

A “Heart for Human Care”

Rev. Rick Jones, chaplain at Dakota Boys and Girls Ranch, received the call to

ministry during a youth group mission trip when he was in high school. The group traveled to San Francisco where they helped out in a soup kitchen.

At that time in San Francisco, there were a lot of working class homeless people. The cost of living was so high that people would have full time jobs but couldn't afford to have a house. They could afford rent or food, but not both.

“So this pastor was running the soup kitchen. His parish was ready to close,” Pastor Rick said. “He had hardly anybody in the pews on Sunday mornings. There wasn't a lot of practical hope for the situation, so I asked him why he was doing this. Why he didn't ask to be placed somewhere else?”

“When you go out there and talk to people after they go through the line, you will know why I stay,” the pastor

answered.

So he went out and talked to the people, where he saw how the soup kitchen was making a difference in people's lives. “You are giving them something they aren't getting anywhere else,” Pastor Rick said. “Something that will change their lives. That is a priceless thing to be involved with, and something I couldn't pass up.” From that moment, Pastor Rick knew he wanted to be in ministry. He didn't know exactly how, or in what capacity, but he knew he was being called to the ministry.

While Pastor Rick ended up taking the pastor route—going through seminary and becoming ordained as a pastor of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS)—he didn't stray far from the type of work he was doing at the soup kitchen when he first received the call.

Pastor Rick was first introduced to the Dakota Boys and Girls Ranch while in seminary at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, MO. For his required vicarage year, he was sent



Pastor Rick shows Christ's love to the children at Dakota Boys and Girls Ranch through his compassion, gentleness, and listening.

to Our Saviors Lutheran Church in Minot, where part of the vicar's role was to conduct spiritual life groups, chapel services, and other duties at the Ranch.

"On vicarage, when I got that little introduction, that's when I realized this is a special place. Even if I hadn't got the call here, the Ranch would have been a special place to me and I would have found ways to be a part of the Ranch because it is just that amazing

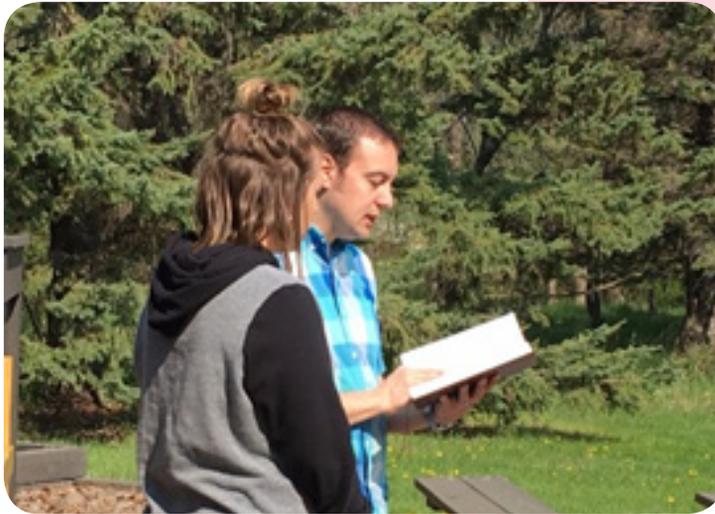
what we are able to do here and how we are able to help these kids. The work we do is so important." When he completed seminary and it was time for the call process, Pastor Rick and his wife, Betsy, were delighted to come back to North Dakota.

"Some people would be resentful being sent to North Dakota. Some pastors would even be resentful being sent somewhere other than a parish, but for me it was 'No, you don't understand. I get to go back. I get to go back to Dakota Boys and Girls Ranch and be involved in a much larger capacity. This is a great thing!'"

Pastor Rick's ecclesiastic supervisor agrees that the Ranch is a great fit. "Pastor Rick has a heart for ministry, a heart for human care," said Rev. Dr. James A. Baneck, President of the North Dakota District of the LCMS. "He shows Christ's love through his compassion, his gentleness, his listening. He cares for the kids and shows it by not being judgmental. He doesn't put them down. He sits down

with them face-to-face and has a good conversation."

In addition to Chapel and one-on-one spiritual counseling, Pastor Rick builds relationships with the kids by sharing



A 15-year-old girl who recently completed treatment asked Pastor Rick to affirm her baptism in the prayer garden before she left.

meals with them. "It sounds really silly, but I get to know the kids by eating lunch with them. We have five cottages so I sit with a different cottage every day. I ask them questions. See how their day is going, and it builds from there. 'Pastor Rick, will you come see me today after school?' 'Pastor Rick, will you pray for me?' 'Pastor Rick, my mom is going through this, will you pray for her?' Some of the pastors in the kids' lives have been sources of fear and intimidation, so I try to break down those barriers."

Pastor Rick believes the Ranch is full of amazing kids with incredible potential.

"Do our kids have behaviors? Absolutely. But where are those behaviors coming from? What is motivating them? When you unpack that you realize our kids are victims. Victims of physical abuse, sexual abuse, poverty, family circumstances, developmental delays, fetal alcohol syndrome, and more. They don't know any other way through a problem.

That's the way they've been taught." Through building relationships with Pastor Rick, their youth care workers, and their therapists, kids at the Ranch learn who they really are. "They learn they have a Heavenly Father who loves them just the way they are and who knows the pain they have gone through, who sent His Son to experience that pain and remove it from their lives," Pastor Rick said. "Slowly they come back to reality and they are able to function as the joyful children they are intended to be."

True Transformation Starts with Authentic Love

When asked about the child at the Ranch that has impacted him the most, Pastor Rick tells about a young woman we'll call Sara.

"She was so physically abused, so sexually abused, that she didn't want to be a human anymore. She acted out like an animal," Pastor Rick said. "She pretended to be an animal."

Sara's parents had locked her in a cage for days at a time, with no food, water, or clothing. She only survived by eating the cat's food. This abuse went on for so long that Sara was unable to interact with others. She came to the Ranch pretending to be a cat.

It took a long time, and lots of love, nurturing, and therapy, but Sara slowly came out of her shell. She started to talk instead of hiss and meow. She started to show interest in the people around her and in God's mercy. Before she left, Sara asked Pastor Rick if he would baptize her.