

Just A Closer Walk With Thee

By Peter Rieke

2008 Pine Ridge Mission Team member

July 27 – Aug. 1, 2008

“You don’t need a lot of equipment. You are the equipment, and all you need to keep that going is three meals a day. Travel light.” (from The Message, Matthew 10)

After a week on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota I had a better understanding of walking with Jesus.

Our mission team from Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church arrived at the Denver airport from Charlotte via Dallas to begin our journey by car to Mission, South Dakota near the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Thirteen adults and youth anticipated the ride for the next hours across the prairie lands of Colorado, Nebraska and South Dakota, an area of the country most of us had never seen. I deposited my large black suitcase with my mission team and proceeded to register my name as a driver with Budget Rent A Car. I drove the blue Ford Explorer to where my team was waiting and watched everyone load the collected baggage.

Over eight hours later around 11:00pm we arrived in Mission, South Dakota, tired and excited to see our new home for the next days. We were at All Nations Assembly of God Church, a simple two-story cement and wood structure which would serve as dormitory, sanctuary, kitchen, library, kids’ camp, and headquarters for us all. As the luggage was being unloaded from the two vehicles I noticed that my black suitcase was nowhere to be found. A feeling of angst came over me. Could the suitcase still be at the Budget car rental office in Denver? Had I wrongly assumed a member of the team would load my suitcase? After asking around, no one remembered placing my suitcase in the vehicles. Colin remembered seeing a black suitcase on the sidewalk when we left and had said something but was not heard. (The next day I confirmed on the phone with Budget that my black suitcase was in their “Lost and Found” and I could pick it up on my return to Denver.)

As the team heard of my dilemma of the missing suitcase, they realized I would be without most of my clothing, bedding and toiletries. Within a few minutes I received donations from my team member of three T-shirts, towel, washcloth, soap, shampoo, shaving cream, razor, and toothpaste. Fortunately, I had packed in my knapsack an extra shirt, shorts, spandex shorts, toothbrush, and deodorant. My “Keen” sandals that I was wearing would have to be worn for all occasions during the week. They had served me well in Guyana last year on my mission trip and they would serve me well again.

Air mattresses were waiting for us when we arrived. We quickly inflated them with two air pumps. One team member donated a sheet for my use. I was without a pillow and blanket. Later that night I found (tucked under a church table) a quilt and pillow that served me well through the end of the week.

The thought entered my mind the next morning after a restless night: Would I be tested this week to live with less, much less? I remembered Jesus. *I did not recall Jesus traveling and living out of a suitcase.*

The first full day at the church we awakened anxious to get busy. We met Carla the young associate pastor in training who directed the kids’ camps. We were introduced to Elton – a

Native American Indian of the reservation, member and daily servant at the church. Phil and I were asked to organize the food pantry, which was in a complete state of disarray. Carrots, peas, tomatoes, potatoes, corn were all mixed together. We segregated the vegetables on the shelves and made room for another truckload arriving later in the day. I had to wonder if anyone ate any fresh vegetables? My answer would come later.

The ladies were given the task of organizing the library. None of the books were sorted by category. Books were piled everywhere including the floor. Phil and I were asked to build simple shelves – “just get some boards and cement blocks at the store and we’ll do the rest”. Phil and I proceeded to the local building supply store less than a mile away in the Ford Explorer. There we were told that cement block or blocks of any kind were not in stock. However, they would sell us cement mix and we could make our own blocks. Not interested.

Phil and I spent the next hour at the building supply store engineering and cutting 2 x 12 shelving for the library. After many cuts, some faulty, we had the necessary pieces to nail together back at the library a five-tiered shelf and completely cover the main wall. With the purchase of nails, we were ready to test our handyman skills.

The rest of the first day Phil and I erected the library shelf as our team watched, encouraged and critiqued. The small room was a challenge with the large shelving boards in maneuvering the shelf up and down as we fitted, nailed, and tested. The furniture in the room was constantly getting in our way. Two more trips to the building supply store were made to correct some of the cuts made and purchase masonry nails. The evening of the first day we attached the shelves to the cement wall with the masonry nails. The shelving could now withstand the tugs of any group of kids.

By the second day I was not missing my suitcase with all its extra clothing, toiletries, and sleep ware. My team was making sure I was comfortable and had everything I needed. I did not even require a trip to the store. However, in the back of my mind, I had already registered the fact that down the street a Family Dollar and grocery store could replace all my suitcase articles for about \$100.00. I was determined not to spend any money on any suitcase replacements and manage with what people gave me for the rest of the week.

