

## ***The Mission to Wemindji, 2004***

*by Bill Evans*

A friend of mine is a clergy member of *Partners in Mission*. The laymen who were to accompany him to Wemindji had to cancel shortly before the Mission. He called me a few days before departure and asked if I could go. That call came just 1 day after I had prayed that God would show me what to do in his kingdom here on earth in the future. So I asked my son Peter's grandmother to care for him (she was delighted) while the Rev. Bruce Glencross and I sped north to James Bay. I knew again Providence in my life.

It is a full day's drive north (800 km) from Montreal to Matagami where we stayed the night. After Matagami (another 625km) there are no more police. The roads are patrolled by grey wolves, bear, porcupine and caribou. We saw these on or by the James Bay Highway. After Matagami the next gas station is 381 km., north. The land is stark but beautiful. In the past two decades some of the vast forests burned. It took 2 hours in the car to pass these areas. The fires in BC last summer pale in comparison to the scope of the forest fires around James Bay. While many hunting camps were burned, I expect it fair to say that no villages were burned. The Wemindji village itself is new; the settlement began 45 years ago. The band moved north 50 Km from their old site of Old Factory as they needed a better place to live, hunt, fish and with better forests for firewood as well as river access to James Bay. No house or public building is older than 25 years. While the very early houses were mobile homes the new housing is mostly squat well-insulated bungalows, band council housing. Virtually everyone lives in (rents) band council homes. In the last few years a few owner-occupied houses have sprung up - a new program.

The Cree Nation of Wemindji prospers as perhaps no other first nations community in the North. They have a large school, medical clinic, community center, indoor rink, and a recreation center with an indoor pool. A new Sportsplex is being built with a completion date in February, with many young Cree men working as steeplejacks or operating heavy equipment. The band council is perceived as smart and making smart decisions. The people feel their James Bay treaty (hydro-electricity) money is well spent. Perhaps one central issue is complacency. It becomes easy to forget about God when the game and fish are plentiful and the people are now relatively healthy. Have we read this before in scripture? You rise in the morning when the birds awaken you and have breakfast and prayer. By 9 a.m. one can look outside and see what kind of a day it is. The kind of day it is has a great deal to say about what you will do on any given day.

If the wind is strong you might venture into the bush for trapping or hunting. If the weather is calm you might take your canoe out onto the bay for fishing and shooting waterfowl, and thereby escape the black flies. If you are in a newer trade of construction or heavy machinery operation then the weather plays less of a role. However enclosing your construction project before the first snow is a necessity. Wemindji is perhaps the last place I know where the people are respected as great hunters, fishers and trappers. The James Bay treaties allow this to happen. Everyone has a freezer and my best guess is that every freezer is full of game right now. Fourteen hundred kilometers north of Montreal is a different world. The men can be described as broad at the shoulder and narrow at the hip. One good hunter would take perhaps 4 moose, 150 rabbits, dozens of geese and boats full of fish. His wife and those in his extended family would use their 16 foot tepee frequently to smoke these catches from Providence. It is as essential to family life as the canoe is to the hunter's life. Some women do this in addition to having jobs in the village such as teller, cashier or manager. Save breakfast, all meals are cooked by roasting over a 4 foot wood fire in her tepee, but only if there is wild meat to cook. At our first evening meal the caribou stew was cooked over the fire all day long. Game is hung by cords or ropes and roasted. Every day we were at the mission, roasted game was provided for us. There is no butcher shop in Wemindji. The local grocery store stocks a minimum of the cuts of meat we see in Montreal and usually for the non-native palate.

