

# Walk with Us for a While

BY MOLLY CALLAGHAN



Catholic Missions In Canada

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Callaghan, Molly, 1930-

Walk with us for a while / Molly Callaghan.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-9809537-1-8

1. Callaghan, Molly, 1930-. 2. St. Bernadette Church (Sandy Lake, Ont.)—History. 3. Ojibwa Indians—Ontario—Sandy Lake Indian Reserve No. 88—Biography. 4. Ojibwa Indians—Ontario—Sandy Lake Indian Reserve No. 88—Social life and customs—20th century. 5. Lay missionaries—Catholic Church—Biography. 6. Sandy Lake Indian Reserve No. 88 (Ont.)—Biography. I. Catholic Missions in Canada II. Title.

BV2815.O5C34 2009

266.2713112

C2009-904180-4

Published by Catholic Missions In Canada

201-1155 Yonge Street, Toronto, Ontario M4T 1W2

Tel: 416-934-3424 Fax: 416-934-3425

Toll-free: 1 (866) YES-CMIC (937-2642)

[www.cmic.info](http://www.cmic.info)

E-Book Design: Kyle Schruder/Fresh Art and Design

Editor: Patria C. Rivera

“We always knew what had to be done,  
we just needed someone to  
walk with us for a while  
and tell us we were doing it right.”

Tom Linklater  
Sandy Lake, Ontario

∞ FOREWORD ∞

It is in the *details* that we appreciate the art. That is what I thought when I had read this charming and revealing treatment of missionary life.

Molly Callaghan has opened up her precious memory to share with us the details that give us a real understanding of God in an isolated or faraway place. The little joys and difficulties of the everyday life, the encounters with new experiences of faith, the happy and humorous situations, and especially the demands for improvisation and creativity on the part of the faith-sharer—all these were part of the missionary journey of Deacon Bill and Molly Callaghan.

We appreciate Molly's sharing and her clear expression of how to work out God's will in faith while loving those that God loves as she and her husband served as Catholic missionaries at an isolated mission in Canada.

In thanking Bill and Molly Callaghan for the work they did, as expressed in the work, we are paying tribute to all the many Canadian missionaries whose stories of dedication are similar to those found in these pages.

Father Philip Kennedy  
President  
Catholic Missions In Canada

We dedicate this book to all missionaries everywhere,  
to the faith-filled people they serve,  
and to the generous benefactors who support them  
both spiritually and financially.

❧ CHAPTER 1 ❧  
*Our Love Story*

Shortly after our fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration, Bill and I were invited to write our love story for *Mission Highlights*, a newsletter published by Catholic Missions In Canada.

The first thought that came to mind: who would want to read our love story? It was important to us, of course, but would others find it interesting? The editor, Patria Rivera, was very encouraging, so rather reluctantly, we agreed to try. How does one condense fifty years of living into six hundred words or less? It was not easy. We hope you enjoy the result.

Our love story is actually the story of a love triangle: love for God, love for each other, and God's love for us.

We met at my high school prom in June. I was a young, impressionable seventeen-year-old. He was twenty-five, the handsome older man escorting my classmate. He had been in the seminary for five years and had discerned that God was not calling him to the priesthood. That New Year's Eve, he asked me to "go steady."

Two years later, we were married.

On our honeymoon, we travelled to Ottawa, Montreal and Quebec City. At St. Anne de Beaupre Shrine, our prayer was that God would bless our marriage with children. God did! Ten, to be exact, plus the two we lost—our little angels in heaven.

Often, times were tough: sickness, accidents, never enough money, never enough time...all the stresses and strains of a busy family life. Underlying it all was the strength and peace of knowing that God was always there, the first partner in our love triangle.

We became involved in whichever parish we were living at the time.

One Sunday, for some forgotten reason, we attended different Masses. When Bill returned, I said, "You know, Bill, it seems that we are happiest when we are working together for the Lord. Do you think you should be looking into the Permanent Diaconate?" "Funny you should say that," he replied. "Our pastor has just asked me the same question."

So began a new phase in our love triangle. Bill was ordained a deacon on July 19, 1980. Ordination has brought many blessings to our marriage and

family. He has been privileged to witness the marriages of many of our children and has baptized most of our thirty-five grandchildren.

When Bill and I retired from the Toronto Catholic District School Board, we enjoyed a holiday in Florida and then offered our services to the Northern missions.

We were thrilled when Archbishop Peter Sutton, O.M.I., invited us to serve in the Archdiocese of Keewatin-Le Pas at St. Bernadette Mission in Sandy Lake, Ontario, and then at St. Maria Goretti parish in Lynn Lake, Manitoba.

After three years of us being away, our grandchildren complained: "We kind of remember what Grandma looks like, but we've forgotten what Grampa looks like." Obviously, it was time to return home to family.

Several years later, Bishop Gerald Wiesner of Prince George diocese invited us to serve at St. Patrick's parish in McBride, British Columbia.

Our missionary adventures were a wonderful way to work together for the Lord. Living away from family drew us closer together. We depended on and supported each other more than ever. Our ministry truly was a joint effort of all three partners in our love triangle.

After two years in McBride, we are again home celebrating time with family.

One Christmas, a son and a daughter-in-law gave us a beautiful picture that hangs in our dining room today. The inscription on it has become almost a family motto. It reads: "Our family is a circle of strength and love. With every birth and every union, the circle grows. Each joy shared, adds more love. Each crisis faced together makes the circle stronger."

On September 30, 2000, Bill and I celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary.

What a rich fifty years it has been! The love we felt for each other on our wedding day was as nothing compared to the deep abiding love we share today.

The same might also be said for the love we share with the first partner in our love triangle.

❧ CHAPTER 2 ❧

## *How it All Began*

**I**t all began shortly after Bill retired. He seemed busier than ever, as chaplain at Holy Cross Cemetery in Toronto, where in one day he would have twelve interments. His handyman and landscaping business was also booming. This started out as a favour to a neighbor who had difficulty finding someone to do yard work. It could easily have expanded into a full-time occupation.

As well, one of us or the other, or both of us, seemed to be out every evening of the week. There were meetings to attend, workshops and marriage preparation sessions to facilitate. We felt like we were on a never-ending merry-go-round. The only way to get off seemed to be to get out of town!

At the beginning of 1990, we warned all the organizations we were involved with that we would be unavailable the following year.

We had no concrete plans, no idea of what 1991 might hold. However, a very pleasant holiday in Panama City Beach, Florida, in February of 1990, led to the idea that a three-month vacation in the sunny South might be a good way to start a sabbatical year. This would rest our tired bodies and overworked minds and set the creative juices flowing again.

So, before leaving Florida, we reserved a lovely condominium from January to April 1991. It overlooked the Gulf of Mexico. That took care of the first quarter of 1991.

Then there was a conference on Corporate Discernment we wanted to attend in San Francisco. This could begin to address the study aspect of a sabbatical, but what about the rest of the year? We couldn't just sit and twiddle our thumbs at home, because the phone kept ringing. To this point, we obviously hadn't learned to say "No!"

One sunny September day in 1990, the mailman delivered a magazine containing an article about Via Veritas Vita (or the Way, the Truth and the Life). Here was a good description of this organization sponsored by the Archdiocese of Toronto. It spoke of the Martha/Mary/Joseph work of some of the Via Veritas volunteers in Canadian missions. This reminded us of the directors of Via Veritas, Sisters of St. Joseph Virginia and Mary Regis Nelson.

The Nelson sisters were very encouraging. They put us in touch with Oblate Archbishop Peter Sutton of Keewatin-Le Pas Archdiocese. He invited

us to join him in Sandy Lake, Ontario, from December 14 to 17, 1990, for the blessing of the new St. Bernadette Church.

The weekend gave us a chance to meet the Catholic community of 420 people, and for the people to meet us. Mostly Oji-Cree, a mixture of Ojibway and Cree, these native people were warm and welcoming, with a deep inner dignity and spirituality.

In late February 1991, this Catholic community of St. Bernadette signed a petition, some in English, some in syllabics, some with an “X,” requesting that we come to live with them from May to December. Bill and I were thrilled to accept their invitation. So it was that on Tuesday, May 21, 1991, at 1:45 p.m., we landed at Sandy Lake airport, somewhat nervous, but very excited to begin this new challenge.

To our surprise, we found ourselves in the midst of a heat wave; this, despite all reports about how cold it could get up North. In fact, just the morning before, we had stopped at a wayside park near Thunder Bay and discovered a skiff of new ice on Lake Superior. Here, however, one could hear the laughter of the children as they enjoyed jumping into the refreshing water of Sandy Lake.

What did our ten children, who at the time ranged in age from twenty-seven to forty, think of their parents’ new venture?

Some were excited for us; others, rather skeptical.

One son, knowing how greatly mosquitoes and other insects “bug” his mother, worried how I would survive the black-fly season.

Our eldest nephew had been in international banking for a number of years, stationed in such places as Bahrain, Holland and Hong Kong. Finally, he was posted back to Toronto, only to find we were preparing to leave. He and his wife seemed somewhat upset, feeling it was all right for them to travel the world for extended periods, but did we have to go?

One of our daughters accompanied me on a shopping trip to purchase warm boots and a parka. While trying one on, I had trouble getting the zipper done up. She joked, “I can’t let you two go all that way alone. You can’t even do up your own zipper!”

In telling one of her friends about our plans, the friend was very excited for us. Our daughter replied, “That’s fine for you, but I’ve never had to do without my mother and father for eight months before.”

She found out she could. So did our other nine children. It was a maturing process for all of us. Of course, we missed our children and their spouses and our grandchildren, but there is a lot of truth in the old adage that

absence makes the heart grow fonder. We kept in touch, often by mail or by phone, and our visits home were truly family celebrations.

In terms of distance, we were a long way from home, or roughly 2,300 km from Toronto. However, the trek could be made by air in six-and-a-half-hours door to door. Besides, isn’t home where the heart is?

## *Blessing the New Church*

We met Bishop Peter, as Oblate Archbishop Peter Sutton was affectionately known, on Friday, December 15, 1990, in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Then, we flew via Air Manitoba to Sandy Lake in Northern Ontario.

A large delegation of parishioners was at the airport to meet Bishop Peter. Among them were Sidney Fiddler, chairman of the parish council, and his wife, Harriet. John Fiddler, the sacristan, accompanied his mother Jemima Fiddler and Mary Mamakeesic, widows of the late deacons Naham Fiddler and Walter Mamakeesic. With them were a host of others who we would get to know and love over the next two years.

We were billeted at the Northern Store residence. Store manager Allen and his wife Brenda Feeney, along with their sons Christopher, Steven and three-week-old Timothy, graciously welcomed us with warm Northern hospitality.

The new church sat on a promontory about seventy-five feet above Sandy Lake. Blanketed in snow, the little church sparkled against a grove of green spruce trees. In minus thirty-five-degree brilliant sunshine, the scene would remain with us forever.

