



*Trinity II*, Father John Giuliani

# Listening to God

BY DANELLE CRAWFORD MCKINNEY

Bring you greetings from the great state of South Dakota! I want to thank Presbyterian Women for the opportunity to share my personal reflections on the USA Mission Experience held in South Dakota in September 2010. I was one of the first of the Dakota people to meet with participants to provide a brief orientation as participants prepared for a week of learning and exchange.

As I contemplated what to share at that first meeting, I recalled a transformative time for my family. Five years ago, my husband Ron (from the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma) and I spent a full year sharing everything we know about our history, culture and traditional values with our children. This included sharing our Presbyterian faith and the Presbyterian tradition. But this wasn't a time for us to just tell what we knew, it was a time to reflect on the way we lived and to consciously discern how our cultures (Dakota and Choctaw) came together to form our way of life as a family. It was an amazing experience. I think I learned more than my children! But more than ever, I learned to appreciate the history and culture in which I was raised.

## Eyes to See God's Message

I now see that the intentional time our family spent in understanding our history and culture was preparing us for the USA Mission Experience. The impact this trip has had on our family is helping us to grow together even more. Through the intentional time spent with USA Mission Experience participants, we were reminded of the importance of looking to God. Now, months later, we continue to open ourselves to God, to learn how God will lead us as we serve with fresh, new eyes.

For example, one of the ways we serve one another and our community is by looking at the scriptures through the lenses of our cultural experience. *Genesis 8:6–12* tells the story of Noah and his use of the dove to find dry land. The dove flew around all day and came back in the evening with the olive branch in its beak. Today, many Christians see the dove as an important symbol of our faith. It is a symbol of hope and peace. Of course, the

dove is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit: in *Matthew 3:16*, the Spirit descends like a dove when Jesus is baptized.

Even the author of *Matthew* was writing to tribal peoples, and issues of culture and spirituality are addressed throughout scripture. If we have the eyes to see it, we can understand that a dove is also seen as a messenger. In our Native American culture, it is important to recognize that animals and experiences in nature send messages to us. An eagle is seen as a messenger of good news, indicating that something good is to come into our lives. The Navajo believe that the coyote can be a messenger to warn people of a troublesome event about to happen. These messengers are sent by the Creator, God, and it is extremely important that as we seek to have eyes to see God's message, we also listen to what that message is.

### Hearts to Understand God's Message

One of the contemporary struggles that Native Americans face today is the separation of culture and faith. There's a Native American mentality (perhaps from missionary influence) that traditional Native American culture is different from Christianity. It's as if native people are expected to choose between two different worlds and to live only according to one set of doctrines or another. The way my family and I are beginning to understand our work is that God is calling us to be involved in finding the balance between those two worlds.

Another key component to our ministry is fulfilling the prophecy of Sitting Bull, who said that it will take seven generations to find healing from the complete



Mary Lou Williams

**Danelle McKinney (far right) greets the USA Mission Experience participants, including Hsin-Mei Weng (far left). Danelle's husband, Ron, and their children Madison, Altheia and Ronston joined Danelle to share their thoughts about their culture and faith.**

transformation of the Native American way of life—particularly to find healing from the historical trauma of events such as the Minnesota Conflict (see p. 35) and the massacre at Wounded Knee (see pp. 11–12). The questions that we as Native Americans have to ask ourselves are these: What am I doing to facilitate the healing of our people? What can I do to support future generations so that they may live in a way that there is a balance of culture and faith? If we can understand the tensions that exist in our lives, then we can open our hearts to God's work of healing and reconciliation, as well.

### Spirits To Be Agents of God's Message

Here in Dakota Presbytery, we are on the precipice of an opportunity to bring healing and reconciliation to our way of life in the United States. The experiences you will learn about in this magazine will give you a very good sense of the current happenings within the bounds of Dakota Presbytery. You will hear about the group of horse riders who make their way each year to the execution site of 38

Dakota warriors, and how a documentary is being made to tell their story (see p. 35). I believe this project (among others) provides an opportunity for the church to become a beacon of light to a hurting people. I believe that God is leading the church to come to Dakota Presbytery and assist with this great responsibility.

As you read about the experiences here, I pray you will remember how important it is to reflect, and to listen to God's calling in your own life and how you may feel as you listen to our stories. This is a great chance to learn about our way of life! But it's also important to be aware that this is only a snapshot.

When I was in college, I worked at a bingo parlor to earn some cash for my education. An older Native American, Andy, was my mentor. His reputation as a great bingo caller was strongly upheld. One evening, as the session began, I noticed that Andy was busy writing something on a napkin. I managed to peek at what he was writing, thinking it was valuable information for doing the job. What I saw was a random series of dots and hash marks spread about on the

flimsy paper. Throughout the evening, Andy would call a number and then write something down on the same napkin. I thought for sure that we were supposed to be recording the numbers we were calling, but as I glanced over, I saw the same random markings, only more in number.

It wasn't until our shift was over that I realized Andy's random dots and hash marks worked together to form a beautiful landscape of trees, birds, a river and clouds—an image of peace and serenity.

Andy passed recently, and I learned that he was a beloved track coach, had been entered into the South Dakota Sports Hall of Fame, and that he was a talented artist, loving husband, devoted father and a warrior in the battle against cancer. I began to see a bigger picture of the kind of person God created in Andy, and I was in awe of God's wondrous creation.

I think the same holds true when it comes to understanding Native American culture. Most people only see a portion of what we are all about, but when you look at the big picture, you can truly see God at work within our people. Much can be done when God calls *all* of us to the work of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. We not only look for and listen to God's message; we ourselves are agents of God's message!

More than 100 years ago, the Presbyterian Church made an impact on the ministry of the Dakota, Lakota and Nakota people. I celebrate that I am a product of



Joy Temple Ray

**Danelle (center) welcomes several USA Mission Experience participants to First Presbyterian Church of Wentworth, South Dakota, where she is pastor.**

the fruits of those labors! I truly believe that God is at work in empowering our people to share the gospel. God's message will impact the generations that follow me long after I have left this world to go to my eternal home. I am very grateful for the challenge set before all of us—it is a gift to be a bearer of God's message!

### **Moving Forward Together**

I recognize that there is so much the PC(USA) can do to once again bring the gospel to the Dakota

#### **Web Exclusive!**

Hear more from Danelle through the devotion she prepared for the USA Mission Experience participants. Based on *Psalms 23*, Danelle's devotion will encourage you to listen for God's voice in the people and world around you. The full text is available at [www.pcusa.org/horizons](http://www.pcusa.org/horizons).

Presbytery. The stories that have come from the USA Mission Experience will convey some of the teachings our Native American culture can offer. And together, we can move forward in faith. Through the USA Mission Experience, I believe that Presbyterian Women has already taken a first step toward living into the Presbyterians' Brief Statement of Faith—"In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage . . . to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace . . ."\*

I want to thank Presbyterian Women for its commitment to this vital ministry. I know for the participants, it was a difficult process filled with emotionally challenging struggles. I also know that this experience was a memorable and rewarding event. My prayers go out to all of you who are currently serving in your areas of ministry. I pray that we will continue to work together, all the while listening to God; and I ask for your prayers for the healing and reconciliation of Native Americans all throughout our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Danelle Crawford McKinney is the first Dakota woman to be ordained in the PC(USA). Danelle serves Native American youth at Flandreau Indian Boarding School and First Presbyterian Church of Wentworth. Danelle, Ron and their three children (Alethia, Madison and Ronston) live in Flandreau, South Dakota, within the bounds of Dakota Presbytery.

#### **Notes**

\*The full text is available at <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/101/brief-statement-faith>.