Young people are in school all day. It is one of the few things in town that runs by a clock. Few other things start at 9 a.m. They know little of their grandfather's ways. They go to the Cree survival camps as a part of the School curriculum. My impression was that they wander around like tourists, much as our kids would. I have never known a place where the distance between generations is so great. There is an Anglican priest in Wemindji named Samuel Hughboy. He bears his 88 years well, carries himself straight, having many children and many more grandchildren. He is not prone to wander. Samuel is of the ancient priesthood Bishop Ambrose of Milan wrote about in the 4th Century. There was a time in the church when we had wooden chalices and golden priests. When his son died, he was asked what had caused his death. Samuel gives no quarter to the Devil and no credit. Samuel said it is the Lord who has taken him. Never was a son buried with greater ceremony nor more days of prayer than Samuel's son. Samuel has the earned respect of being a religious and cultural elder. Samuel reminds me of a Biblical character, Zechariah, of Luke 1:5, "righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." Who else could one say this of today. We, also, treated him with the greatest of respect. Samuel is also an elder, and here the church elders are respected. He may not know what his grandchildren are

doing on computers and they may not know what he thinks, but they respect him. They know there are good reasons for the decisions he makes, and they would never oppose him. They might choose another path but not openly oppose or disrespect him. The Cree nation differs from anything we have known.

In all matters concerning religion the Band Council seeks the church elders for guidance. The Band Council's writ runs absolute in the Village. While the bylaws prohibit alcohol, tradition dictates divorce and remarriage are not allowed. There is no liquor sold in Wemindji, not anywhere. While the Council's Bylaws are in fact law, the Band Police enforce the law as the Band Council determines and regularly meet with the SQ and other representatives of Quebec Law. The Band Council asked the people what church they wanted in Wemindji; the church elders said Anglican. This is not unusual as these Cree have been Anglican for 350 years. So the band council built a log church and a rectory. They own them and everything in them. The Parish is self-supporting. If Bishop Caleb Lawrence of Moosonee sends a priest, the band council reimburses his stipend. This church is the only church in the village. Wemindji has a very high birth rate (27 baptisms last year in a village of 1200) The priest is on call 24/7 when in town to say the least. Weddings can be a 2 or 3 day event at Wemindji. Cree custom states when weddings should be held so that parties do not extend into Sunday. The Lord's Day Act is in full force in Wemindji. Mind you stores are open Sunday afternoon. Our hosts were unable to get up to prepare breakfast on the Saturday after a wedding as a wedding surely calls for a party and a party in Wemindji involves dance. It was the Scottish Reels that may have exhausted them! Denise Georgekish, widow of the fiddler Frederick, gave me a tape of her late husband's fiddle music. It's lively. I dare say they danced all night.

The current priest's responsibility (the Rev Chris Davis) stretches well beyond the Wemindji Category 1 and 2 Aboriginal lands. While in town he doesn't have days off. Chris, and Winsome his wife, travel south for a week every three months or so, to see their own children. Chris Davis speaks Western (James Bay) Cree but noted to me that one often confuses this with the Cree dialect spoken in Wemindji. He is even more at a loss with Moose Factory Cree. He reads the liturgy from a book using roman lettering that transliterates the language to enunciate Cree words. In Wemindji they would understand why Modern Israel chose Hebrew to be their language. The old ways and tradition matter. I look at the faith of the fathers and their ways and say when they pass on, their faith and heritage will pass on with them. The first Fur Post the Hudson's Bay Company built was at Moose Factory, the southern end of James Bay, in 1673. The Church Missionary Society came there in time and spread the Gospel among the Cree.

They translated prayer books, hymn books, song book and the Bible into that Cree. Only a few young people understand it and they don't come to church, certainly not the 11:00 a.m. service. Some might come for the 3:00 p.m. (in the local language) or the 7:00pm. service usually in English. When they do come for special events, they may not understand what is happening. The Rev Chris Davis told me that because of the birth rate, the four largest parishes in Moosonee are Cree. Soon they will dominate the Anglican rolls of that Diocese. The Cree Nations comprise the third largest language group in Canada. I wonder to myself if they are now taking back the land? Wemindji is children. In a village of 1200, there are 300 children in school. Half of them have cable TV, the same number have computers and internet connections. The elders do not comprehend what they are doing. The children do not know what the elders are thinking.

