

Native American COVID-19 Relief Project

A collaborative effort of the Synod of the Southwest and the Presbytery of Grand Canyon

October 15, 2020



Following the very successful Gathering of Native American leaders (the Gathering) from the churches and chapels throughout the Synod of the Southwest (the Synod) in late September, 2019, the Synod's Native American Ministries Coordinating Committee (NAMCC) conducted a debrief. The discussions centered around what should be the next steps in serving our Native American siblings based on the learnings taken from the Gathering. The NAMCC came together in late January to engage in these discussions and considered the ongoing support and validity of continuing the Native American Theocademy project (NA Theocademy) and how it would be overseen by the NAMCC with the resignation of its main staff support, the Synod's Native American Consultant. We also discussed how we would follow-up with our Native American siblings on the Doctrine of Discovery and its impact on our Native American communities. We had planned on a next face-to-face meeting to take place in early April. Then, in early March, COVID-19 hit the United States and the world changed and all scheduled meetings and plans came to a halt.

In April, the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board (PMAB) met and at the behest of the Rev. Judith Wellington, a member of PMAB and the Synod's former Native American Consultant, the PMAB considered whether it should "think about asking the ASG [the Administrative Support Group of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) A Corp] President and board to consider reallocation of funds from the sale of the [Ghost Ranch] Santa Fe property in the Southwest...to support ministry among the indigenous people of the Southwest particularly in the way of funding internet services". Following the Board's discussion on the matter, the PMAB took the following action: "that communication be established with the Synod of the Southwest and its four presbyteries concerning this critical need immediately; and that the PMA President/Executive Director and Senior Staff identify and/or repurpose existing funds to be used for this serious matter."

Thus began a series of meetings of the NAMCC on whether or how it might respond to this action. After much discussion (three virtual meetings in successive weeks in May), the NAMCC recognized that addressing the internet and digital resources was beyond our ability to significantly impact the problem and that, in fact, the Navajo Nation and other tribal pueblos and communities were already working to address this need, though slowly given the huge financial resources needed to facilitate such an endeavor. However, the NAMCC members concluded that given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the indigenous peoples within the Synod (home to 20 Native American churches and 9 Native American chapels), addressing the issues of food insecurity was a better and more effective use of effort, time and money. We note that all but three of these churches and chapels are located within the bounds of the Presbyteries of de Cristo and Grand Canyon. Arizona is home to 19 churches and 7 chapels serving Native American communities and three are located within the bounds of the Presbytery of Santa Fe – New Mexico with 1 church and 2 chapels. Of those, 8 churches and 2 chapels are located within the bounds of the Navajo Nation. Likewise, the closure to weekly worship services has had a disproportionate effect on these churches and chapels, many of which are extremely small. Therefore, the ability to support the ongoing use of those churches and chapels, which serve as community centers, and the few presbytery-assigned pastors and commissioned pastors (all of whom are part-time) who serve those communities was also considered to be of high importance during this difficult time.

As a result, the NAMCC, with input from leaders of the Presbyteries of de Cristo and Grand Canyon, the Navajo Nation and the Laguna Pueblo, submitted a grant proposal, the Synod of the Southwest Native American COVID-19 Project (the Project) to the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA). The proposal requested significant support to enable monthly food distributions for 200 Native American families throughout the Synod, financial support to cover the costs of utilities for the Native American churches and chapels and financial support of the pastors and commissioned pastors serving those communities. The Project would provide monthly support from July 2020 through December 2020.

The PMA, through its Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Program (PDA) in less than 30 days processed and approved a \$250,000 grant toward a Project budget of \$372,000 and PMA immediately released \$125,000 of the grant to the Synod. At the same time, the Synod of the Southwest allocated \$25,000 toward the Project and the Presbytery of Grand Canyon sought and received a PDA grant of \$25,000 for this purpose as well. This left the Synod needing to raise an additional \$72,000 to cover the anticipated costs of the Project.

Thanks to the generosity of Presbyterians both within the Synod and throughout the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), as of October 3, 2020, \$65,084.50 has been received in donations and an additional \$6,915.50 remains to be raised. Thus, of the \$372,000 funding originally forecast to be raised for this project, we have raised, including the PMA grant, \$365,084.50. Thanks to the help of the Presbytery of Grand Canyon, a donation opportunity has been provided on their website to make credit card donations and thanks also to the Foundation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in facilitating this online donation technology. We further note that the contributions made through the Presbytery of Grand Canyon ACH opportunity are earmarked specifically for the Navajo Nation portion of the Project. To this end, checks made payable to the Synod of the Southwest or the Grand Canyon Presbytery that provide donations to this Project are used to underwrite any and all Project related costs, unless otherwise earmarked for particular areas served by the Project and so indicated on the check.

