

HEADLINE: Rebuilding more than a church building

DECK: Anabaptist insurance company aids MB church rebuilding project

When Lakota Gospel Church, a Native American Mennonite Brethren congregation located on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation, burned to the ground last summer, one of the first questions up for discussion was the continued existence of this Porcupine, S.D., congregation.

The congregation struggled numerically with less than 50 members and to maintain a sense of purpose and mission. Ministry on the reservation is challenging. Pine Ridge, the second largest Indian reservation in the U.S., after Arizona's Navajo Nation, is located in the nation's poorest county. It posts the highest poverty- and alcohol-related death statistics on the continent and the average lifespan is just 52 years.

Following the June 21, 2004 fire that completely destroyed the building and its contents, the congregation as well as Central District Conference leaders questioned whether or not the congregation would continue to exist. Then came an offer of help from MutualAideXchange, an Anabaptist reciprocal insurance company. Lakota Gospel Church is part of the Central District Conference and is insured through MAX programs and ministries.

MAX, as the company is known, offered to come along side the church for the rebuilding process. MAX, which has insurance programs that are used as a tool for mutual aid among Anabaptists, also has ministry programs that lend support for emotional and spiritual needs of individuals and churches.

Church and CDC leaders credit MAX's offer with jump-starting not only a building program for the Lakota church but also a new sense of spiritual vitality.

“It’s one thing to rebuild a church building,” says Glenn Welborn who develops and coordinates MAX’s U.S. mutual aid programs. “To see the movement of a congregation from real discouragement to renewal, a spirit of hope, excitement and enthusiasm—that’s the most important part of our work.”

The Lakota rebuilding project fell under Burden Bearing Ministries, one of four MAX programs. While an insurance adjuster dealt with the insurance aspects of the damage, Allen Schroeder, a MAX responder from Minnesota, helped to assess other ministry needs. Processing what had happened surfaced as an immediate need. Schroeder met with Pastor Howard Whiteface and congregation members for a prayer meeting and discussions regarding their future.

Once the Lakota congregation, together with CDC leaders, decided to rebuild the church building MAX funds covered 60 to 70 percent of the rebuilding materials. But additional finances and labor to complete the project were still needed. Curtis Hoyt, a member of Bible Fellowship MB Church in neighboring Rapid City, S.D., agreed to serve as the on-site general contractor. Hoyt is executive director of Hands of Faith Ministry, Inc., a rehabilitation program for Native Americans. Men from the reservation who were learning new skills and trades through Hands of Faith helped to build the new church. Hands of Faith volunteers from around the country also helped with the rebuilding project.

“For me to see the spiritual renewal and to provide an opportunity for Native American men to not only learn a vocation and to help rebuild the church, but also to participate in some of the meetings held by those working together was an awesome experience,” says MAX’s Welborn.

Additional labor assistance came from Bible Fellowship MB Church and two teams of MAX employees who traveled to South Dakota to help with drywall, electrical work and other interior construction tasks.

The Lakota congregation requested \$7,000 from MAX for the rebuilding project and looked to other sources for additional financial assistance. CDC congregations contributed funds and MAX was able to help generate additional funds through its Network Ministry, a process by which Anabaptists throughout North America are notified of special needs within the Anabaptist community. Needs may include prayer, monetary aid or volunteer help.

When MAX enacted its Network Ministry, “funds were given far beyond the \$7,000 initially requested,” says Denise Dietz, MAX marketing coordinator. Through the network, MAX gathered donations to pay for the removal of debris and to add Sunday school rooms to the Lakota church. The Lakota congregation had not had educational classrooms prior to the fire.

“This disaster demonstrates what can happen when people with loving hearts, committed to mutual aid, rally around brothers and sisters under burden,” says a MAX news release.

While the building is not 100 percent complete, it is close. Christmas services were held in the new church just six months after the fire. Curtis Hoyt and Hands of Faith volunteers will finish the remaining work on the church and Pastor Whiteface says the congregation will host a dedication service.

Pastor Whiteface, who began attending the church’s Sunday school ministry as a small child, says the congregation has been encouraged in several ways since the fire.

The bigger building enables them to host larger groups of people, particularly for special occasions such as Christmas when their attendance increases significantly. Whiteface says donations to the church have increased as have the number of visitors attending services. The assistance of MAX, volunteers from a variety of places and words of encouragement from present and former people involved in the Lakota Gospel Church have also been significant in the rebuilding process and the continuation of ministry, says Whiteface, who also has a radio program that is broadcast in a several states. Whiteface says the broadcast has also generated interest in the Lakota church.

“God does much more than bless the rebuilding of the building,” says MAX’s Welborn. “There is an emotional and spiritual renewal. It is an awesome experience to see God at work in people’s lives,” says Welborn.

In addition to providing insurance coverage, the MAX mission is to follow the biblical teachings of Christ and the apostles in the treatment of brothers and sisters. In addition to Burden Bearing and Networking Ministries, which have been in existence for two years, MAX is developing a financial assistance ministry and an educational ministry to help build awareness among individuals and congregations regarding mutual aid among Anabaptists and others.—MAX news release and Leader staff

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