



Built in 1882, St. Mary's Church in Old Agency, South Dakota, is one of the oldest Christian churches in the Dakotas. The recent addition of new stained-glass windows has helped to shore up the church's structure.

Photos by Matthew Townsend

# A Little Hope on the Prairie

*Life is not easy for the people and churches of South Dakota's Sisseton Mission. But glimmers of hope can be found by those who look.*

By Matthew Townsend

In a brightly lit basketball gymnasium lies a coffin flanked by a kaleidoscope of hanging quilts. Stars bloom in the center of each quilt, each star composed of multicolored lozenges that converge in eight points, like a sun. The quilts are gifts of significance by the Dakota, made by women of the tribe as an expression of honor and culture, and this time they hang in honor of the Rev. Leslie Campbell.

Campbell — Fr. Les to all who gathered at the Enemy Swim Community Center in the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate (SWO) Reservation — was not just a priest to those who had come for his funeral. He was a friend, a father, an uncle, a guardian, a cousin, and the last in a generation of Campbell clergy who had grown up in the church, sought ordination in the church, and died in the church. Campbell, like most gathered, was a Dakota man who cared deeply about his people, his church, and Jesus.

The Dec. 28 funeral was held in the community center because none of the reservation's Episcopal churches, all part of the Sisseton Mission, would have accommodated the crowd. Much of Campbell's 42-year career in

ministry was spent in northern Minnesota, on the Cheyenne River Reservation, and on the Standing Rock Reservation. In retirement, however, Campbell had served St. James' Church in Enemy Swim — his family church where his brother had served as rector, before his death. Families associate strongly with churches there, but most members of every parish came to the funeral. Episcopalians from around the state, as far as Standing Rock and Pine Ridge, ventured through the brutal winter weather to attend. The house was full.

Campbell's life reflected the complexity that exists among Dakota Episcopalians. They are Americans but also native. Their ancestors' traditional beliefs and language were beaten out of them in boarding schools, but their more recent ancestors were Episcopalians who loved the church. Many of their family members are interested in reviving the traditional beliefs that were once lost — but for them, church is their tradition. Some of them were in boarding schools, where they saw violence and abuse at the hands of people who claimed to be Christian, and many of them have relatives and friends who suffered mightily from brutal attempts to "save the man and kill the Indian."

Yet, on Sunday morning they make the drive from their homes to church, they visit their relatives in the churchyard, and they come together for Communion, when a priest is scheduled to be present. Otherwise, lay readers lead Morning Prayer.

Episcopal Church Women is active in some parishes. Coffee hour is completed with chili, macaroni salad, and potato chips. People talk about family news, politics, and television shows. One element is exotic: the hymns are sung in Dakota. But in almost every other way, the experience is friendly and familiar, with common prayer and praise.

The churches of the Sisseton Mission are in a far-removed corner of the Dakotas. The Lake Traverse Reservation, of which the city of Sisseton is a part, lies between the comparative bustle of Fargo and Sioux Falls, a million acres of farmland, grazing hills, and quiet lakes. The reservation mostly falls in South Dakota, extends into North Dakota, and borders Minnesota and its titular lake to the east. While tourists may make the trek to Rapid City, the Badlands, or Deadwood to see western South Dakota's intense natural beauty, far fewer people venture to its bucolic east.

Four of the mission's five churches are on the reservation and have native lay leaders: Epiphany in Sisseton, St. John's in Brown's Valley, St. James' in Enemy Swim, and the 135-year-old St. Mary's in Old Agency, the oldest mission church in that part of the Dakotas. One church is not on the reservation: St. Mary's in Webster.

The five congregations share one full-time priest: the Rev. Charley Chan. Chan, who has spent 13 years as priest-in-charge at the mission, may seem an unlikely deployment. Born in Hong Kong, Chan went to a boarding school in California and eventually ended up at Nashotah House. He was ordained in the Diocese of Colorado but has never served there. His work troubleshooting within Chinese-speaking congregations brought him to Hawaii and New York, where he served as priest-in-charge at Church of Our Savior in Chinatown in 1981. He worked in Milwaukee after that and returned to New York in 2003, where he again served as

priest-in-charge at Our Savior. Chan also helped translate the Book of Common Prayer into Chinese.