Finally, given that we under-budgeted the cost of the project by approximately \$28,000, we actually need to raise at least \$35,000 more. In reality, we anticipate the total cost of the project will be \$400,000, as in our haste to respond to the PMAB's action, we did not include all the incidental costs associated with such a massive undertaking. Items such as gloves, water, masks, labels, pens, boxes, pallets, delivery truck rentals, lifts, hand sanitizer, etc. These are all the costs associated with the actual preparation and delivery of the food to the six locations throughout the Synod and to accommodate, safely, the 100 volunteers needed each month to actually prepare the boxes for distribution. The truth is that we had no idea what we were getting into. But we believe that all involved agree it is definitely worth the effort.

As of October 3, 2020, we have spent the following in support of the food insecurity portion of the program: \$90,075.38 on food and household supplies; \$37,523.50 on grocery store gift cards; and \$7,271.48 in miscellaneous expenses to facilitate the distribution of food program within the overall project. This does not include the cost of having an onsite project manager, the Rev. Daniel Albertson, to manage the receipt, packaging, preparation and loading of the food and supplies for distribution. His compensation is coming directly from the Synod's operating budget, in addition to the \$25,000 the Synod donated as the initial seed grant.



We note that each family will receive, monthly, six boxes of food and supplies (sufficient to support a family for a month), and a case of water. Large bags of dog food are also distributed. Initially, the dog food was allocated on a site by site allocation, rather than to individual families, allowing the community leaders to distribute the bags of





dog food as they deemed most appropriate. We learned after the first delivery, that, in fact, each family needed to receive a bag of dog food as dogs are not just pets for many of our Native American families, they are a part of the family “work force” used to herd their livestock, principally sheep.



The result is that we prepare 1,200 boxes of food and supplies each month, plus the water and dog food. Each delivery includes in excess of 35,000 pounds each month, not including the water and dog food. The boxes are then delivered to 5 Native American Presbyterian church sites on the Navajo Nation and one site on the Tohono O’odham Nation, serving a total of 12 Native American churches/chapels and their surrounding communities.



Further, to ensure that we have the correct type, size and number of dry goods, we find it necessary to purchase, at wholesale with a discount, all the items directly from a big box store. The actual contents of the boxes are based on recommendations from the Native American community as to what types and quantities of food they need and use. Thus, we have discouraged local food drives in support of the Project. All family sets of boxes are identical.



Nonetheless, during this time many churches have held food drives and made deliveries independently to other sites, particularly on the Navajo Nation. We are grateful, as we are certain our Native American siblings are, for these supplemental food drives, as our serving 200 families only begins to scratch the surface of the need.



In late August we also distributed almost \$38,000 in Food Gift cards to 225 families, of which 20 are located on the Laguna Pueblo. And in September we distributed an additional \$4,000 in gift cards to the Laguna Pueblo. This enables families to purchase, as they are able, perishable items that we are unable to include in our food distributions. It was also decided that because the Laguna Pueblo community does have access to local, on-pueblo grocery stores and a big box store just outside the Pueblo where families can more easily obtain the needed food and supplies the norm would be to provide our Laguna families with



gift grocery cards instead of food boxes.



As previously noted, the Synod has also employed an independent contractor (independent of the Project budget) to oversee the food distribution part of the Project. This individual is responsible for coordinating the hundreds of volunteers needed to prepare the boxes of food and supplies for distribution and delivery, which volunteers donate



something close to **1,000 person-hours** for each distribution, working over a seven day period. Without the work of the volunteers, this task would be impossible to accomplish and we are grateful for their willingness to serve!



Of course, most of those volunteers came to us from the Presbytery of Grand Canyon and we are grateful for each of them and for their fearless leader, Brad Munroe, who in August personally delivered a truck load of food and supplies (114 boxes) from Phoenix to our siblings on the Tohono O'odham



Nation at Sells, Arizona. And we are also exceedingly thankful to Pastor Gale Watkins, and the session of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Phoenix, and to Pastor Chris Woodard, and the session of Valley Presbyterian Church in Paradise Valley, for providing the spaces needed to accomplish this gargantuan task. In subsequent months, we are hopeful that other churches will provide the space needed to prepare the food and supplies for shipment.



Finally, we are grateful to St. Mary's Food Bank who has graciously picked up and delivered the food supplies to our sites within the Navajo Nation, at no cost! Without this service, our costs would have been much higher and the task might have been insurmountable. Thank you St. Mary's!



Again, we are grateful for your interest in this Project and your willingness to donate of your funds and/or time. We also covet your prayers that our efforts will serve well our Native American siblings throughout the Synod of the Southwest as we continue this work through December, 2020.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!

If you are interested in volunteering of your time to assist in the preparation, packaging or loading of the food boxes and live in the greater Phoenix area, please contact Sharon Yates at (520) 791-9600. We anticipate needing volunteers the weeks of October 19th, November 16th and December 14th.