For a decade or so I was an associate of The Navigators. For the Navs one of the big questions is, What is the need of the hour? Exactly what is it that is needed which, if it were achieved, would allow the Gospel and the Kingdom to advance? In Wemindji, I think it would be this: Luke 1:17. To turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children. Why do I think that? Subsequent to my returning a friend in Wemindji wrote: It is Khayden Otter from Waswanipi who was beaten by a foster parent, a native from out west. Khayden and his family recently visited all the Cree communities to raise awareness about violence toward children and raise money for his ongoing rehabilitation. I think he was at Montreal Children's and will be returning there for follow-up. If you enter his name in your search engine it will take you to his website for more info. He was hospitalized for 7 months of surgery and rehab. His story was broadcast by the CBC.

### ***The Mission***

The priest and his wife in Wemindji are busy folk. Not least of all because they had a Mission to prepare and run. They coordinated the parishioners efforts roasting rabbits and wild geese, caribou, moose in order to feed the Team of 8. Bruce and I found we were part of that Team upon arrival! The caribou was the best eating. I put on 5 pounds in 8 days, all protein. Meat is possibly 65% of the diet. Meat and Bannock (bread) are the staples of life. Local businesses were asked to provide snacks for 50 - 100+ each evening. There are about 27 infant baptisms a year. In the last year 17 people died. They died, from cancer, heart disease and accidents. Samuel's son died of cancer at age 57. Every family in the village was touched by death in the last year. Our Missioners were the Rev Dale and Diane Lang from Taber, Alberta. It was their 17 year old Jason who was shot dead in the high school four years ago, by a 14 year old boy he did not

even know, a week after Columbine. The boy thought the massacre in Columbine was very, very cool. The Lang's message (they both spoke) concerned losing a loved one; finding forgiveness; and finding purpose in life with God under the title "Forgiveness is Freedom". Abuse at the residential schools is another current issue in Wemindji. There were a couple of long sheets of newsprint on the walls of the community center. They recount being forced to speak English in school and never Cree, beatings, cruelty and sexual abuse. The irony is that worship in this Cree endures, certainly until this generation passes. I was asked to share my testimony the first night of the mission. Another friend asked me to take it easy because my testimony is fairly shattering stuff. I asked the Lord what to share and sensed God saying, "The time for hiding is past, get it all out, Bill". So I did. Nancy is a Cree elder who translated for me. She was great, yet she still had to sit down to translate for Dale Lang's story of his son's murder afterward. Death is not a casual subject here. About 50 came the first night and the number grew each evening. By the last night the community center seemed packed. They come to church or a Mission much as the Magi of old did for Jesus; they come late!

Diane Lang spoke twice and the second time she spoke, she gave an altar call. The Cree people are quiet and in some ways very private. In Cree culture you do not display yourself. One would not go forward at an altar call, so some of the women escorted Diane around the auditorium to pray for those who indeed gave their lives to Christ. These evangelistic missions occur every year now. While it might be the case that 20% of the village regularly attend church, 100% are Anglican! The last night of the mission, right at the end, we asked the elders to come up for prayer. They all gathered in a semi-circle. I asked the AV operator if this had happened before. He said, "Sure! The elders have been prayed with before". A friend turned to me on her toes and said, "No, not like this they haven't!!"

There is a man of the village named Henry, a young Cree man with a family. He is on fire for the Lord. Henry has and continues to have a burden for the Gospel and for the youth. On the third night of the Mission Rev. Chris Davis asked him to play his guitar and sing praise songs after the Mission talk. His singing was anointed and he spoke with power and conviction. I remain very impressed with Henry. Wemindji is a hard place to leave forever. It gets in your blood. The Revival we pray for gets in your blood. Village pictures remain in your mind long past the seeing. Can you be hooked on a place without truly knowing it? I believe I might be. Does your heart burn within you?

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