The original church, built in 1936, had become unsafe to use. Thus, in 1990, with the help of an outside contractor, Réal Rioux, and using local labour, the people tore down their old church. In a mere five months, they renovated the old rectory, put up a beautiful multi-purpose facility, a new garage, and a new snowmobile shed. This was a monumental task of which they were justly proud.

One of the parishioners, Rhoda Meekis, had the vision and foresight to photograph the event. The results of her work sit in the church in two photo albums for all to enjoy.

Rhoda captured in colour the tearing down and the building up. She photographed the sad day the old church spire was lowered, the digging of the new foundation, the exercise in togetherness as the community gathered to help raise the first side on their new house of God, and the finished structure with its unique teepee entrance.

Between the church and the lake stood the newly renovated rectory, with the new garage on one side and the snowmobile shed on the other.

Friday afternoon, Bishop Peter mobilized everyone into action. The movable altar platform was positioned and chairs were set in place. Lectionary, Sacramentary and Rite books were snugly covered in moose hide and had leather

thong markers. Vestments were ironed. A curtain was sewn and hung to separate sacristy from vestry. Finally, all was ready.

Visitors continued to arrive.

Father Wilfrid Dumont, former pastor, came from St. Theresa Point, Manitoba. He had worked in the area since 1944 and was fluent in Oji-Cree, a native dialect. The people, particularly the elders, appreciated his visits, as it gave them the opportunity to confess in their own language.

Father Antonio Alberti, O.M.I., also arrived from St. Theresa Point. This was his first visit as newly appointed pastor to St. Bernadette Mission.

Sister Aline Gazaille, S.C.S.H., had been there all week putting the renovated rectory in order.

Another Grey Nun, Sister Marie Claire Boucher, S.C.S.H., took over the kitchen and proceeded to work her particular magic with meals for those visiting the mission.

At the Saturday evening Eucharist, seven children and one young woman received their First Communion. Harriet Fiddler, under the direction of Sister Aline, had prepared them all.

The crowd continued to grow until the church was jammed. Joe Harper from St. Theresa Point introduced himself and took me to meet the deacons' widows again.

Deacon Naham Fiddler had been killed in a snowmobile accident several years before and Deacon Walter Mamakeesic had died suddenly of a heart attack. However, these two church leaders had paved the way for our acceptance. Through their early ministry, the parishioners of St. Bernadette became familiar with deacon-couples.

As Mary Mamakeesic and I looked into each other's eyes, we both started to weep and embrace, ending up seated on the altar steps with Jemima Fiddler holding our hands.

Another woman came over to console Mary and supplied all three of us with Kleenex tissues to wipe our eyes.

John Fiddler translated for us, telling Mary and Jemima how much I wished I could speak their language, and that I was sorry to have made them sad. When John told them what I had said, that we three were "sisters" because we were all deacons' wives, they nodded and said they understood. It was a very moving moment.

On Sunday morning, December 17, excitement was running high. Festivities were to start at 11 o'clock.

A number of charter flights arrived, bringing guests from Winnipeg, Red Lake, St. Theresa Point, Sioux Lookout, North Spirit Lake and The Pas.

The Chancery Office was well represented by Sister Rose Arsenaault, R.S.R., Sister Val Leibel, S.S.N.D., and Sister Betty Lackenbauer, S.S.N.D.

The church was filled to capacity and, as someone said, "There was a lot of traffic." People got up and moved around freely, coming and going, especially the children.

Extra chairs had to be borrowed from the United Church. The choir ladies wore their blue gowns and veils and had front-row seats.

Sister Marie Lanthier, at Rhoda Meekis's request, had brought in some silk flowers. The buds picked up the dusty-rose colour of the altar backdrop.

Readings were done both in English and in Oji-Cree. Deputy-Chief Randy Linklater translated for Bishop Peter.

After the altar was blessed with oil, Mary Mamakeesic and Jemima Fiddler laid the new, multi-hued, altar cloth. Their late husbands' stoles were hung on the altar backdrop.

Fathers Alberti, Dumont and Piché assisted Bishop Peter in blessing with oil the crosses on the four walls, representing the four directions and the four races.

After the Mass, the altar was stripped, and the Blessed Sacrament was moved to the sacristy. Then the elders took over, speaking at great lengths.

The Mamakeesic family presented Réal Rioux, the contractor, with a lovely beaded and fringed moose hide vest handmade by Mary. The Chief, Jonas Fiddler, and the United Church minister, Sanadius Fiddler, both brought greetings. The Band council presented a plaque to the church in honour of the occasion.

When the speeches concluded, chairs were moved and tables set up. Bella Linklater and her committee took over and a substantial feast miraculously appeared.

Several of the women had flown out to Winnipeg to purchase supplies. There was moose meat, turkey, mashed potatoes, corn, bannock (their quick bread), butter and jam, tea and a variety of pies: apple, blueberry, cherry, and raisin. The children, much to their delight, were served hamburger helper and jello.

Sisters Aline and Marie Claire had baked and decorated a beautiful cake for the occasion and had it flown in with them from St. Theresa Point. The inscription read: "The Lord has built us a Church."

Several sittings were required to serve the large crowd of about seven hundred people. While the last people were enjoying their dinner, the musicians started tuning up for the singing.

Bishop Peter handed out rosaries that had been blessed by Pope John Paul II the previous week in Rome.

Later that evening, Bishop Peter was asked to bring Communion to Edna. Bill and I were invited to accompany him, along with Fr. Dumont and Sister Aline.

It was a clear, cold night as we walked from the rectory through the Roman Catholic (R.C.) section to Tom and Edna Linklater's house. Edna was suffering from kidney problems and Tom had nursed her tenderly for several years.

The house was crowded with extended family when we arrived. Prayers were said. Bishop Peter anointed Edna and gave her Communion. Then two guitarists played as the group sang their Cree hymns.

What a wonderful introduction to the community it was for us! It was also a prayerful way to end a very special day in Sandy Lake.

## *Our Second Arrival*

Late in May 1991, we again landed at Sandy Lake airport. It was sunny and 27 Celsius. This time, there was no one to meet us. That was understandable as we had been unsure of our exact arrival date. This had depended on our son Mike's work schedule.

Mike was an Ontario Provincial Police Sergeant, stationed in Wawa. Bill had baptized Mike and Anne's daughter, Kayla, our seventeenth grandchild, the previous Sunday. Mike had agreed to drive us from Wawa to Red Lake where we would board Bearskin Airlines for Sandy Lake.

Bill walked from the airport to the rectory but failed to find the keys to the Mission truck. Curiously enough, this was a yellow Nissan, with Florida license plates. It had been donated to the Mission by an American benefactor, and driven in over the winter ice road several years previously.

Trying another tack, Bill contacted Allen Feeney, manager of the Northern Store, who had so kindly housed us during our December weekend visit. Allen, his wife Brenda, and their three sons rescued us with our luggage and drove us from the airport to St. Bernadette's.

It was a pleasant surprise to find that Dawn MacDonald and Steve Deme of Villagers Communications were already settled in at the rectory. One of their many projects was preparing the 1992 Catholic Missions In Canada (then known as The Catholic Church Extension Society of Canada) Calendar. They were in Sandy Lake for the week to meet the local artists whose work they hoped to use.

We weren't sure how our arrival had been discovered, but we hadn't been in the rectory for an hour before the phone started ringing and visitors began arriving at the door.

Several couples were anxious to arrange for their marriages. As an ordained permanent deacon, Bill can baptize, marry and bury, or "hatch, match and dispatch," as someone once joked.

That evening, Sidney and Harriet Fiddler with their son Elliott, and another couple, Louis and Hattie Fiddler, with two-year-old-Stanley, arrived to officially welcome us. Sidney was chairman of the parish council.

Sidney's brother, Louis (with an "s" not an "e," he informed us) Fiddler,

was head of the finance committee and also our organist, following in their father's footsteps. A big man with large hands in keeping with his size, we wondered how he managed to hit just one note at a time. The music he coaxed out of the keyboard during our church services moved us all into deeper worship.

The two couples shared with us some of their hopes and dreams for the parish. When we inquired what they would like us to do during our time there, they asked for help in encouraging more people to come out to church. They also were looking for ministries' training and could we please help them to get Renew organized? This diocesan-wide renewal program was to start that fall.

The following evening, about fifty members of the parish joined in preparing a welcome barbecue. Two logs were rolled into place on the lawn in front of the church and rectory. A fire was lit between the two logs, and soup, moose meat, fish, bannock and tea were prepared. Kentucky Fried Chicken had even been flown in from Winnipeg for the occasion.

A temporary downpour briefly moved the festivities into the new garage, but the sun soon came out to dry us off so we were able to eat outdoors. What an outdoors! Not only could we feast on the delicious food, there was also a feast for our eyes in every direction.

The next day, a number of people who could not be at the barbecue stopped in to introduce themselves.

People such as Norman Meekis, an elder, who walked a very long way with great difficulty on a very warm day to make sure we knew that we were welcome. Norman had been a close friend of Deacon Walter who had ministered to his people for years.

Before Walter died the previous year, he had asked Norman to keep telling the people about God.

Norman had accepted this responsibility very seriously, but had become discouraged because so many people seemed not to be hearing. He looked on our coming as help with his task. He told us he was seventy-two and his ministry was visiting the sick and elderly. The Band had asked him to go to Winnipeg to support their sick there. He flew out soon after our meeting.

That evening, we went to visit some of the elders with Harriet and Sidney. The Fiddlers had been mandated by Bishop Peter as Extraordinary Ministers of Communion, and had been leading the Sunday Communion Services when no priest could be there.

Sidney told us that while they had been taking Communion to the elders each Sunday, they didn't feel that they knew how to do this task and would

like our help. Yet, when they went into each home, they did everything so beautifully it looked as though they had been trained for years.

First, they simply spoke with the people, setting them at ease, finding out how they were feeling, asking what had been happening in their lives since the last visit.

A little prayer service followed, then the distribution of Communion, a moment of silence and a closing prayer.

The Holy Spirit was almost tangibly present as these deeply spiritual people humbly and gratefully received the Blessed Sacrament. It was an experience that moved us to tears. A few closing remarks, and we were on our way to the next place.

Back at the rectory again, several more visitors arrived; one, with a most welcome package of pickerel filets. Then, just as we were preparing for bed, the phone rang. Steve Linklater, church custodian and our neighbour down the hill from the rectory, wanted to make sure we stepped outside to see God's light show. Hence, our busy day ended with another first: a breathtaking view of the Northern Lights.

## ✧ CHAPTER 5 ✧

### *The Building of St. Bernadette Mission*

Sandy Lake is an isolated First Nations Reserve. You could only get there three ways: Air Manitoba from Winnipeg, Bearskin Airlines from Thunder Bay and Ministic Air from Red Lake.

About seventeen hundred people lived in Sandy Lake then. Most of them were Oji-Cree, which is a mixture of Ojibway and Cree.

