

EPISODE FOUR: A Pilgrimage of Trust on Earth

Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota, 2013



As anyone who is a teacher knows, one of its joys is seeing former students go on to do great things. And so it was for me as a seminary dean, when Rita Powell, a student from South Dakota, went back to her home diocese and began planning for a “pilgrimage of trust” to work toward reconciliation between the Lakota and Anglo people in and around the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Her inspiration came from a period she spent in residence at the Taizé Community in eastern France. For many years, thousands of young people have come to Taizé each summer to share in worship, service, and fellowship. But the brothers of the community decided they also wanted to extend their ministry of reconciliation outward, going to places on earth where tension and division between people prevail. They have gone to such places as Kolkata, India; Cape Town, South Africa; and Chicago, USA.

Back in South Dakota, Rita observed first hand the lingering distrust and animosity between the Native and Anglo populations. And in what she reluctantly calls a “vision,” she decided that people in the United States need the Taizé Community’s “energy and wisdom,” beyond the well-known style of meditative music. And so she invited several young people to go with her back to Taizé to experience for themselves what reconciled living looks like. Out of that trip, an invitation came for several brothers from Taizé to bring their model of seeking reconciliation through living in community to the badlands of the prairie.

The Pine Ridge Pilgrimage was in May of 2013, on land surrounding Christ Episcopal Church outside of Red Shirt Village. Led by Brother Alois, the abbot of Taizé, the brothers came with no plan, no agenda, except to live with the people and to listen to what they—and the Spirit—had to say. And sure enough, both showed up: over 500 pilgrims came to join in song, silence, prayer, and sharing. Participants lived in tents, and prayed three times each day in a natural outdoor amphitheater. As Margaret Watson, missionary at Eagle Butte described it:

As the sun set that first night, turning the rocks and cliffs and plateaus red and pink, the moon rose over the altar. Yes. Literally. The people sang. Dare to forgive. God will be with you. Let those who are thirsty, come.

And I wept. Tears of joy. Tears of amazement. Pent up tears. Tears I couldn't name because I didn't know their source. Tears of unknowingness. Tears that carved away a Bad Lands in my heart, exposed strong soul cliffs and washed away the unnecessary earth.

And I was not alone in weeping. And it was good.



One evening, Brother Alois presented the tribe with a piece of pottery from Taizé, made entirely out of earth from the region of Burgundy. "We wanted to bring a piece of our land to your land," he said. "But this pot is empty. You have to fill it. We did not come to bring a message or to give you advice. We want to share our gifts and listen to your words, and build a relationship."

Rita Powell is now the Episcopal Chaplain at Harvard University.

