

In good time

'All is ready,' Bernard announces. And lunch becomes a holy communion.

By David Van Kley

Early one Saturday we gather in the parking lot of Custer [S.D.] Lutheran Fellowship—a caravan of pickups and trailers loaded with ponderosa pine, cut and split. We drive south out of the Black Hills and then east, through a wilderness of billowing fields and across the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation to Wakpamni Lake. Statistically this is one of the poorest areas in the United States.

A slimy mud road leads to Bernard Little White Man's home. There a crew of Lakota men helps us unload. White and brown hands fling lengths of wood to make large piles by the fence line. We work steadily until the trucks are empty.

Then I walk up to the house where women from our group gather around Bernard. About 70 years old, he is gracious and graceful. He explains the need for firewood: "Not many people heat exclusively with wood anymore. But burning a little wood

lowers heating costs and comes in handy when the electricity goes out."

The conversation continues in fits and starts, with more silence than I'm used to. Finally Bernard tells us, "Some women are getting lunch ready at the church."

We drive to St. Andrew Episcopal Church. A low-slung building, its white wood walls are bright with Lakota symbols. Men from our church show me the outhouses they installed behind the building last year. I notice the tiny pines, transplanted from the Black Hills, that dot the yard. How many will live?

Lunch isn't ready so we pass time. Folks from Custer and Wakpamni Lake cluster, apart. We sit on the picnic table north of the church, inspecting cracks in the wall. They stand in front of the church, talking.

I approach Bernard, his son and another man. It's dry this fall and the prairie wind blows unimpeded from

the north, whipping dust into our faces and clogging our sinuses. "My son loves snow," Bernard says. "He worked at a ski resort in Montana." I describe the 300-inch winters I experienced in Michigan. Bernard says, "We don't need that much snow in Wakpamni."

We lapse into silence. It strikes me that building relationships is harder work than piling pine.

A man driving a pickup with an open trailer pulls up. A nervous cow, bellowing, stands in the trailer. Bernard walks up to the man and says something in Lakota. The man drives to the back of the church. Bernard tells me, "Emily Has No Horse died this week. They're going to butcher

Bernard Little White Man stands in front of St. Andrew Episcopal Church, Wakpamni, S.D., where members of Custer Lutheran Fellowship come to work, pray and feast.

the cow for her funeral." In a few minutes, the cow stops bellowing.

Glancing at my watch, I notice that more than an hour has passed. I'm anxious about the time. But Bernard offers neither an apology nor an explanation for the delay.

Suddenly Bernard announces that all is ready. Entering the dingy fellowship hall, we find it alive with people. Little kids run every which way. Grandmothers sit expectantly on folding chairs.

Bernard asks me to pray. We eat: The food is unbelievably good!

Loosening up at last, we begin talking and laughing together. Divisions dissolve: We are one people, gathered around the table with Christ. We have become the church. The meal is a love feast, a holy communion.

I forget about the time. It ceased to exist because Jesus' promise has been realized: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near."

Often it happens just this way. □

Van Kley is pastor of Custer [S.D.] Lutheran Fellowship.

Bernard, 71, is part of the Adopt A Grandparent Program. The mission of the not-for-profit organization is "to bring Native American elders into contact with a larger community." (For more information: P.O. Box 241, Taos, NM 87571; 505-776-8474; www.adoptagrandparent.com; adoptagrandparent@taosnet.com.)