Several denominations co-existed there quite ecumenically. The largest was the United Church led by Sanadius Fiddler who had been asked by his people to study for the ministry. His grandfather had also been a minister. To help support his family, Sanadius had a trap line.

The second largest denomination was the Roman Catholic Church with about four-hundred and twenty members. There were also Mennonites, Pentecostals, Full Gospel and even several Mormons.

Naham Fiddler's grandfather brought the first missionary to Sandy Lake by canoe over seventy years ago. The original frame church was built in 1936 when Father Joseph Dubeau, an Oblate priest, came to Sandy Lake accompanied

by Brother Joseph Dussault. The Mission continued to be served by Oblate missionaries for many years.

Father Wilfrid Dumont spent eighteen years there as resident pastor. He learned the language and was much loved by all. It was at Fr. Dumont's urging that two of his parishioners studied to be ordained as permanent deacons so they could serve their people.

Naham Fiddler was ordained in 1976 and Walter Mamakeesic in 1979.

That was the good news. The bad news was that Naham was killed in a snowmobile accident in 1984. A beautiful little roadside shrine marks the spot where the accident happened. Another tragedy occurred in February 1990 when Walter died suddenly of a heart attack.

The community mourned their leaders and felt somewhat bereft. Fr. Dumont had aged and was now living at St. Theresa Point, flying into Sandy Lake occasionally to hear Confessions and to celebrate Mass. To make matters worse, the old church had become unsafe to use.

With no resident priest and an unsafe building, many parishioners had drifted to other denominations.

As one man put it, "The church and rectory were like haunted houses. We didn't see much sense in bothering about our faith and many of us went elsewhere."

The rebuilding of St. Bernadette Church became somewhat of a memorial to Naham and Walter. The influence of these two good men was still felt throughout the whole community.

The young people visiting us, even though some of them were not old enough to have known these two elders well, constantly referred to Deacon Naham and Deacon Walter. They spoke of the way the deacons lived their deep faith, transmitting it by their example to the rest of the community in so many ways. Their ministry paved the way for our acceptance in Sandy Lake. Deacon-couples were familiar to the people.

To have a new building suitable for parishioners to come together for worship was something everyone knew the two deacons would have encouraged. In fact, Deacon Walter had been discussing plans for a new church with Bishop Peter just before driving him to the airport. Walter had just returned home when he had a heart attack.

Supplies for the new church were brought in over the winter ice road. This was open for about six weeks in February and March if the weather was cold enough to freeze the lake sufficiently deep. It stretched over two hundred and

fifty miles from Pickle Lake to Sandy Lake and was well plowed and well marked with evergreen trees.

Unfortunately, one truckload of materials went through the ice and was lost. These had to be re-ordered and flown in, escalating the cost of the new church considerably.

Réal Rioux, a contractor from Winnipeg, came in to lead the job as the parishioners did all the work. Many neighbours from the other denominations on the reserve also pitched in.

Bart Meekis, a Sandy Lake artist, did a special commemorative painting of a native Sacred Heart. Fittingly fastened by moose hide thongs to birch-pole framing, it now hangs in the new church.

The new church was not a makeshift structure. It was quite modern, and met all the safety codes. It had a large multipurpose room, with a small sacristy, confessional, storage room, two small meeting rooms and two washrooms. A folding wall could be opened or closed, depending on the size of the gathering.

For weekly Communion services, the divider was usually closed, the service being held in the church proper.

The Children's Liturgy took place in one of the small meeting rooms. However, for weddings or funerals or at Christmas and Easter, the folding wall was opened to accommodate the crowd. After the service, it could again be closed so the community room could be used for the feast.

Most of the elders came to our ten-thirty Sunday morning service, so it was conducted in both English and Oji-Cree. Bill had to learn a new style of homily, a series of one-liners, which would then be translated, usually by parishioner Tom Linklater, into the local language.

The hymns for this service were all in Cree. The people were very musical and loved to sing all six or more verses. This made their music like a mantra, leading us into deeper worship.

One morning I found myself in tears as they sang in Cree to the old familiar "O Salutaris" hymn. While I couldn't understand the words, the music touched me deeply.

The one o'clock afternoon service was all in English and the younger crowd came to attend. Music at this service could be quite astounding.

Most of our musicians belonged to the Fiddler family. The Fiddlers are members of the Sucker Clan. A clan is a group of people united by kinship and descent or common ancestors. The Fiddlers originally got their English name because their ancestors began to make musical instruments similar to fiddles.

Alfred Fiddler was the organist for many years. Most of his many sons could play by ear, and with their sisters, sang beautifully. When the family was together, it was not unusual for them to spontaneously break out in three-part harmony.

With the blessing of the new church in December 1990, there was a kind of spiritual rebirth.

Steadily, more and more people began coming back to St. Bernadette's. It was an exciting time to be there.

The faith was deeply rooted in the people. The Holy Spirit was working there long before we arrived and, we believe, will continue to work in their lives long after we have gone.

❧ CHAPTER 6 ❧  
*Sandy Lakers*

The people of Sandy Lake are a happy people, living very close to nature. Some have had incredibly difficult lives.

One young woman told of being the youngest of nine children. Her father died when she was just two years old. After that, her mother fed the family by trapping. When she was away on the trapline, the eldest daughter looked after the family, building a log cabin to keep them warm in winter. The two-year-old helped chink the holes with moss to keep out the cold.

Although wildlife is not as abundant as it was years ago, many people still follow their traditional ways of hunting and fishing.

Louis Fiddler, our organist, besides hauling freight from the airport to the Northern Store, had a special ministry. Regularly, he set his fishnets. After hauling in his catch, he loaded it into his station wagon and drove around the village, handing out the fish to the elders.

Many could no longer fish for themselves, so Louis ensured that they would still be able to enjoy their fish dinners.

On several occasions, we were delighted to be grateful recipients of his delicious whitefish and pickerel.

One of the first events we were invited to after our arrival was to meet the elders. These men and women were held in great respect and consulted before any major decisions were made in the parish. They seemed to grasp early on that their purpose in later life was to pray for the rest of us, who were so busy doing everything we considered necessary.

One Sunday morning, Walter Mamakeesic's widow, Mary, with her daughter-in-law translating, asked Bill if he would wear Deacon Walter's stole and cross while we were there. This was a great mark of acceptance on her part. Bill thanked her saying he would be honored to do so. He added that the first time he would wear them would be for the prayer service to be held to bless and install Walter's gravestone.

It was a very moving moment as Mary vested Bill with Walter's stole and cross. Walter's close friend, Norman Meekis, spoke very eloquently. We all sang, in Cree, the last hymn Walter had sung: "Nearer my God to Thee."

Afterwards, we processed down the hill to the cemetery behind the

church for the blessing of the marker. Then, every person there, right down to Walter's youngest grandchild not yet a year old, sprinkled the stone with holy water.

Walter had a great effect on his children and grandchildren. His daughter had prepared a beautiful songbook in memory of her father who loved to sing. His daughter-in-law became a Catholic soon after his death, and was one of our first volunteers to help with the Children's Liturgy. Her young son, Jonah, was named by Walter.

The first Sunday the children gathered, the lesson was on thanking God.

Jonah, barely three, used every colour in the crayon box. He said he was thanking God for colours. Afterwards, Jonah insisted on taking his picture to the cemetery to put on his grandfather's grave. Of course, he had his mother and grandmother, and us too, in tears, when we heard the story.

Naham's widow, Jemima, came to tea one day. Their adopted son, John, translated as Jemima shared how scary it had been when she and Naham had to go out for diaconate training.

First, they flew to Red Lake and then took the bus thirteen hundred kilometres to the Anishinabe Native Spirituality Centre at Anderson Lake near Espanola.

Neither Jemima nor Naham spoke English. Fr. Dumont had travelled with Naham the first time; after that, they were on their own.

John was quite young at the time. He had been left with relatives in Red Lake, and remembered how excited and happy he was to see his parents returning. He also remembered coming to the rectory on cold winter evenings, sleeping on the floor while his parents studied with Fr. Dumont.

As in most reserves, lack of available employment can be a problem.

The Northern Store hired a few, as did the airport, the Band Office, the school, the Nursing Station, the Children's Centre and the local police force. A number of trained firefighters were also on stand-by, but many remained unemployed or had to travel elsewhere to find jobs.

Indoor plumbing was installed in most homes after we left. That created some employment, as did the work on road improvement, the operation of the lumber mill, and the building of the larger Northern Store.

While we were there, children could attend school up to Grade 10 on the reserve. Later, they had to fly out for higher education, to London, Thunder Bay, Toronto or Winnipeg.

A new high school has since been opened, so that the children no longer

have to leave to further their education.

First Nations' young men and women are encouraged to become accredited teachers, by first apprenticing as teacher aides.

Currently, the number of native teachers has increased. Community college courses in word processing and computers are now being offered, as well as Futures programs for job training.

One difference we found was that at home people would ask a newcomer, "When did you get here?"

In Sandy Lake, newcomers were asked, "How long are you staying?" The people were very welcoming and hospitable, but found it hard to believe that we planned on staying until Christmas.

## ❧ CHAPTER 7 ❧

### *Kanina*

Death reveals much about the spiritual life of a people. When someone dies in Sandy Lake, the whole community stands still for days so that everyone can pray and pay their respects.

About two weeks after our arrival, native elder Norman Meekis returned. He was accompanying the body of Morris Rae who had died in Winnipeg. The Band had chartered two planes to bring the body and all of Morris's relatives home.

Nearly the whole village drove to the airport to meet the planes and to comfort the family. Morris had been a member of the United Church but all six denominations on the reserve were represented at the airport. All would take turns praying at Morris's home during the three-day wake. These people were very ecumenical without ever having heard the word. It was just a way of life with them.

That night around midnight, we received two phone calls.

People wanted to make sure we would go outside to see the Northern Lights. The Lights were in a different configuration than we had ever seen before. They were cone-shaped, funnelling upward, and stretched from the horizon in all directions to an apex overhead. Our callers explained that this was something they had come to expect every time a Band member dies.

If you want to feel loved and supported during sickness and death, this is the place to be. Whether you are the ill person or a close relative, this First

Nations community will lovingly care for you.

We first saw eighty-four-year-old Kanina shortly after our arrival in Sandy Lake, as Sidney and Harriet drove us around on Communion calls to the sick and elderly. It was a warm summer evening and we were travelling over the dusty roads in their comfortable van.

As we passed Kanina, Harriet said, "That old lady is always walking. She walks everywhere!"

Sure enough, we would see Kanina at any time of the day or evening, trudging here, there, and everywhere over the reserve. She was very tiny and looked to be just skin and bones.

All through that summer, we saw her whenever there was a gathering: prayer services, funerals and feasts. She seemed a rather vague presence, but always was lovingly included. Someone always found her a chair, brought her to Communion, saw that her plate was filled.