Chan told TLC that he never planned on becoming priest at a cardinal parish in New York, or moving to South Dakota. The call was set into motion when he was reviewing a copy of *THE LIVING CHURCH* and saw mention of a former colleague who was serving in South Dakota. He called and left a voicemail message, which grew into an invitation to come visit.

Chan's objective in the Sisseton Mission has been to lead by getting out of the way, which may speak to his longevity on the reservation; on average, clergy in South Dakota spend only five years in indigenous ministry. He leaves decisions, provided they do not violate church canons, to the mission council and the parishes. His conversations with the congregations are loving but blunt. The priest cites his background as a strength, a way of avoiding political correctness and generational blame games that could flare up during conflicts. Chan has also incorporated retired clergy in the area: the Rev. Conrad Ciesel, the Rev. Deacon Bitsey Ciesel (Conrad's wife), the Rev. George E. Parmeter, and, before his death, Campbell. All have decades of experience in Native American ministry.

Together, they provide pastoral care, Christian education, and worship to the churches, most of which are at least a half hour's drive from each other, even at 80 miles per hour.

"We're not dealing with a situation where we have churches that are five or ten miles apart," Parmeter told TLC. "There's quite a bit of distance between our congregations. Frankly, I don't see how one person could adequately do the ministry. I know what it was like, for me, back in the '70s on the White Earth Reservation.

"With five congregations, there's no way in the world that Charley could be in every congregation every Sunday. It's not physically possible," he said. "We're only human, and the stress gets to be too much. And I think that's why the burnout rate is so high amongst mission clergy, because normally there's no one we can rely on."

Chan said the parishes receive Eucharist two to three

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The Rev. Charley Chan completes the Christmas morning baptism of a new member of Gethsemane Church, Sisseton. "You don't have a choice to be born or not," he preached. "But how are you going to live? That choice is up to you. Is your life a life of repentance? If baptism means something to you, then your past has been washed clean and your new life has been sanctified."

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times each month, instead of once, because of the support of retirees.

“I just play the Bishop of Sisseton,” he joked.

“They see us functioning together as a team,” Parmeter added. “And we all bring different skills to the table.”

## A Challenging, Complicated Ministry

This team, and its lay support structure, often finds itself facing challenges that would be foreign to many ministering within the Episcopal Church. Many caricatures of life on the reservation exist. Both clergy and tribal members told TLC that they see two common misconceptions of reservation life: that people are either living in tipis and spend their days admiring the plains on horseback, or that every last person is a drug addict or alcoholic who gets lost among the slot machines. Neither of these is an accurate portrait.

Adequately explaining life on the reservation and its myriad complexities without a book — and a decade of ethnographical research — is perhaps impossible. But there are things a short-term visitor might notice.

To Episcopalians, the tribe’s structure may look somewhat familiar: the tribe has a chairman (not a chief) and council of leaders from each of seven tribal districts. As with deaneries, disagreements within and among districts happen. The tribe, which is based in Old Agency within a headquarters of glass, brick, and hardwood that evokes traditional tipi structures, is not the only entity operating within the reservation. The federal government is present through Indian Health Service (IHS), a department of Health & Human Services that ostensibly provides free healthcare to federally registered natives (complaints about the program and its limitations are frequent). The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), part of the Department of the Interior, has jurisdiction over about 100,000 acres of trust land and some roads within the reservation.

Road signs help drivers know they have entered Native American lands, but it is pretty easy to pass through the Lake Traverse Reservation without realizing it: it all looks pretty normal. Tipis are used in certain ceremonies [TLC, Dec. 24, 2017], but residents live in homes indistinguishable from any other North American house. They drive cars and work as police officers, school teachers, lunchroom cooks, and nurses. Many work in the tribal structure, engaged in essential services, civic projects, and social welfare endeavors. The tribe provides and distributes goods to the elderly and the poor. It has its own police service and ensures that non-natives who lease land on the reservation are in compliance with tribal code. It runs a bison farm and recently opened a spacious, well-stocked grocery store in Sisseton. It operates a treatment center for those in recovery. Schools, a college, a court system, and several

other agencies fall under the tribe’s purview. The tribe also owns and operates three casinos. Sisseton, which at 2,500 is the largest population center on the reservation, is a mixed community (both native and white) that is not administered by the tribe. It resembles most towns of its size in the Upper Midwest. Poverty is visible throughout the reservation, as it is throughout rural America.

