

Oklahoma bound

United Methodist Church members to help Native Americans

By Helen Prunty Krisplen
CRIER CORRESPONDENT

The caring, and cooperative spirit of helping others will be a tradition in action once again as the United Methodist Church in Hopkinton this time sends a team of volunteers to the Cookson Hills Center in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains in Cookson, Oklahoma.

The team will help make needed repairs, and assist in other essential ways at this large medical center that serves many Native Americans, mostly from the Cherokee tribe.

As part of the Volunteers in Mission (VIM) this team of no more than twenty volunteers led by John Chickering of Franklin, Massachusetts, will fly to Oklahoma and spend one week in July from the 18-24, to help the rural, low income people in northeastern Oklahoma.

The trip, which costs each volunteer \$800, is sponsored by volunteers themselves through fundraising efforts such as car washes and church dinners, outreach to family and friends and from donations from local businesses.

"We will be assigned work by the center when we arrive. I expect we'll be engaged in multiple activities which could include home repair for local residents, grounds keeping, facility improvements, or visitation, and counseling," Chickering said.

According to Chickering, the center was

established in 1948 by the United Methodist Women in Oklahoma. The center began as a single medical clinic on one acre. It now operates with 12 buildings on 20 acres at the original site. "Ongoing services include such things as a thrift store, food pantry, craft co-op, home repair, counseling, emergency assistance for housing, and employment, a Christmas store, children, youth, and adult education programs, and a Health Information Center," he said.

Chickering says he learned of the site from his daughter, Jennifer, who was assigned there as a United Methodist Missionary this past October. Although there are no youth age volunteers on this trip, Chickering says, "I've led several similar VIM trips to do restoration in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. They've (youth) jumped right in and helped, taking on or helping on most jobs. For example, both of our daughters now know how to hang dry-wall. And one other thing, use of the power tools is not limited to just the men. Anyone with proper safety instruction can use the pneumatic nail gun."

There are many ways to serve the needs of people in dire straits, and to earn the thanks of a grateful recipient is a wonderful feeling, a feeling Chickering has experienced firsthand. "The best part about leading the team is first and foremost knowing that I and my family are doing what God wants us to be doing," he said. "In the recent trips to Mis-

issippi, a couple of other things bear mentioning. One is the personal and spiritual growth. Another is the friendship both with team members as well as with the people at the sites where we work."

He continued, "I remember one woman who lost her house in the hurricane. During the week we were there (two and a half years after the storm) we primed and painted her walls and ceilings, then installed the flooring. As we finished both of those stages, we invited her in from her trailer to see the progress.

She just stood there and wept. The tears were probably a mix of joy, and relief, thanks, and perhaps some sense of disbelief that after so long in a trailer, she could see her new home finally coming together. All she could say was thank you over and over again."

Those moments can teach us all what those words can really mean.

Church members are helping in many ways, raising funds to finance the trip, purchasing building material, and offering to provide rides to and from the airport.

The church is also asking for help from the community. Anyone who wishes to make a cash donation may send a check, payable to the Grace United Methodist Church with "Oklahoma Mission" on the memo line. Donations may be mailed to Grace UMC, 61 Wood St., Hopkinton, MA 01748.