One day, in the heat of the summer, she was found lying on the ground unconscious. From then on, we scarcely saw Kanina.

Sidney and Harriet made sure they took her Communion when she was not able to come to church on her own. Next, we heard that Colleen had been hired to sit with her when her family was not there.

One Sunday evening, Bella Linklater phoned to say Kanina had been taken to the Nursing Station. Bill went down to pray with her and with the prayer team that had gathered.

Anna, the nursing supervisor, told the family that the doctor could find no infection and that her problem was just old age.

Anna congratulated the family on the good care they had given Kanina. She said that the stimulation of being with children and grandchildren had probably prolonged her life.

The next morning, Kanina was flown to the hospital in Sioux Lookout.

Several people, including Norman, went to pray with her and support the family. Daily reports were phoned back to Sandy Lake and relayed to the whole village via the local radio station. Translations of these Oji-Cree messages were relayed to us by several parishioners.

Sidney was scheduled to take his son Jacob to Sioux Lookout that week for a doctor's appointment. While there, he was able to contact the priest to come and anoint Kanina. So, the caring continued.

When news of Kanina's death reached our community, the wheels of tradition began turning.

One of the Band councillors phoned to tell us that her body would arrive from Sioux Lookout on Monday at 11:00 a.m. and that “everything would be on the R.C. side.” (That is, the Roman Catholic side of the reserve as opposed to the United Church or U.C. side.) This meant that the funeral would be held at St. Bernadette’s Church and that the Catholics would be responsible for seeing that family and visitors were fed and housed.

Usually, the Catholic women saw to the arranging of the body, placing the cutwork white cloths on forehead and chest. They sprinkled the special perfumes, and arranged the silk flowers around the handmade casket. This was set on a wooden platform covered with a pink cloth over which was placed an intricately cut and scalloped white cloth.

A canopy was erected over top of the casket. Again, this was decorated with the same pink and white cutwork cloth. The four poles holding the canopy were covered with foil and then silk flowers. Family members and friends crafted artificial floral wreaths.

As many villagers as possible gathered at the airport to support the family and mourners when the plane arrived. It was a very touching sight to see more than a thousand people waiting on the runway to welcome Kanina back.

The casket was loaded on to the back of an open truck. An honour guard of relatives sat on the sides of the truck and the body was escorted home.

First, Kanina was brought to her older sister’s house.

Esther Linklater had asked if we would help welcome her. The light blue casket was carried into the centre of the main room, and the grieving family was warmly enfolded in Esther’s loving arms.

Anian Fiddler and Norman Meekis read Scripture passages in Oji-Cree. Bill prayed in English. Holy water was sprinkled generously by Bill, Anian, Norman and Sanadius, the United Church minister, who also said a prayer.

The casket was opened for family and friends and each said a private prayer for Kanina. Two large loaves of fresh warm bannock were passed around and each person took a piece as we broke bread together.

Later that afternoon, the body was taken to the house where Kanina had been living.

We arrived at six p.m. to find a blue tarpaulin shelter erected in the yard. In the centre of this shelter, a cheerful fire burned, for warmth and for cooking.

The people gathered had just finished eating and the ecumenical prayer service soon began.

The United Church members started, with Sanadius leading, and their

guitarist, accordion player and choir members providing music.

Extra chairs had been brought from the Sports Complex. When these ran out, more were quickly brought from St. Bernadette’s. The house was jammed. Joshua, one of the United Church elders, spoke after Sanadius; then, more singing.

At the end of the first hour exactly, it became the Catholics’ turn. Anian and Norman read Scripture passages. Bill was asked to pray. Penina Rae, an elder, led the hymns, again in Oji-Cree, and Sidney said the closing prayer. Caregivers would stay all night to minister to the family.

That evening, the Northern Lights danced overhead. Again, these Northern Lights were in that different configuration, settling over the village and diffusing in a cone-like glow almost as though the lights were accompanying the soul of the deceased to its Creator—the Great Spirit, Kise Manito. We saw this happen on at least three occasions during our time in Sandy Lake.

The next day, near sunset, Kanina was brought to the church. As we walked there from the rectory for the wake service, we could see a string of lights coming down the frozen lake.

Later, we learned that this was a contingent from the Deer Lake Reserve. Kanina had been well known there and this group had travelled six hours by snowmobile to join the mourners. There were also visitors from Red Lake and St. Theresa Point. All were housed and fed within the community.

After the formal two-hour service, the wake took off, almost like an old-fashioned Irish wake. The teapot was the social centre in the community hall of the church. The organ and guitar led proceedings in the church proper.

When Bill went back to check the church at midnight, the hymn-singing was still in progress. At nine the next morning, two musicians and one young sleeper were still keeping vigil.

During our breakfast that morning, we could see the gravediggers gathering, on foot or by snowmobile, to start their part of the ritual.

First, a path had to be shovelled up the hill to the site of the gravesite. The snow was about a foot-and-a-half deep and had to be cleared from the plot as well. A fire was built to help thaw the ground, and it was well past noon before the new grave was dug.

The community gathered on this beautiful, sunny, February afternoon as Kanina’s funeral service began at the traditional time, 2 p.m. Again, it was “standing room only” in the church.

After the official Communion Service, the speeches began: Anian,

Norman, Joshua and Jonas, the Chief. Then, the family was invited to talk about what Kanina had meant to them and how they felt at her passing.

Finally, at four-thirty, the coffin was opened for the last time and the family made their final farewell to this cherished loved one. Afterwards, members of the gathered throng paid their last respects to Kanina and her family.

The bell tolled as Kanina's casket was carried from the church.

Across the lake, the sun was beginning to descend in the sky.

Bill led the procession down the hill behind the church to St. Bernadette Cemetery, and Kanina was laid to rest. Final prayers were said at the grave and, with Fred Meekis in charge of the ropes, her casket was slowly lowered into the grave. Each person threw in a shovelful of earth. The grave was filled in, the canopy erected over it and the floral arrangements placed within.

The procession wound its way back up the hill and slowly dispersed.

A final feast was held for family and friends at Kanina's home and a peace settled over Sandy Lake.

On the first anniversary of Kanina's death, her family hosted another feast. It is believed that for a year after the death of a loved one, the spirit of that person remains with the family to help and to guide them.

The Anniversary Feast is a Thanksgiving Celebration—a thanksgiving for the life of that person and for the help given by his or her spirit during the past year. It is also a public letting go of that loved one whose spirit is now released to be with the Creator, Kise Manito.

The past year had been one of mourning and grieving a great loss, now it is time to begin to carry on with one's life. So, while the feast is an ending, it also marks a beginning.

Louis stopped in for coffee the morning after the funeral. He commented on how peaceful he and the whole village felt after the funeral. It was understandable. Everyone had been united in prayer and in a common purpose, and the hymn-singing and caring support of the family was like a catharsis.

Kanina's life and death had been a blessing. She was now at rest.

## ❧ CHAPTER 8 ❧

### *The Tire Garden*

Originally, the Oji-Cree people settled around Sandy Lake because the soil grew good potato, carrot and onion crops. However, as the young people

went out to residential schools, they were away for the planting and the reaping.

Bit by bit, gardening skills had been lost.

This was a tragedy. Except for berries, fish and wild game, all other food had to be flown into Sandy Lake, or brought in over the winter ice road. So, of course, it was very expensive.

For example, a four-litre bag of milk cost \$8.28. Facial tissue was \$5.00 a box, and potatoes were 80 cents a pound.

Coming from farming stock, Bill has always had a garden. Arriving late in May, and seeing the high cost of food, a vegetable garden seemed very much a priority. So, while I unpacked and settled in, Bill attempted to dig a garden plot.

Well, the soil behind the rectory was nearly impossible to turn over. The spade was almost broken in the attempt.

Bill decided to try another approach. Sometime before, he had read an article about someone who had planted his garden in used tires filled with soil. This seemed like a possible alternative.

There had been vehicles in Sandy Lake since about 1976. The rectory vehicle (a yellow Nissan truck bearing Florida license plates), had been donated to the Mission and driven in over the winter ice-road. This was how most vehicles arrived on the reserve, over the winter road. However, when they were beyond use, they were relegated to the "car cemetery." A quick trip to the "car cemetery" produced a number of used tires for our garden.

Then, someone told us about some good soil out near the airport.

Happily, we discovered it was what southern Ontarians might call "black gold," a type of soil almost as black as the Holland Marsh soil. Several truckloads of this soil filled the tires.

Seeds sent in by generous friends and relatives were planted, and Bill's "tire garden," as it became known far and wide, was thriving.

Potatoes, onions, cucumbers, radishes, lettuce, carrots, beets and parsnips did quite well. Tomatoes were not quite as productive.

This was an amazement to the people! It became almost a ritual after our Sunday services for the congregation to walk over to see what had happened in the garden that week.

When the potato leaves were about three inches high, one man in his mid-forties squatted down to touch them reverently. In an awed voice, he said, "I remember when my grandfather used to grow these."

When Fr. Dumont arrived in for his monthly visit and found the garden, his comment was, "Teach them through the garden. If you can teach

them to grow their own food again, it will be easier to teach them about God's goodness."

Taking that seriously, Bill surveyed the large bed of chives blossoming down the hill. Evidently, a former pastor had brought in a clump of chives and planted them. Now they had spread all over the hill, but the people didn't seem to know they were there and could be used to season their food.

So, off Bill went to the dump to find usable containers. These he washed and, with his "black gold," planted enough containers of chives that each family could take one home.

The Gospel was on the mustard seed. At the end of the service, the chives were blessed and each family was invited to take one container home and teach the children how to plant them. If they spread as the previous pastor's had, Sandy Lake should be covered in chives in years to come.

Several containers were left over.

Two young girls asked if they could take them. The next day, one came to visit. When asked how her plants were, she rather sheepishly said she had sold them. How enterprising! She made three dollars and then treated herself and her sisters to ice cream cones, but could she have some more plants?

So, Bill fixed up several more containers and off she went, wondering how much she should "cost" them. An hour later, she returned, handing Bill \$2.50. He explained that the money was hers to keep for all her hard work.

A letter arrived from my sister. The Sunday of the "mustard seed" Gospel, the deacon in their parish had been preaching the homily. He started telling the story of this deacon-couple in Northern Ontario who were teaching their people through the "tire garden."

Shortly after, we heard from another woman who had also been listening to that homily. She became so interested in the concept, that she wondered if she couldn't provide the seeds for the next year's garden. This she did to the tune of several hundred dollars.

By this time, the carrots were ready to harvest. When the children would come to investigate the garden, Bill would ask them if they had ever seen magic.

"NO!" they said, as they shook their heads.

"Would you like to see magic?" Bill would say.

They would nod their heads vigorously.

Bill would bend down and pull up some carrots by their tops and the children would gasp in amazement. Then, he would rinse the carrots under the

hose, give them to the children, and they would go away happily chomping.

