

by Eddie Pettit

Partnership is a great concept. Having a partner, and being a partner are both important concepts in missions. Missions opportunities are more effective in reaching people with the gospel if we have partners to help us.

Don Lykins knows how important partners are. From his calling to missions in South Dakota to building a camp, working effectively requires partnerships. In the early days it was simple for Don and Teena Lykins. Don was a jet mechanic with U.S. Air, following up on his training in the air force. His life was filled with church, family, and work. Contentment was the norm, and life was good for this Rock Hill, South Carolina, couple.

One day he read about an associational mission trip to South Dakota to conduct Vacation Bible Schools on an Indian Reservation, and he and Teena joined the team. Soon they were among the Dakota Sioux teaching and working with children from early morning until night. The children did not want to leave at night, and when he took them home, he began to realize that many of these children needed more than their families could give them.

Some of the children were alone at night. Many of them did not get the proper meals needed to grow into healthy children. No one was watching after these children.

One little girl in particular caught his attention. Her name was Rosie, and for three days she was shy, refusing to smile or join in, but finally she smiled. Don named her Dakota Sunshine, and from that moment his heart was no longer in the jet repair business. God was beginning a work that continues today.

All short-term mission trips end, and as this one came to a close the children wanted to know if Don and Teena would come back. Like so many people do, Don said he would return the next year. The children responded, "Everyone tells us that, but no one ever comes back."

It has always been hard for me to get the pictures of the children out of my mind after a mission trip. Upon returning Don found he could not forget the children's faces, their poverty, their sad eyes, and their neglect. Soon he and Teena were raising money for coats to send to South Dakota, and before winter he and Teena flew back and delivered 60 coats to children who are always cold when the winter winds began to blow. Word spread quickly among the Dakota Sioux: Don and Teena had returned.

In the weeks and months that followed, Don began to pray like he had never prayed before. "What can I do to make a difference?" he prayed, not knowing how a jet mechanic could impact a people for Christ.

Prayer can be a perplexing thing for us. We pray, God answers, and we sometimes wonder if it is really Him. Don decided to "put out the fleece." He began praying that if God wanted him to move to South Dakota He would have to get Don laid off from his work at U.S. Air. This was in 2001, and soon after September 11, U.S. Air asked for workers to take a voluntary lay off. Still wondering if this was God, Don threw out one more request. "God, if this is your leading, then let Teena feel this call, and then bring this up, and say let's go."

You guessed it. She brought it up, and soon they were preparing a donated 1972 Airstream Travel Trailer to move to South Dakota with four kids, one dog, and one cat. They were to live in this trailer for several years until they could buy a place to live.

In God's timing, a partner was emerging. Mike O'dell, the Director of Missions for the York Baptist Association in Rock Hill, South Carolina, heard what Don and Teena were doing, and the York Baptist Association caught the vision, entering into a five-year partnership with Don and Teena.

Soon teams from the Rock Hill area were aware of the opportunities. In the first year, seven churches and more than 150 people went to work with churches in the Lake Traverse Reservation. Don was gaining respect and support from the Dakota Sioux, and soon Teena saw the perfect “house” for them.

Upon inspection, Don saw this “house” was more like a barn. It had actually been constructed to be a restaurant, but was merely a shell that had never been completed. With the help of volunteer teams, this building became a home for the Lykins. The downstairs became the headquarters for Dakota Sonshine, housing a full commercial kitchen, and a large area that would develop into a church a few years later.

Dakota Sonshine now owns 33 more acres, a livery stable built by college students, a tack room, an outdoor chapel, a tee pee area, and plans to build a camp using an old west town motif. With very few activities for the children, a camp was the most obvious need to help bring the Dakotas to Christ, while involving them in outdoor activities that are such a part of their lives.

A Bible study began two years ago has become a church plant with 40 people in attendance. In an area where so much prejudice exists, this congregation has broken through some barriers with 60 percent white and 40 percent Dakota Sioux.

There is still much to do, both in developing a camp for children, and in building bridges where people can come to Christ. A dream is becoming a reality, a partnership has advanced the gospel, and the reality of people working together through associational missions to reach people many miles away with the gospel is yet another example of the way Baptists advance the kingdom of God through cooperation.

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