Day Two started with the unloading of food from the delivery truck. I was on Team 3 and today was food preparation today. We made several runs to the grocery store that day and every day as it turned out. We seemed to always need one more item for a meal. There were two grocery stores nearby where we shopped. Team 3 prepared chicken, potatoes and beans for dinner. In the afternoon we drove an hour to St. Francis. Here we toured the Indian museum and Catholic Church. The fire alarm went off in the church while touring and we were told to leave because there was a problem. On our way home, several fire trucks passed us going in the opposite direction towards St. Francis. We could only wonder? (Two days later we found out that a small wiring problem in the belfry had triggered the alarm but all was okay.)

In the evening, Carla brought 20 young Indian children between the ages of two and 14 to us again for stories, handicrafts, games and refreshments. Janet acted out the story of the Good Samaritan with the help of some of the children. The rest of the evening we emphasized the good neighbor, good friend concept by creating paper chains and playing Red Rover outdoors. That evening everyone told about events of the day. Stephanie and Jan sang their version of “The Rose” in tribute to Peter and Phil who had contributed greatly to the enhancement of the library. Two paper rose petal crowns were placed on their heads.

The third day I had forgotten that my suitcase was missing and I was enjoying not having to keep up with much. Everything I was using was borrowed and a small heap next to my inflatable mattress represented everything I needed for the week. *It felt so easy to keep up with so little.* I started to resent having packed so much in the first place and what a chore it would have been to keep up with it all.

Elton, my new Indian friend, and I spent the morning cleaning and organizing the Veggie Tales room. It was a catchall room for everything - books, handicrafts, furniture, and games. We moved a lot of the unneeded items into the trailer outside and placed the needed items where they belonged either in the library or in the play area for the kids. Soon we were playing with the kids again as they arrived for morning kids' camp.

That afternoon we traveled to the small town of Wanblee on the Pine Ridge Reservation to view the ministry of Pastor Gus Craven and his wife Terry. Pastor Gus is the pastor in the town of Mission of the All Nations Church where we were staying and lives in Wanblee. His wife runs a food pantry and home for abused children. Terry gave us a walking tour of their home which was currently home to five foster children. She showed us the almost completed worship/all purpose center as well as kitchen/pantry. She explained the poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, lack of jobs or work, and complete lack of hope and faith in the community. We toured the area by car and witnessed dilapidated small homes and overgrown yards. I asked, "Where are the vegetable gardens?" The response: "It's too much work to keep up." Only half of the lawns were mowed. It is true that the life expectancy of males is 47 years. It is true that Indians will often spend their last \$20 on gambling at one of the nearby casinos and depend on the generosity of the churches to feed themselves. It is true that the average income of a worker is \$3500 per year. It is true that Pine Ridge is the poorest area of the USA and rivals most Third World countries in its poverty.

The evening of the third day we participated with the Indian children again at kids' camp. Stories, handicrafts, games and refreshments – all within a short hour-and-a-half period. I vividly remember Conner, the young five-year-old boy who was always getting into trouble. Three of our team members were always on guard for Conner's next daring act as he loved to elude us with his uncaring regard to the rules. After the children had left, Team 3 swept, mopped, and scrubbed for the next hour to eradicate the aftereffects of the children – a mixed mess of paper, crayons and glue mixed with sticky juice and melted ice cream. It was our last night in Mission and we gave thanks with song and praise. Elton, Terry (Elton's wife) and Carla shared with us their thanks for our work. We gave God all the glory.

The fourth day was our departure day from the town of Mission and the Indian Reservation. We were to tour the Badlands, Black Hills, and Mt. Rushmore and finally overnight in Cheyenne. I spent little time packing my few dirty clothes in my knapsack with my stick of deodorant and toothbrush. I would be soon returning to a life of store-bought clothes and toiletries that were waiting for me in my black suitcase in Denver.

I was grateful for the lesson learned from my missing suitcase experience. I had experienced a small part of what it must have been like for Jesus who traveled with only the clothes on his back and the sandals on his feet. Jesus encouraged his disciples to travel light, go out into the world, teach and be grateful for what was given to them by their hosts. I learned that often *less* is more.

I left the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation with a sense of sadness. I had never experienced such a depressed people, such a lack of hope. I saw the direct effects of what government handouts and entitlements can do to a group of people. The only hope I saw was in the small children who

came to the churches and lifted our spirits as we played and worked with them. Hope lies with the children and in the churches where every day the life of Jesus is told and remembered.

When I returned to the Denver airport and the Budget lost and found, I picked up my black suitcase intact. Travel light. *You* are the equipment.

Lyrics to: “Just a Closer Walk with Thee”, an American Gospel Song:

I am weak, but Thou art strong;
Jesus, keep me from all wrong;
I'll be satisfied as long
As I walk, let me walk close to Thee.

○ Refrain:

*Just a closer walk with Thee,
Grant it, Jesus, is my plea,
Daily walking close to Thee,
Let it be, dear Lord, let it be.*

○

2. Through this world of toil and snares,
If I falter, Lord, who cares?
Who with me my burden shares?
None but Thee, dear Lord, none but Thee.