One young man, when he saw this performance, said, "Why they look just like the carrots we buy down at the Northern Store!"

Such was the renewed interest in gardening that we wondered how it could be made more accessible to the people.

After much prayer and deliberation and with many generous donations from benefactors, such as the Luke 4:18 Social Justice Group from Brother André High School in Markham, Ontario, the parish purchased a Kubota garden tractor.

Bill's brother, Jack, and his wife Aileen, transported the tractor to Red Lake airport. There it sat until a freighter was free to fly it in to Sandy Lake. What a great day that was as the tractor was unloaded from the plane, put on a truck, and driven to the rectory garage.

The following Sunday, the new tractor sat in all its bright-orange glory in front of the church for all to see. After the service, there was a tractor blessing ceremony.

Church volunteer Timothy Fiddler was appointed to run the tractor and to plow up plots for anyone who would like to start their own garden.

On the other hand, Tom Linklater, who had a bigger plot than he could use for himself, divided his plot so some elders who didn't have room for a garden at their houses could enjoy trying their hand at gardening as well.

Bill even had several planting demonstrations. At these, he shared the seeds sent in by our generous friend, and soon a number of gardens came into being.

Unfortunately, it turned out to be a cool, rainy summer so vegetables didn't flourish quite as abundantly as they had the previous summer. However, potatoes did quite well and the people gained a bit more planting know-how.

The next spring, Tom phoned us to say that some of his strawberry plants had not survived the winter. Where could he get more, and how should he plant them?

Several years later, he phoned again to say he had bought some rose bushes when he was in Red Lake. How should he plant and care for them?

We were glad to hear that the gardening bug had bitten him.

# *Landscaping and Mud*

Our first view of St. Bernadette Mission was in mid- December of 1990, when we had flown in for the official blessing of the church.

It was a cold, sunny, -35 Celsius weekend. About a foot of snow lay on the ground covering the construction site in a mantle of white, criss-crossed by many snowmobile trails.

Our next view of the mission was on a bright, 32 Celsius day in May of 1991. The children were swimming in the lake below the rectory.

Instead of snow, the church was now surrounded by clay and gravel. It had the usual bare untidiness of a newly-constructed building. What could we do to improve the grounds of this very functional, multi-purpose facility?

Number one on the agenda was to haul away much of the leftover construction garbage.

The yellow Nissan rectory truck could almost find its way to the dump after numerous trips there. That accomplished, what could be done to eliminate the austere bare look around the teepee entrance?

Our many trips to the dump had revealed on the side of the road some large rocks just begging to be brought back to the mission.

Again, the yellow Nissan truck proved its worth, as we loaded and unloaded enough of these large stones to outline a flower bed on either side of the church entrance.

So much for the outside of the flower beds, now for the inside. We remembered that good soil out near the new airport strip. Thus, on one hot June day, Sidney and his wife Harriet went directly from work filling their truck with this rich, dark soil. It about half filled the two flower beds as their two young sons, aided by several cousins, helped to unload it. They got quite excited about what was happening.

After several more loads, we were ready for planting. Now the question became what to plant?

Sidney and Harriet remembered some plants that grew year after year at the site of the old Nursing Station.

Sunday morning, after Communion calls to the sick and elderly, we went investigating, and found lilies—orange lilies and tiger lilies—that were surviving almost on bare rock with just a minimum of soil for their roots.

Bill went on a transplanting spree the next day, and voila, instant garden! Miracle of miracles, they loved their new home and bloomed in

profusion for the twelfth of July.

In the meantime, we had sent out an SOS to sisters and daughters for flower seeds. They did not let us down. It became fun to guess what the mail held in store. Immediately on arrival, the seeds went into the new flower beds—asters, forget-me-nots, sunflowers and Sweet Williams.

Then, the Northern Store manager, Allen Feeney, also a parishioner, was asked to order in from Winnipeg some pansies and impatiens plants. Unfortunately, these got mixed up with grocery shipments and sat at the back of the store for several hot days. Allen brought them to church one sunny, late-June day, a little the worse for wear.

Having been warned that the children would not let the plants grow but would pull them up to investigate, we decided to enlist their aid.

A planting bee was announced for that afternoon at 4 p.m. Six young children arrived to help and received their first lesson in planting.

At one stage, all six were bent over the flower bed, with their backsides in the air, busily planting “their” plants. Woe betide anyone who messed around with their flowers! I quickly ran for the camera and got some great shots of our fledgling planters.

When all had been planted and watered, two young boys appeared at the door with cardboard boxes. Could they have some of that black stuff to plant their corn? Opening their grubby hands, they revealed three kernels of corn.

Bill found sturdier containers and donated some radish seed to the cause as well, and off the budding gardeners went.

Several days later, they rushed back excitedly to tell us the radishes were up already.

On Sunday mornings, parishioners began to look forward to inspecting the flower beds to see what was new for the current week. It became a hot topic of interest.

The sunflowers grew taller and taller, five feet on the shady side of the teepee entrance, but nine feet on the sunny side. The question now became, “Will they bloom before frost?”

Billy Meekis was intrigued with them.

He was the head caretaker at the school and wondered if they could be transplanted so he could take one to the school.

Finding a large container, Bill experimented with the healthiest-looking sunflower, sheltering it in the snowmobile shed until it took root in its new home.

Then, Billy and his son came to transport it to the school. With it, Bill

also sent some tomato plants bearing tomatoes that would not ripen on the vine before frost. Seeing these, all the teachers got excited, wanting plants for their classrooms.

Several women came to pot some of the flowers, hoping they would survive indoors.

One of the women worked at the Children's Centre. She asked for a sunflower for the Centre as well. So Bill did another transplant job, sending not just the sunflower, but a tomato plant as well.

The next time we inquired about the plants, Lillian Stoney told us that the children greeted them each morning with a "Good Morning, Sunny! Good Morning, Tommy!" The sunflower eventually bloomed and then died. The tomato ripened and the children learned a bit about gardening.

How pretty the flower beds looked on either side of the teepee entrance! They truly improved the look of the church.

After seeing this, a number of people decided there should be a flower bed along the side of the church. Again, the yellow Nissan truck was pressed into service to haul outlining stones and "black gold" soil.

Driving out to get it, we noticed that the new gas station in town was open. Not only that, the building was being beautified with a lawn around it outlined in stone just like the church flower beds. Grass seed was planted and before long, a lovely patch of green grass was flourishing.

As the old adage goes, "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

As always, one improvement usually leads to another. Once the flower beds were firmly in place, what more could be done to beautify the property?

One of the problems seeking a solution was the ever-present mud. If somehow we could eliminate the muddy patch out beyond the church steps, maybe that would help to keep the inner church mud-free.

Mud in Sandy Lake is something else again.

One of the first questions our Manitoban son-in-law asked us when we reported our safe arrival was, "Do you have that awful Manitoba mud that sticks like glue?"

In spite of the fact that Sandy Lake is in Northern Ontario, we had to reply, "Yes! We do have that awful mud that sticks like glue."

Torontonians Dawn MacDonald and Steve Deme were staying at the rectory the first week we were there. Their company, Villagers Communications, was coordinating The Catholic Church Extension Society of Canada's 1992 calendar project, using the work of Sandy Lake artists.

Coming in from one of their walking ventures, Dawn proceeded to remove her shoes. I told her not to worry about them. Her comment was, "Oh yes, you have to remove your shoes. You see, I've been sweeping up some mud."

It didn't take me long to see.

One of the things we had neglected to bring with us was rubber boots. Bill was fortunate to find a discarded pair that fit him in the rectory basement, but my shoes took an awful beating from the mud and were never the same again. I made sure to purchase some duck shoes on our first trip out.

After a rainfall, the mud is everywhere. Two steps and your shoes are doubled in size. It clings to your pant legs and truly is like glue to remove. It can also be dangerous, because when it is wet, it becomes almost as slippery as ice. Many cars and trucks slip and slide on the muddy roads, just as they do in winter on ice.

To counteract the mud problem between church and rectory, Bill attempted to make a cement walk. This solution proved less than satisfactory. Flying in enough cement could be a very expensive proposition. Would a gravel walkway do? Gravel was free for the carting. So off went the yellow Nissan again, this time to the gravel pit.

Many loads later, a completed walk from rectory to Church entrance faced the crucial test—a heavy rainfall. Yes, it did control that stick-like-glue mud! Now instead of scrubbing up mud, we just had the much easier task of sweeping up gravel.

Could this same solution work for a courtyard stretching from the parking lot and out in front of the Church? This time, the truck was kept busy for many days until finally the courtyard was completely gravelled.

Another problem was drainage from the corner eaves. Somehow, this run-off had to be funnelled away from the building or it would weaken the foundation. A stone crib worked well at the bottom of the drainpipe. After a few more hits-and-misses, a ditch and a handy little piece of culvert proved to be the needed solution.

The culvert itself became the source of a number of jokes among elders.

The story went that during a heavy rainstorm, two pickerel swam up from the lake and got caught in the culvert and couldn't get back to the lake again.

Well, this struck Anian as being quite hilarious. He took it upon himself to tell Mary Mamakeesic. She was listening very seriously to the long drawn-out tale. When she finally realized it was only a joke, she responded with

a spontaneous slap to Anian's arm. Then, they both laughed uproariously. Our people loved to laugh, usually at themselves.

Now that the gravel courtyard was in place, it needed fencing to match the parking lot side. Posts and a chain-link fence finished that in good measure. Then, there was that tree-lined path up to the church. Some of the evergreens were missing.

A trip to the bush supplied new seedling trees, enough to outline the courtyard. When these were planted, it seemed right that there should be a row along the side of the church.

So much was happening that the inevitable question to Bill was, "What are you building today?"

At a late-summer funeral, the Chief, arriving at St. Bernadette's with a member of the planning committee, commented, "Is this place ever looking up!"

On our trip out in October, we had purchased some tulip, daffodil and crocus bulbs.

The first Tuesday we were back, the weather warmed up considerably. Snow on the flower bed beside the rectory melted enough that Bill was able to plant the bulbs.

A good thing he did! From then on, the temperature dropped and we were in a deep freeze. That was the last day he could have planted that fall.

## ∞ CHAPTER 10 ∞

# *Marriage and Baptismal Preparation*

There had been no resident priest in Sandy Lake for five years when we arrived. Deacon Walter had died in February of 1990. No marriages and few baptisms had been celebrated since then. Bill and I had been in the rectory less than an hour when the phone started ringing and people began coming to the door. They were so hungry for the Sacraments!

Couple-to-couple sharing became the order of the day for marriage and baptismal preparation. This had the benefit of helping us to get to know the young couples. It also allowed us to tailor the preparation to the couples' individual needs.

We suggested they pray together. Here, we had the time to actually teach them Scripture prayer, with amazing results. It was rewarding to watch the transformation taking place as they began to know each other spiritually and to see their love for each other grow as a result.

