

Stan Harder – CPT Delegation Report 10/16/11



Four weeks ago I arrived in Kenora Ontario to join a Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation for two weeks of discovery about the Anishinabe Indigenous people who live on the Grassy Narrows reservation. We were to learn about how CPT allies itself with oppressed groups like the Anishinabe, and has helped give them a voice about the use of the land they hold sacred.



See, I grew up on a Mennonite farm in Central Kansas; a land not nearly as beautiful as this. Our family lore included the story of purchasing the land from the railroad in 1874. But it wasn't till preparing for this trip that I learned about the illegal implemented treaty that stole that land away from the Kiowa tribe in Kansas, just 6 years before my ancestors purchased it.



I went to Kenora to try to clear up my conflicted feelings and lack of knowledge about the people who lived in North America for 10's of thousands of years, before having their culture and way of life whisked away to make room for my ancestors.



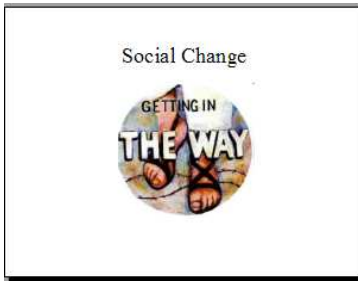
I went to learn about this and how CPT does its work. I went to learn about a people neglected and forgotten by society. And in the end, I experienced much more than I expected.



A delegation of eleven, mostly young, mostly white, mostly privileged, mostly Mennonite or Quaker, became a close family as we cooked, listened, played, shared and cried together.



We spent 4 days on the Grassy Narrows reservation an hour North of Kenora. The rest of the time was in Kenora visiting with various agencies and organizations learning about issues related to the Anishinabe people. We also did group activities that opened our eyes to the roles of privilege and oppression in this society.



We learned to appreciate the approach CPT takes to encourage social change. Christian Peacemaker Teams was formed to be deployed to regions of potentially violent conflict. And be helpful by, as one of their mottos states, 'getting in the way of violence.' Many times, when there is violence, there is also oppression and abuse of power. In these cases, it is the oppressed that want CPT to be present. And as Christians, we usually can't help but be on the side of the oppressed.



CPT has developed a method of social change where they ally themselves with the oppressed. CPT uses the privilege that comes with being from the dominant culture, to stand by the oppressed. CPT lends their power to the marginalized so that the voice of the suffering can be heard.



At Grassy Narrows that has meant living along side the Anishinabe who were blockading a logging road to protest clear cutting on their traditional hunting grounds. CPT was there to protect those protesting from potential violence from both the loggers and the local police. In the end, the logging stopped and a court ruling this summer stated that Ontario had no right under their treaties to grant logging licenses on traditional Anishinabe lands.



We discovered that knowledge isn't enough. Sure I could have learned all about the treatment of Indigenous persons by reading it on the Internet. I could learn by reading every detail of the legal statements and environmental damage reports. But there is more to it than knowing. I discovered that knowledge is no match for the compassion that comes from such an intense personal experience.

I found more than knowledge when I heard the anger in the voice of an old Anishinabe fisherman who told me that the government doesn't let him work. He can't fish anymore due to the mercury poisoning from the paper mill, which has closed all commercial fishing in the area and made many on the reservation sick. The hundreds of lakes around Grassy Narrows contain fish that, once fed both the local people and the tourist industry, are now too toxic to eat. It was a tragic blow to the Anishinabe economy and spirit as well as the ecology of this beautiful area.

I got more than knowledge when a strong young man, by the name of Thunder, tearfully tried to tell us what happened to his grandmother at the residential schools. Where, when she was a child, Indigenous children were physically taken away from their families and community to have their culture educated out of them. Where they were beaten if they spoke their native language. This is now known as the worst human rights violation to have happened in the history of Canada. And then to find out that a few of those schools were run by Mennonites. I could have gotten knowledge from reading about it in a book. But to experience the damage caused by this arrogance of the white man, leads to a level of compassion and understanding that books cannot provide.

Community



Our experience gained even more power as it was done in the context of community and friendship within the delegation. The whole experience was intense and life changing. But it was even more profound given that it happened in community with 11 Christians, as we struggling together to comprehend the system that makes all this suffering possible.



The first full day together we were invited to a traditional powwow in Grassy Narrows. This was a memorial powwow for an honored leader in the tribe. It was a privilege to be invited. Plus...



we were asked to cook breakfast for them that day. But by the end of the day our delegation had prepared and served 3 meals to about 150 people.



That opportunity to work together and serve the people of Grassy Narrows united us for the remainder of our time together. This little band of 11 Christian (peacemaker want-a-bees); here around a campfire at the sight of the historic blockade, hearing indigenous folk tales and telling our own life stories,



under a cold clear dark sky, lit only by the faint green glow of the northern lights and billions of stars.

In the course of two weeks we had just partially been liberated from our ignorance and racism regarding this little corner of the world.



While you look north from just behind that campfire; across one of the few mercury free lakes in the area; I will close with a quote from Lila Watson, Indigenous Australian activist: "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us walk together."