With modern, familiar life come modern, familiar problems.

“Drugs and alcohol are the major problem we have here,” Clifford LaFontaine Jr., lay reader and member of St. Mary’s in Old Agency, told TLC. Clifford — or “Coke” to everyone — also works as a tribal police officer.

LaFontaine said the tribe has considered using banishment — the expulsion of people from the reservation — as a means of fighting an epidemic in addiction. Dealers would be the most likely target, but so far, no one has been banished. “I know that we have people that should have been,” he said.

Mike LaFontaine, also a lay reader at St. Mary’s and brother to Coke, said drugs like methamphetamine are further exacerbating problems among families that began in the 1950s, when alcohol entered reservation life. “That broke up families, or you lost the family nucleus,” Mike told TLC. “Mom and dad are always drunk, and the kids were being neglected. Nowadays it’s drugs and alcohol, single-parent families, losing the guidance, losing your faith, and losing your hope.”

He said under such conditions, people on the reservation begin to lose connection with God, and guidance does not necessarily come easily. “You can sit and pray to God, and God’s not going to say with a booming voice, *You need to do this. This is how you need to help yourself in order to help your children in order to make life better.*”

Another worry on the reservation: the high suicide rate, common among indigenous groups in North America. “One thing I am really concerned about are the suicides,” said Grace Frazier, a member of Gethsemane Church in Sisseton. Many suicides occur among youth. IHS reports that native youth are 3.5 times more likely to kill themselves than other groups, nationwide.

“I don’t know what they think, or were thinking, to make them take their own life,” Frazier told TLC.

“The more they think, the more scared they are,” said Chan, whose tenure on the reservation is now almost triple the average of those in indigenous ministry in South Dakota. “The more scared they are, the more depressed they are, because what they see is hopelessness.”

Bruce DuMarce Sr., also at Gethsemane, agreed. “I think a lot of them see no way out. There’s no help, no circle like our people used to have.”

The hopelessness Chan mentions is a two-edged



The Sisseton Mission runs a scholarship fund to help Dakota youth go to college, whether at the local Sisseton Wahpeton College (pictured) or off the reservation. The funds provided are modest, but the interaction is not. “Five hundred dollars for a four-year program is peanuts, but it is a signal of support, a sign of encouragement to them to go,” Fr. Chan said. “I try to explain that education, probably, is the quickest way to break the curse of poverty.”

sword. Not only does it affect those on the reservation touched by poverty, suicide, addiction, and depression, but it can attract personalities who seek to solve “the Indian Problem.”

“[Fr. Chan] has probably done more suicide funerals in two months than I’ve done in my entire ministry as a priest,” the Rt. Rev. John Tarrant, Bishop of South Dakota, told TLC. “I would say part of Fr. Chan’s faithfulness is he had no illusion that he was going to fix anything. But, by gum, he has been committed to being present amidst the brokenness, and some things have been healed.”

Tarrant, who grew up in Michigan, was consecrated in 2009, and will retire in 2019, said attempts to “fix” problems in South Dakota should be avoided.

Likewise, Conrad Ciesel said those coming in to minister should be respectful and humble. “People who are not Indians come in with the attitude of *oh, well, I’ll teach you*,” he said. “Come in with humility — learn and listen first, before you speak.”

This means, he said, letting go of what is learned in seminary: the call to take charge and make sure things get done. “You don’t do that when you come into a Native American community. You come, you listen, and you learn. You learn who’s the elder and listen to what

the elder has to teach you. You come in not so much to be the teacher but to be taught first. Then you go teaching, later. After you earn respect from the community, then you do the teaching.”

Other less humble motivations might lead people to native ministry: the desire to be seen ministering to the most needy, a sense of guilt, or an impressive line on a résumé. James Kurkowski of St. Mary’s in Webster said some clergy and others come from the east with such motivations, but they do not stay long. “They’re out here for a few years and they go back,” he told TLC. “I’m sure that the cocktail conversation is, ‘Well, I have a handle on the Native American issue because I spent three years out there’ — versus people who live here, who have spent their whole life here.”