In most cases, these young couples had at least one child, so children became part of our marriage preparation sessions, too.

To keep the children amused while the parents were learning, I put together a toy shelf: crayons, paper, books, dolls, stuffed animals, a toy truck and plane, ball, yo-yo, cards and so on. These little people would stick like glue to mom or dad at first, but by the second or third visit, they hardly had time to say hello. As soon as they were inside the front door, they headed for the toy shelf.

On coming in the second time, one five-year-old commented, "I hope that toy shelf is still there!" He reminded us of our grandchildren at home. It wasn't long before they felt comfortable enough to ask for their juice and cookie. Afterwards, they played quietly until it was time to leave.

An interesting side-effect was that when we met these children anywhere else in the village, they always had a big smile for us. We were familiar to them now instead of just being that funny-looking couple with the "white eyes" and bifocal glasses that were only half there.

In the couples, we saw a strengthening of their love. We also saw a change in the way they related to one another as they began to experience their coming marriage as a "holy union," a sacrament, rather than the uncertainty of the situation they had been in. The young men began to walk taller and prouder.

The young women seemed to become even more beautiful.

Gradually, as other couples began to see and hear what was happening, they started phoning for appointments.

The phone rang at eleven o'clock one night. The opening question was, "How long are you guys going to be here?"

Evidently, the young man and his fiancée had started marriage preparation with Deacon Walter.

When Walter died, they had continued with Fr. Dumont, but had never completed the arrangements. It sounded as though they wanted to make sure we would be there long enough to finish things before they would commit themselves to start preparations again.

Their experience made me more aware than ever of how dependent we are on clergy for the sacraments and how spoiled we had been in our past lives, having clergy readily available whenever needed.

How discouraging it must be for these people to have to wait interminably for a priest or deacon to minister to them. It is no wonder so many of them give up in disgust and frustration and go off to do their own thing!

While they may go off to do their own thing, First Nations people believe strongly in having their babies baptized, and will go to great lengths to do so.

Most frequently, just the parent or parents, godparents and baby were present for these celebrations. However, we tried to make them as special as possible, with background music from our electric keyboard music library and little individual baptismal candles.

The baptismal font consisted of a large aluminum basin set up on a white cloth on a small table.

Bill hinted quite broadly that if any of the men who were going into the bush found a large log about four feet high and three feet round, the centre could be hollowed out and it would make a beautiful baptismal font.

Some weeks later, as we were preparing for another baptism, there was a knock at the door. Someone asked, "Could the church be unlocked?" They had something for it.

What a lovely surprise to find our log baptismal font. It was beautifully carved and shellacked, and on casters, so it could be moved easily into place before the altar.

Fred Meekis, Rhoda's husband, had prepared it, and aptly enough, their grandchild was the first to use it. That night, a good crowd came out for the

baptism.

Then it was decided that since many people had been asking for a holy water font, this could serve a dual purpose. It became a real conversation piece, looked quite in keeping with the new church and yet reflected their First Nations heritage.

How deeply rooted the faith is in these people! It may lie dormant for a period, but God has truly put God's law in their hearts and they worship the Creator prayerfully in their own way.

## ∞ CHAPTER 11 ∞

### *Weddings: Simple but Beautiful*

The people in Sandy Lake loved to celebrate and would do so quite spontaneously without much advance preparation. It almost seemed as though the preparation was part of the celebration fun.

Weddings came together quite interestingly and we could learn much from their simplicity.

Instead of costly invitations, the whole parish was invited by a pulpit announcement the preceding Sunday.

On the day of the happy event, the whole village was invited by a radio invitation. This had several side benefits. If something interfered, such as happened when the village was overwhelmed with three funerals in one week, the wedding could rather easily be postponed.

Sometimes, wedding gowns were brought in from outside, but there was also a supply of very lovely gowns in different sizes in the village. These seemed to be readily available to the current bride.

Grooms, best men and bridesmaids wore whatever finery they could beg or borrow. The rest of the assembly attended in their everyday apparel, sort of a "come-as-you-are" party.

Just before one wedding began, I met the groom and congratulated him on this special occasion. His brother, the best man, joined us and I told him how handsome he looked. When I saw the two of them again, they had switched outfits!

Artificial flowers added a bright touch of colour. If the regular organist happened to be unavailable, St. Bernadette's electric keyboard had several appropriate tunes in its music library to supply a wedding march, a signing piece, and a

recessional.

Just as in the city, wedding parties were not always on time.

One bride was only forty-five minutes late. The congregation sat patiently waiting until the ceremony began. Guests loved to throw rice and confetti on the bride and groom.

As the wedding party left the church, regardless of the weather, they formed a reception line outside and all the guests greeted and congratulated them. Then...the big FEAST!

The father of the bride or groom usually went hunting for a moose as the pièce de résistance. Sometimes, there would also be duck, turkey and meat loaf. Or one of the fathers would set his fishnets and smoked fish would be on the menu.

Moose soup and mashed potatoes were staples as well as corn. Always there would be bread and bannock with butter and jam. In berry season, fresh berries or berry pie would be featured.

Not enough seating for everyone at once?

No problem! The elders would be fed first, then the adults, and finally, the children. Before the meal, the parents or several of the elders would speak, sometimes at great lengths, about what this couple meant to them and how they felt about their union.

Then, the officiating clergyman would be asked to say grace and the loving cup filled with grape juice along with the plate of small bread cubes would be passed first to the bride and groom and then to everyone present, so all might share.

Of course, the feast would not be complete without the cake.

The Grey Nuns, Sister Aline Gazaille and Sister Marie Claire Boucher, S.C.S.H., who lived at the parent parish in St. Theresa Point, Manitoba, were expert cake-makers and decorators. They were frequently called on to make the cakes for these celebrations. These cakes were then flown in over the nearly one hundred miles from St. Theresa Point to Sandy Lake.

Fr. Dumont told us of the many flights he had made with a huge cake box on his lap. Everyone waited impatiently for a generous slab of cake. Sometimes it would be accompanied by jello for the children.

As the meal wound to a close, the bride did a quick change from her finery to a track suit and joined the clean-up crew.

Honeymoon trips were rare, and very few couples started out with their own homes. In fact, many couples lived with parents or in-laws for years, often as

long as twenty years, before finally getting their own house.

Although twelve to twenty new houses were built a year, it never seemed to be enough, especially when some older ones were lost to fire.

While we were there, the Sandy Lake Economic Development Corporation was planning two hundred new homes for the near future. These were to have running water and stove hook-ups, which the older homes did not have.

Many homes had no refrigerator and only one or two-burner hot plates for cooking. So, in warm weather, cooking was done mostly outdoors. Drinking water was brought from the school, and washroom facilities were outside. This can seem primitive and quite a hardship to city-dwellers, but it is very true that one does not miss what one has never had.

Bill once experienced a very different kind of wedding.

Sister Jean Cunningham, C.S.J., administrator of St. John's parish in Red Lake, Ontario, phoned one afternoon. If she received permission from the bishop and sent a floatplane for Bill, could he witness a marriage in North Spirit Lake? This was a reserve about forty miles from Sandy Lake.

The pastor from Balmertown, Ontario, who usually looked after North Spirit, was away for two months. The young couple had obtained their license at last and was waiting for a clergyman.

While there was no fee for marriage licenses for our First Nations people, the flight out to Red Lake to get one could cost the couple close to two hundred dollars each.

The float plane landed about ten-forty on a sunny September morning, behind Tommy's Place, a busy convenience store down the hill from the rectory.

Bill climbed aboard and off they soared, enjoying the beautiful fall colours as they travelled. The landscape was a lovely mixture of green and gold and the water sparkled in the sunshine.

About six hundred people lived in North Spirit Lake. St. Eugene's was a pretty little church with living quarters in the back, but no resident priest.

At one time, Sandy Lake clergy had served the people of North Spirit Lake. However, when we were there, they were under the jurisdiction of Thunder Bay diocese.

While not much had been done regularly for a long time, the deep faith of the elders had continued. When the priest was not there, they gathered at the church to sing hymns, read Scripture, and pray the Rosary together.

Upon reaching North Spirit Lake, the float plane touched down by the dock. A waiting boatman motioned for Bill to climb in and off they went about a

mile along the shore. There, Bill was let out to walk up the hill to the church.

The groom, decked out in his unaccustomed finery, had difficulty tying his tie. Sister Jean brought him to Bill for help. In alb and stole, Bill had to put the tie on himself to do it up properly. Then, loosening the knot and slipping it over his own head, he transferred the tie to the nervous groom, settling it in place under his shirt collar. No telling when he would need a tie again. If he kept this one knotted, he might not have to find someone else to retie it for him the next time.

Next problem on the agenda...the ring.

A frantic search through the groom's pockets proved fruitless. Out he went to find his best man and another fruitless search was made through his pockets. The groom's ring was lost.

What to do? Again, Bill came to the rescue, lending his wedding ring for the ceremony.

The radiant bride walked to the church in all her finery. A teen-aged relative was pressed into service to carry the long train so it would not get soiled on the way.

The long-awaited moment arrived as the young couple pledged their vows to one another. An older woman provided the music, as she sang unaccompanied. After the signed documents were safely stowed and rice was thrown in lavish quantities, the return trip began.

As I was sweeping the front porch at about one-fifteen that afternoon, I spotted Bill getting out of a truck in the church parking lot.

The floatplane had difficulty landing at Tommy's Place, so the pilot deposited Bill out near the airport. The truck driver saw him starting the long trek around by road to the rectory and offered him a ride.

Two-and-a-half hours from the time he left, Bill was back at the kitchen table eating a belated lunch.

## ∞ CHAPTER 12 ∞

### *Newspapers, or the Lack of Them*

Newspaper reading, a habit we had grown up with, was rapidly disappearing. When we first arrived in Sandy Lake, Bill would try to pick up a current newspaper while shopping at the Northern Store.

On Monday, Wednesday and Friday, the *Winnipeg Free Press* came in

on the morning plane. However, to get one, you had to be at the store when they arrived, or be out of luck.

On one occasion, as Bill was checking out our few grocery staples, he thought he had lucked out in getting a paper, throwing it in with his purchases. Arriving back at the rectory and sitting down for a good read, he was disappointed to discover that the paper was two days old!

Our children sent us care packages periodically. Sometimes, the contents were carefully wrapped in parts of *The Toronto Star*.

Just as carefully, we would unwrap what was enclosed, smooth out the newspaper gently and thoroughly enjoy the familiar look and feel of our "home" paper.

Of course, we read it thoroughly from cover to cover. Little did it matter that that news was three weeks old!

In the interim, the time saved was well spent enjoying the beauties of nature which surrounded us. This tended to slow us down, put things into truer perspective and nourish the soul, as a newspaper never could.

The beauties of nature emphasize the "Good News" of God's Creation, of which we are a part.

Little by little, daily newspaper reading slipped away as a necessary part of our day. Radio broadcasts or TV news telecasts served to keep us informed, usually in less time than reading the paper took.

