signed into law the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the health insurance reform bill passed by Congress. In addition to reducing our deficit, making health care affordable for tens of millions of Americans, and enacting some of the toughest insurance reforms in history, this bill also permanently reauthorizes the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, which was first approved by Congress in 1976. As a Senator, I co-sponsored this Act back in 2007 because I believe it is unacceptable that Native American communities still face gaping health care disparities. Our responsibility to provide health services to American Indians and Alaska Natives derives from the nation-to-nation relationship between the federal and tribal governments. And today, with this bill, we have taken a critical step in fulfilling that responsibility by modernizing the Indian health care system and improving access to health care for American Indians and Alaska Natives.⁹

Without adequate protections under the law, the health care of our Native sisters and brothers is at risk. Being a neighbor to our Native sisters and brothers means helping to preserve the means of good health care for them.

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The next issue that came to the fore on the national level was that of the Violence Against Women Act. The statistics I am about to share with you are really difficult to wrap your mind around because, as dominant-culture people, we cannot image things being this bad. One in three Native women will be raped in their lifetime. Three in five will be physically assaulted. Native women will be stalked twice as much as other women. They are murdered at a rate ten times greater than the national average. Because of underreporting, these figures are probably higher. It is inconceivable to us in the dominant culture to think that many of these women would never see their abusers or rapists brought to justice. Previously,

an unworkable, race-based criminal jurisdictional scheme created by the United States limited the ability of Indian nations to protect Native women from violence and to provide them with meaningful remedies. For more than 35 years, United States law stripped Indian nations of all criminal authority over non-Indians. As a result, Indian nations were unable to prosecute non-Indians, who reportedly commit 88% of the violent crimes against Native women on tribal lands.

The 113th Congress acted quickly, passing a bipartisan VAWA with tribal provisions intact. On March 7, 2013, President Obama signed the Violence Against

⁹Barack Obama, Office of the President, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/statement-president-reauthorization-indian-health-care-improvement-act>.

Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 (VAWA 2013) into law, an historic step forward that reflects not only the United States' commitment to protect Native women from domestic violence, dating violence, and violations of protective orders, but also its restoration and reaffirmation of inherent tribal sovereignty to protect their citizens from violence.¹⁰

VAWA 2013 authorizes Indian tribes to exercise special domestic violence criminal jurisdiction within Indian country over certain non-Indian defendants.¹¹

Being a neighbor to Native women and men to protect against domestic violence means helping to keep legislation like VAWA 2013 intact.

Where do you fit into this picture of being our neighbor and us being your neighbor? You can ask this question as an individual, as a group of young people or adults, or as an entire congregation. I have already made a quite a few suggestions, but I have still more to make.

Seek out antiracism and justice training. This helps make a person aware of what are some of the real underlying and hidden issues. This is hard work to do because we often learn things about ourselves and the institutions around us that we love, use, and take advantage of that are hard to hear and call us to change. To do this work, I would recommend seeking out teams that are trained to facilitate this. The Women of the ELCA is very active in justice and antiracism work.¹² They have "Today's Dream-Tomorrow's Reality" teams in every synod of the ELCA. After coming to Rocky Boy, I went through two phases of this training and do justice and antiracism awareness education with every servant group that comes to Rocky Boy. Be encouraged to find a group to work within your area.

Find resources that will tell you what is happening in Indian Country. Seek to know what is important to your Native neighbors. One current example is finding information about what is happening on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota concerning the Dakota Access Pipeline. I was there for a few days in October. Very little about what is happening there, and has been happening for months at this point in time, is being covered by mainstream press. The journalists who are there are being threatened with jail time and facing freedom of the press issues. The Rev. Elizabeth Easton, Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, issued a statement of support for the action being taken at Standing Rock. I invite you to read this online on the ELCA website.¹³ Being a neighbor in this instance is seeking to be informed, potentially helping financially and/or finding ways to send supplies in

¹⁰Indian Law Resource Center, Ending Violence Against Native Women, <http://indianlaw.org/issue/ending-violence-against-native-women>.

¹¹Indian Law Resource Center, New Report Confirms Violence Against Native Women is Worse than Previously Thought, <http://indianlaw.org/safewomen/new-report-confirms-violence-against-native-women-worse-previously-thought-0>.

¹²Women of the ELCA, <http://www.womenoftheelca.org/justice-pages-41.php>.

¹³ELCA.org, ELCA presiding bishop issues statement on Standing Rock, <https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/7865>.

order to “stand with Standing Rock,” or, possibly, finding yourself going to Standing Rock.¹⁴

Bringing the focus back to our ministry at Our Saviour’s, there are various ways to support and become a part of the work that is taking place here. Becoming a financially contributing Ministry Partner is helpful and needful for us to continue what we are doing. Becoming a Prayer Partner by praying for this ministry, those who come to use our various spaces, the leaders of this congregation, and our Reservation in general is extremely important and necessary for us. Previously, I have mentioned specific parts of our ministry and, if any one of those tugs at you, answer the call.

Now, I issue a personal invitation to each and every one of you. Come and see. Meet the people of the Chippewa Cree Tribe personally. Come and experience a servant group, a retreat, or a cross-cultural immersion event. If you are a seminary student, come and learn and experience what you can. I truly believe every person who comes here returns home changed in some way. I know the Spirit is active and God is at work. I see it every day.

Come! Meet the people of the Chippewa Cree Tribe. Come! Get to know them. You are most welcome. After all, we are neighbors. ☩

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¹⁴Stand with Standing Rock, <http://standwithstandingrock.net/>; <http://sacredstonecamp.org/supply-list/>.