A story by Campbell, shared with TLC a few days before he died, illustrates how challenging ministry can be for a lifelong resident of an environment where miracles can have a limited shelf life. After ordination and study, Campbell focused on the power of healing through Christ.

“When I was out at Standing Rock, this lady had come to me at about 10 or 11 o’clock at night. She had tears in her eyes and said, ‘My friend is laying in the hospital up by Fort Yates. Would you come and have prayers?’”

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Campbell and the woman journeyed to the hospital. “Sure enough, she was laying there, almost in a coma. She had cirrhosis, her stomach was bloated.” The three of them held hands to pray. “We had prayers — and then I forgot about it. The following weekend, I went out to get the mail. Here this lady was coming, walking down the street.”

The woman approaching Campbell was the same he had prayed for in the hospital. Her bloating was gone and her health had improved remarkably. “She thanked me. I told her, ‘Don’t drink again. Quit your drinking.’ So, she did — for a while. She started drinking again, and she died two weeks later.”

Several Dakota Episcopalians pointed out that the “Indian problems” of addiction and suicide are common throughout America among all races and backgrounds, especially in rural contexts where opportunity and hope are more limited.

“Humans learn to adapt no matter what environment they’re in, or forced into. We have adapted to the life we’re living now out of necessity,” DuMarce told TLC. He said the tribe, after being pushed into South Dakota following the Minnesota Uprising of 1862, decided to fight by adapting. “I think that’s what we’re doing now. We’re learning how to live the life that we’re forced into. Not because we want to. We’d rather live the way we used to 500 years ago. I know I would, because we wouldn’t have meth, we wouldn’t have alcohol.”

Norbit Bellonger, senior warden at St. Mary’s in Old Agency, echoed DuMarce’s thoughts, adding that these struggles did not originate among natives. “Everything started in ’52, ’53, when you guys — white people — opened liquor to the Indians,” he told TLC. “Everything changed. So, don’t blame us, blame yourself.”

## “The Most Racist State”

One problem is more unique to the Dakota people, and to indigenous peoples worldwide: they find themselves at the mercy of a kind of racism that ridicules and dehumanizes them to an incredible extent.

“You’ve got to live with it everywhere you go,” Bellonger said. “Every place, it’s there.” The problem is not new. Bellonger, an elder in the church, shared a story of Dakota Episcopalians being unwelcome at Gethsemane in the 1970s, when the church was still primarily white.

“There’s a lot of racism around here,” DuMarce said.

That racism ranges from the quotidian to the grotesque. Frazier said slights are common: people may be “nice to you but then say bad things to your back.” DuMarce added that such insults are learned at home, where white parents teach white children how to think. “*Oh, those f’ing Indians, you stay away from them.* It’s passed down like that.”

The Rev. Richard Zephier, priest at St. Mark’s Church



The Rev. Bitsey Ciesel, deacon in the Sisseton Mission, reading the gospel on Christmas eve.

in Aberdeen — which is not part of the Sisseton Mission — says racism is still present in Aberdeen.

Zephier, who is also chairman of the diocese’s Niobrara Convocation of native churches, said native youth come into contact with racism in Aberdeen as soon as they land on high school basketball teams.

“When they get into high school, they always get cut from the team,” he told TLC.

Linda Simon of St. Mark’s agrees with Zephier. She grew up on the Cheyenne River Reservation in central South Dakota and eventually wound up in Aberdeen. “My son went to high school there, and he was a very good basketball player and was 6-2. He was on the bench; he never played.”

More recently, Simon’s grandson has gone through similar frustrations and decided to abandon playing. Facing nothing but cuts, “the Indian kids have nothing there,” Simon said.

Racism, of course, does not end after high school. Zephier’s experience working with Native Americans in South Dakota is extensive: he spent years working for the BIA in Aberdeen, which is about an hour west of the Lake Traverse Reservation. He told TLC more than a handful of stories about natives trying to get an apartment and finding it had suddenly been rented, applying for a job that had just been filled, and trying to buy a car that was no longer available.