What we did miss was that feeling of winding down at the end of a day...that feeling that "my necessary chores are done and now I can relax!" It took a while to find a suitable replacement for that.

## *Bingo and Rummage Sales*

**B**ingos, rummage sales and TV auctions were the big fundraisers in Sandy Lake.

Again, advance advertising was done through the local radio station on the day of the event. Like women anywhere, the Sandy Lake women loved a bargain.

Before the new church was built, the rummage sales were held at people's homes. The clothes on sale were set out in piles, for rummaging, just like the sales tables in any store.

Home-baked goods were always a big seller at these sales, as many of the women did not have ovens and store baking was expensive. Yeast bread and buns were snatched up quickly, a tasty change from bannock.

At one of our sales, we opened up the divider in St. Bernadette's. Sale clothing was hung on hangers on racks for easy viewing. The rest was set out on makeshift tables.

At the other end of the large room were tables where purchasers could sit and enjoy their soup and sandwich lunch. It was a very warm day, but the church building remained comfortably cool inside. Our eating tables were beautified with bunches of wildflowers set in clean, unlabelled soup cans.

Total proceeds that day were \$340—a good effort!

One gokum (grandmother) was forced to buy a bag of frozen blueberries when she discovered her small granddaughter standing before the bag, patiently eating the berries one at a time.

Bingos were held five of the seven nights of the week. These were heavily supported, participants often playing as many as thirty-six cards at a time.

The proceeds of one "Saturday Night Bingo-a-Month" held at the Roman Catholic (R.C.) hall were used to help defray parish expenses. We were told that this usually amounted to about seven hundred dollars.

When we saw the small hall where these bingos were held, we couldn't believe how much money was raised.

Bill and I were both suffering from colds and flu and were too miserable to attend the first R.C. bingo held after our arrival. However, we trotted off to the second one, not knowing quite what to expect. The last time we had played

bingo was in Panama City Beach, Florida, where daubers were used on disposable cards.

Our initial question was: "How are the numbers called? Are they called in English or in Oji-Cree?" We would be in trouble if they were called in Oji-Cree as we hadn't been able to pick up much of the language yet.

The people looked at us as though we were crazy and answered: "They just call numbers. You know, one, two, three, four, five...." We had a good laugh about that.

In our innocence and ignorance, we had arrived without markers for our cards. Looking around, we could see that everyone had come with their container of coloured disks to cover the numbers called. Harriet took pity on us, sharing hers with us so we could play.

There was a great hoot of laughter when Bill won a twenty-dollar game.

The jackpot prize that night was seven hundred dollars if someone filled their card in the first fifty-eight numbers called. When that did not happen, more numbers were added until a winner was found. However, by then the prize money had dropped to three hundred and fifty dollars, still a respectable win.

The R.C. hall was small and poorly ventilated. No-smoking regulations did not exist in Sandy Lake and the villagers were heavy smokers. One could almost cut the air with a knife as the smoke got quite thick.

Bingo started at 7:00 p.m. and ran until about 9:30 p.m. The children played outside the hall, or came in to watch over their parents' shoulders.

Besides the bingo cards, Nevada "chance tickets" were also available and were purchased in great numbers. It was not unusual for people to spend up to sixty dollars a night.

When the bingo was over, the hall was quickly vacated. Winners left happily. Losers were already looking forward to their next opportunity. Players seemed to win just often enough to whet their appetite for more.

Coffers of the current fundraising effort were a little bit fuller, for the time being.

## *Bless the Little Children*

The young children in Sandy Lake were beautiful, with straight black hair and big brown eyes that saw everything. They were fascinated by anything different. Of course, we were different, standing out like sore thumbs with our white hair and light-coloured eyes.

On the first Sunday there, one little child stood holding her grandmother's hand, just staring at us.

Finally, as I looked down and said, "Hello," she said, "You have white eyes. How can you see out of white eyes?"

Another difference the children found was that we were "hairy" creatures. Their people had smooth, hairless arms and legs. The little ones were intrigued with the hair on our arms.

In the beginning, we found it a bit disconcerting to find them leaning on our knee and just feeling the hair on our arms. After satisfying their curiosity, however, they quickly ran off to play.

The third thing that stopped the children in their tracks was to wink at them. This could gain their attention for quite a long period. Not a smile, just a stare, or possibly a trial wink on their part, then off they would go.

These children were much loved by everyone. They were the promise of the future, the continuation of the Band. They seemed almost to belong to the Band rather than to a specific family.

One might be introduced to a couple with the statement: "These are my parents." Then, a while later, the same person might introduce you to someone else saying, "This is my real mother," or "This is my real father."

It seemed that the children were rarely raised by their birth parents, for various reasons. Inquiring about this one time, the answer was that the most selfless thing a person could do would be to give one's own child to someone who hasn't one.

The absence of norms for disciplining the children was another area that was quite different.

When questioned about this, people replied that they believed in non-interference, because they wanted their children to be free to learn from their own experience. By allowing children to see things through their young eyes and

not only through the adults' perspective, greater understanding was gained by all.

Many of the babies were still carried in the traditional tikinagan, which was a First Nations' older version of the Snugli, a baby carrier. Each one was unique. These were beautifully molded wooden boards on which could be fastened the cloth-and-hide carrier. The baby was "tied up" in this, wrapped in a layer of blankets and laced tightly with hide thongs into the outside hide shell. The carrier was very ornately decorated with beautiful beadwork.

A brightly embroidered cloth framed the baby's face. This cloth could quickly be folded down over the child's face to keep out the wind, cold, rain or snow. A leather strap fit over the mother's shoulders and the board rested on her back.

When indoors, the tikinagan stood up on the floor in front of the mother. The face cloth was folded back and the baby had a ringside seat for all proceedings.

If the child cried, the board, curved on the bottom, was simply rocked from side to side. It also served, quite conveniently, as an impromptu change table or crib.

Wrapping the child into the tikinagan was quite an involved procedure. It reminded us of Jesus being wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Mothers told us that the babies liked to be "tied up" and would sleep for a long time that way because it made them feel warm, secure and protected, like being back in the womb.

Many of the children often had a great sense of humour. Wanting to learn some of their language so I could talk with the elders without needing a translator, I tried to enlist the aid of some of the children.

One Sunday morning, as several of them were admiring their flowers in the church flowerbeds, I asked them how to say "flower" in Oji-Cree.

They looked at each other and said something that sounded like "backwayjikan."

I repeated this several times, and they nodded, "Yes, that's right."

When one of the elders arrived, I pointed to the flowers and said, "Backwayjikan."

The elder looked at me with a puzzled expression, then smiled and entered the church.

Another elder arrived and the same thing happened. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the children giggling among themselves.

Harriet arrived and I questioned her about my Oji-Cree word for flower.

She grinned and said, “No, that’s the word for flour—baking flour.”

By this time, the children were laughing uproariously at the trick they had played on me.

∞ CHAPTER 15 ∞

## *Wildflowers and Berries*

Arriving in late May, into what we mistakenly had thought of as the frozen north, we were amazed to experience a 30 Celsius heat wave. The children were swimming in the lake below the rectory, and they continued to do so all summer. Everywhere we looked, wild flowers bloomed in a profusion of variety and colour.

Wild flowers have been a very special pleasure for us ever since cottage days when we would pick a bouquet to grace our weekend or summer holiday table.

At the cottage, however, we had to take a long walk along the road or through the woods to find the wild flowers. Here, we could literally step outside the rectory door and pick an arrangement that would rival many a flower shop bouquet.

Not being a connoisseur of wild flowers, their official names are unknown to me. Yet their beauty and variety never cease to amaze me, and these we call “weeds” or “wild” flowers! Never before had we seen what appeared to be dandelions with three- to four-foot stems, growing in clumps and waving their bright yellow blooms in cheery greeting.

Our first drive out to the garbage dump filled us with awe and anticipation as we drove mile after mile past thousands of wild flower blooms, particularly wild strawberry blossoms. What a crop they turned out to be, just there for the picking.

At our Soup and Sandwich Rummage Sale, the lunch tables were colourful with wild flowers in empty soup cans. Everyone remarked, “How pretty!” Of course, there was a bit of rivalry as to which of the workers would get to take them home after the sale was over.

The road out to the gravel pit was five miles long. When it was made, whatever was growing on both sides was bulldozed back. The soil was rich; it wasn’t long before vegetation again sprang up, especially raspberry bushes.

Before the wild strawberries had ended their cycle, the wild raspberries were ready for our enjoyment.

We thought the strawberries were good. However, the raspberries easily outdid them. They were as large and as plentiful as anyone would find in a tame

patch, only this patch lasted for at least five miles down both sides of the road.

Several days' picking provided lots for immediate eating, some for jam and some for the freezer. In fact, we were able to freeze enough to supply us with raspberry jam all winter.

And before the raspberries were over, Sandy Lakers were already blueberry-picking. We had been told that we would have to travel by boat to a burnt-out area to find blueberries. Our only boat was a very tippy canoe that we hesitated to use.

One day, we took a sightseeing drive out past the gravel pit to where a forest fire had raged shortly after our arrival in May.

Here it was only August and already in that short time new growth had started in the burnt-out area. Part of that growth was blueberry plants and these healthy new plants were producing abundantly.

Again, we were able to pick to our hearts' content, some for immediate eating and more for the freezer.

The following year, the blueberries in the burnt-out patch would be larger and even more abundant.

We tried transplanting a few of these berry bushes to the new flower bed at the side of the Church. It was an interesting experiment to see if they would survive the harsh winter weather, and surprisingly enough, some of them did.

In the meantime, we thanked God for the beauty of Creation that provided a feast for body and soul...the goodness of the berries as food for the body and the beauty of the wild flowers as food for the soul.

Thank you, Great Spirit! Megwetch, Kise Manito!

## ∞ CHAPTER 16 ∞

### *Shopping on the Reserve*

Shopping in Sandy Lake was quite an experience. We had a choice: Tommy's Place or the Northern Store.

Tommy's Place was right down the hill from the rectory. It carried dry goods and a few perishables such as frozen meat, eggs and ice cream, but no fresh fruit and veggies, no milk. Prices were comparable to those at the Northern Store. Selection was slightly different.

In the back of Tommy's Place was the local pool hall. It was a busy spot almost any hour of the day or evening. This was understandable with so many young men not working.

On cool days, a metal drum served as the heating unit, providing welcome warmth. Shelves were piled high and groceries were stacked everywhere.

The children in Sandy Lake, like most children, have a great liking for sweets and junk food. Pop and chips as well as candy and gum were usually placed close to the checkout counter.

At one stage, both Bill and I developed heavy coughs. It was comforting to find that the brand of cough medicine on Tommy's store shelf was Buckley's. This had been a favourite family remedy from way back.

On another occasion, we were completely out of flour, a necessity for baking bread, so I walked down the hill to Tommy's Place.