“It’s just something that is ingrained in Aberdeen,” he said. “It doesn’t change.”

And Dakota Episcopalians say racism is growing worse. DuMarce said he has heard South Dakota described as “the most racist state in the Northern Hemisphere. I believe it, from what I’ve seen. There’s people who have been run over here, Native Americans, and nothing is done.”

DuMarce compared the violence to lynching. He

shared the story of Justin Redday, a native man who, in March 2000, was walking along a highway and was struck by Mark Appel, 17. “He backed up and ran over him again.”

Redday’s ribs were crushed. Appel loaded Redday into the back of his truck and drove around for several hours before leaving him at Sisseton Public Health Hospital. He died there. “Nothing happened,” DuMarce said. Appel was indicted for vehicular homicide but then charged with a DUI, according to *The New York Times*.

The more recent case of Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind of Fargo shows how incredible violence against natives can unfold. LaFontaine-Greywind, a member of the Spirit Lake Tribe in North Dakota, was eight months pregnant when her neighbor, Brooke Lynn Crews, lured the woman to her apartment on Aug. 19, 2017. Crews attacked LaFontaine-Greywind, performed a crude Cesarean section to deliver the baby, and then killed LaFontaine-Greywind. The woman’s body was found in the Red River. The baby, who survived the brutal procedure, is now with her father.

Crews has been sentenced to life without parole. A letter from the United Tribes of North Dakota said, “During the gatherings and prayers for Savanna, we heard story after story from families who also have women in their families missing or with unsolved murders. . . . The murder of Savanna illustrates a much larger problem of epic proportions.”

“We have so many missing and murdered indigenous women,” said Sylvana Flute of Gethsemane. Flute told TLC that women have disappeared into and from the “man camps” that have sprung up in the Bakken oil boom.

This concern — human and sex trafficking — is shared by the tribe, Dakota Episcopalians, and clergy of the church. The dioceses of North Dakota and South Dakota have partnered to produce pamphlets about human trafficking, which are available in churches like St. Mary’s in Old Agency. A UTO grant has helped fund programming as well.

Mike LaFontaine, who tracks registered sexual offenders for the tribe, said women who are physiologically addicted to drugs are at higher risk.

“They don’t take it to get high, but to avoid withdrawal,” he said. “They’re vulnerable to prostitution, sex trafficking, because of that.”

Racism does not express itself only when natives are victims of crimes — it is also felt keenly when they are the perpetrators. Stories of the justice system charging natives with maximum sentences are common on the reservation. In 2016, 52.8 percent of federal cases in South Dakota involved Native America defendants, according to the United States Sentencing Commission. That is the highest such percentage in America, almost

18 points higher than the next-highest state (Montana). About 10 percent of the state’s population is native.

### **Assimilation and Termination**

Last year’s struggle over the fate of an oil pipeline running through the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota — along with a November oil spill just outside of the Lake Traverse Reservation — highlighted the pain felt by natives who see the justice system, political systems, and age-old prejudice stacked against them.

Such struggles over land and water are not new. Zephier and Simon both described how damming practices in the ’40s and ’50s left many people homeless — and often flooded the richest farmland available on reservations.

Simon said that on the Cheyenne River Reservation, the Army Corps of Engineers had placed markers indicating high water once dam construction was complete. “I lived down along the old river, the original Missouri River,” she said. “There were a lot of trees where our house was, our corrals, our pens, our horses. When the water started backing up and started coming up and coming up, we stayed there until the water was at the corrals. It started coming into our corrals — last minute, we had to move,” she said.

“We moved up on the flats. That water came over the mark. It came way up past what they actually said it was going to do. It had taken over everything.” According to the Partnership with Native Americans, 8 percent of the reservation was submerged when the dam was completed in 1948.

When the flooding came, Simon had been in a Cheyenne Agency boarding school but was moved to a school in Eagle Butte, in the center of the reservation. At first, she was bused back and forth to school. “Then, one night, when we got home, we had to pack all of our bags. They took us back up to Eagle Butte. They put us in a dormitory that was made for 58 girls. They moved all the little girls, the first-graders all the way to the 12th-graders, in one dorm. I had 12 beds in a room that was supposed to have four. We were stacked in there.” After new dormitories were finished, other girls we moved out.

The effects of the flooding continue to this day.

“It was a trying time,” she said. “It was sad for us.” The new dormitories that were built also included asbestos. “Now, people who are my age have strange diseases like scleroderma and a lot of cancers.

“Our cemeteries were moved. Who we think is buried there might not even be the person in that grave.” Another problem has emerged: the water that once rose has fallen again. “My sister fishes a lot, and there’s an area down there where the bones are coming back up.

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They're not animal bones." It has been declared illegal for non-tribal members to visit that area, Simon said, because of looting that has occurred from gravesites that were not moved.

Simon's experience raises one of the most complex and sensitive issues among Native Americans: the long-reaching shadow of efforts to assimilate Native Americans into white culture, and the abuses that followed suit.

After historical policies of warfare and forced re-



Crucifix in St. John's Church, Brown's Valley

moval, the federal government settled into a plan of assimilation, often Christianization or acculturation. In 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act — the Indian New Deal, informally — attempted to restore native management of land, education, and self-rule. By the 1940s, however, a new policy had emerged: termination, that is, ceasing to recognize Native Americans as Native Americans. Made official in House Concurrent Resolution 108 in 1953, this policy sought to dissolve tribes, halting federal recognition and BIA support. The Indian Relocation Action of 1956 followed, attempting to move populations from reservations to urban areas. During President Lyndon Johnson's administration, the government responded to pressure from the American Indian and civil rights movements, and the policy was informally ended. Termination was officially repudiated in 1988.

Through assimilation and termination efforts, off-reservation boarding schools served a crucial role. Many students matriculated by way of force or kidnapping, even into the 1950s. The schools were founded by the BIA and by Christian churches, including the Episcopal Church. The schools sought to eliminate indigenous culture, religious practice, dress, and expression through

harsh discipline. Some people have fond memories of their time in boarding school — but reports of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse within church-run schools are also commonplace and well-documented.

Irene Rondell of St. James' Church, Enemy Swim, chose to attend boarding school. "I wanted to go to boarding school. I wasn't forced to, I wanted to," she told TLC.

"I only went one year," she said. She described strict discipline at the now-defunct St. Mary's Episcopal School for Indian Girls, as well as some meager meals — toast and tea for Sunday dinner.

"If you didn't break your bread in a certain way, four ways, those nuns would walk around and hit your hand with a ruler."

Rondell, a lay reader, said her grandmother would send care packages of apples, oranges, and cookies — of which she saw none. "They'd all just rot away in this big barrel they kept them in," she said.

Valorie Augustson, also a lay reader at St. James', told TLC that the boarding schools seemed to have a chilling effect on her father.

"I always wondered why he never talked Dakota to me," she said. "He did to his mom, my grandma. They talked back and forth all the time. But he never talked to me in Dakota."

She said she has concluded the trauma — beatings for speaking Dakota in the schools — must have lingered in the back of his mind. "It brought back too many memories. I don't know. It just seems unreal that people would treat people like that, but they did."

Sam Crawford, a lay reader at Gethsemane and husband to Sylvana Flute, said he observed similar signs of trauma with his grandmother. She was forced to learn the piano at the Pipestone Indian School.

"My grandmother could play the piano so beautifully," he said. "But she would never play it."

When he became an adult, his aunt and uncle also told him why his grandmother kept a hidden garden in the woods: to keep her children safely out of sight. "They used to hide their kids back then," he said. "They'd come around to take them to boarding school."

*The second half of this article will appear in the next issue of TLC and is available at [livingchurch.org](http://livingchurch.org). Look for an interview of Bishop John Tarrant in a future issue.*

*Those interested in making donations may send checks to: Sisseton Mission, c/o Charley Chan, 716 7th Ave W., Sisseton, SD 57262. Checks should include a memo for specific needs, such as propane and utility bills, or scholarships. Large donations (more than \$1,000) should be sent through the Diocese of South Dakota via Bishop John Tarrant: [jtarrant@episcopalchurchsd.org](mailto:jtarrant@episcopalchurchsd.org) or 605.494.2020.*