Of course, the most economical way to purchase flour is in the large size. The larger the bag, the cheaper the price per kilo. After asking for a ten-kilo or 22-lb bag, I realized I would not be able to tote it back up the hill.

Talk about personal service! The cashier said he would take it up for me. Hoisting it on his shoulder, he trotted off, past the cemetery and up the hill behind the church to the rectory. Straight in through the back door he went, depositing the flour on the kitchen table.

By the time I arrived, my helpful deliveryman was having a personal tour of Bill's "tire garden."

Out behind Tommy's Place was Tommy's float plane service, run at that time by none other than Tom Brotherston, owner and operator.

A busy little business, the floatplane was used often for med-evacs (medical evacuations) and other emergencies. It was also used for charter flights,

as well as for regular connecting flights to the Big Hook Fishing Camp.

While Tommy's Place was at one end of the R.C. section of Sandy Lake, the Northern Store was at the opposite end. It was a windowless building, quite small actually for the several-million-dollar business it did in a year.

Beside the Store were several storage sheds. A number of gasoline tanks made up the gas-station part of the Northern Store compound.

The local post office was in one section of the store and line-ups for mail could be quite lengthy. The store's checkout counter line-ups were also very long, particularly on Welfare Day, as people tended to stock up on groceries when their welfare cheques arrived.

It was wise to pick up fresh produce as soon as you saw it; otherwise, you were out of luck. Fresh fruit was not a great problem while berries were in season, nor were fresh veggies, once the "tire garden" started producing.

For the rest of the year, it was a case of make-do with canned fruit and veggies, or with what might be available at the Northern Store.

Early in our sojourn at Sandy Lake, we bought a box of assorted cookies to serve with tea to a visiting priest.

What a rude awakening! A quick review of the receipt showed that the small box had cost ten dollars. That was the last time we bought cookies. Home baking, while time-consuming, was much cheaper.

With a Northern Store card, you could charge purchases and settle the account at the end of the month. This was a great convenience, but could also be risky.

For example, one woman asked us for a ride to the airport, but first she wanted to cash her welfare cheque. Since there was no bank in Sandy Lake, cheques were cashed at the Northern Store and accounts settled. How disappointed she was to find that her purchases that month had eaten up so much of her welfare money that she didn't have enough cash left to buy her plane ticket.

Most things could be purchased in Sandy Lake, for a price, but not always when you wanted them. Since everything had to be flown in, freight charges increased the cost of items considerably.

Once, the I.G.A. store in Red Lake was advertising ten kilos of flour for three dollars. However, to have that flown in, you had to add forty-four cents a kilo for freightage. That was still cheaper than the twenty-five-dollar price tag we often saw in Sandy Lake for that same ten kilos.

One day, we discovered we were on our last roll of toilet paper. The toilet-paper shelf at the Northern Store was bare. We began to experience some

of the frustration of living in the far North. We were so accustomed to the convenience of the corner store or supermarket in the city, where you could find any item and in a number of competing brands.

In the North, we didn't compare brands.

Any brand of toilet paper would do. I stood stewing over our dilemma for a minute or two and then sadly walked to the cashier with the few items in our basket.

As I neared the cash register, on top of a pile of cases of pop lay an eight-roll package of toilet paper. Hallelujah! Someone had obviously picked it up to purchase and then had a change of heart. Saved again!

Another time, in the midst of 30° Celsius July weather, our deodorant was almost gone. That's when we discovered that unscented deodorant was unheard of in Sandy Lake! Being allergic to perfume, this was a problem.

What to do? First, hubby was forbidden to touch the remaining bit. He used the newly-purchased regular deodorant. Then, relatives received a hurried SOS: "Could someone please mail in a new supply of unscented deodorant—ASAP?"

What a relief when the package arrived! I discovered how accustomed I was to my own particular creature comforts, and how cranky I became when they were unavailable.

Shortly after we arrived in Sandy Lake, our sister-in-law, Aileen, phoned asking what were we not able to get on the reserve that we had been used to having at home.

The first thing that came to mind was Earl Grey tea. Not too long after, the biggest box of Earl Grey arrived. What a treat that was! When that box was just about empty, another box arrived. This continued for the whole time we were in Sandy Lake, thanks to Aileen and her thoughtfulness.

Fresh milk was flown in and keeping it fresh in the summer was a problem. Since a four-litre bag of milk cost \$8.28, it was quite serious to have it go sour before being used up.

Here again, economy measures came into play.

Always in the past, we had been able to use up sour milk in baking, but three litres?

Our trusty Mennonite cookbook provided an easy recipe for making cottage cheese from sour milk. Since cottage cheese was not easy to get in Sandy Lake, and since it had previously been a staple in our diet, we were delighted to enjoy this homemade alternative.

In 1993, a new larger Northern Store was opened in Sandy Lake. It is more centrally located for the whole reserve and boasts an in-store bakery. In time, this store will be owned entirely by the Sandy Lake Band.

Mailboxes are another convenience in the new store. People no longer have to line up for their mail. They have a box number and a key to open it.

The old store is being used for extra storage. This means that more staples can be brought in over the winter road and stored until needed. Supplies trucked in are much cheaper than those brought in by plane.

All in all, what shopping in Sandy Lake taught us was patience.

One could get almost everything there, but not always when one wanted it. We also learned to call on our innate ingenuity to substitute something else when the item of our choice was not immediately available.

As the old adage says, "Necessity is the mother of invention."

## ∞ CHAPTER 17 ∞

### *Childhood Lessons*

**C**hildhood lessons! Isn't it surprising how quickly they come back to mind just when we need them?

We had flown to St. Theresa Point, Manitoba, our parent parish, to take part in the annual Faith Rally. Many participants were camping overnight at the conference site by the edge of the lake.

Sleeping on the ground no longer being kind to aging bones, we had opted to return by truck and stay in one of the guest-rooms in the rectory.

Fr. Alberti, our pastor, was on his summer holiday visiting friends and family in Italy. American benefactors had invited Fr. Dumont, his associate, to Big Hook, a fly-in fishing camp. Thus, no priest was in residence.

Shortly after our arrival back at the rectory, the telephone rang.

I picked it up and heard a very distraught woman cry, "Father, come quickly!"

As I explained that no priest was available, the woman became even more upset. She sobbed, "My baby is dying and isn't baptized yet."

Just that afternoon, we had heard that the priests had baptized all the new babies before they left. Obviously, then, this baby must be a newborn.

As a permanent deacon, Bill can baptize. My next question was, "Where do you live?" Distractedly, the woman said that she lived in Wasagamach, another reserve, which was at least an hour by boat from St. Theresa Point. It was pitch black out by this time. We had no vehicle and absolutely no idea of the direction to Wasagamach.

Again, the woman began crying, "My baby is dying and is not baptized." Suddenly, the light switched on in my head, and there from the distant past were the remembered words of that childhood lesson: "When there is danger of death, anyone may baptize!"

Quickly, I said to the sobbing mother, "You baptize your baby." The sobbing ceased for a moment and then she said, "But I don't know how."

Again, the rest of the remembered lesson came to mind: "Pour water over the baby's forehead and say, 'I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.'"

With a great sigh of relief, and not even taking time to say goodbye,

the woman hung up. We never did find out who she was, or if she managed to baptize her child, or whether the baby survived.

However, we were reminded vividly of how much we had always taken for granted in our city parishes, with priests so readily available to look after our needs. People in missionary dioceses do not have such easy access to priests and sacraments.

We also discovered that many well-learned childhood lessons can be recalled to mind when we most need them. *Deo Gratias!*

∞ CHAPTER 18 ∞

## *The Sacred Drum*

Many good native traditions have been lost over the years. The early missionaries in their zeal vetoed the use of many of these traditions, mistakenly labelling them as “devil-worship.”

We heard stories of parishioners who secretly walked long distances to attend other churches where some of these practices were still permitted.

One of these traditions was the Sacred Drum.

At one of our parish council meetings, we were challenged by an elder who had “never heard the drum in church.”

Our immediate reaction was that if there was someone who could play the drum, then why not use it?

Well, that was a little bit too sudden and too revolutionary for our people. However, after quite a bit of discussion and prayer, it was decided that it would be all right if the Sacred Drum was part of our Rosary Procession on August 14, the Eve of the Feast of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven.

So it came to pass that one of our young men joined the leaders of that cavalcade.

Starting in front of St. Bernadette Church, then at each of the stops: the Northern Store, the Band Office, the Nursing Station, the airport, the school, and ending at the United Church, there was a minute of Sacred Drum music with chant.

As one man said later, it was wonderful for all of us, regardless of religion, to be praying together in the Creator’s great Church of all outdoors.

It was quite permissible to use the drum outdoors, but using it in Church seemed to be a different matter. However, gradually the people began to understand that in the past, the drum had been used as a means of communication, to call the people to war, to warn them in time of danger, to summon them to the hunt for food, or to call them to worship.

In our prayer services, the Sacred Drum could still be used as a “call to worship.” This would precede our entrance procession. The young drummer would stand just outside the sacristy door and after drumming for a minute or so, would lead the procession through the church to the altar.

Several of our lay leaders took great pains to visit each of the elders to

explain just what would be taking place.

Even so, on the first Sunday this was implemented, there were many teary eyes in the assembly and some trepidation as together we experienced the beauty of this ancient “call to worship.” This beautiful ritual was not used every Sunday, but for special occasions. It is gradually becoming valued as a very special facet of native spirituality rightfully to be reclaimed.

How sad that so few know how to drum and chant. Some can drum, but don’t know the accompanying chant, or vice versa, some can chant, but have not mastered the drumming. There is hope that this is an art that will be relearned and passed on to future generations.

How fitting it was that the Sacred Drums welcomed the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, to Downsview Park for the closing Mass celebrating World Youth Day 2002. How moving for all 800,000 pilgrims being united in this powerful “Call to Worship.”

## ∞ CHAPTER 19 ∞

# *It's Been a Long Time – A Rosary Procession*

Without a resident pastor, and with a priest coming in to the reserve only once a month at best, we tried to initiate whatever forms of prayer we could. So at one of our parish council meetings, Bill asked if the parishioners had ever had a Rosary procession.

Their first question was, “What is a procession?”

It took a while to explain in English that a procession was a group of people walking together to the same destination.

A Rosary Procession included saying the Rosary while the people were walking. Then this had to be translated into Oji- Cree. It took even longer to make sure everyone understood. When finally they did, they became very excited.

It was decided that the procession would start in front of St. Bernadette Church where we would say the Creed, an Our Father, three Hail Marys and a Glory Be. There would be a minute of Sacred Drum music and a verse of Immaculate Mary, in Oji-Cree, of course. Then we would all process to five different homes in the parish, saying a decade of the Rosary at each, with more drum music and another verse of Immaculate Mary.

Before agreeing to all of this, the parish council members said they would have to take it to the Chief and the Band council as the one road on the reserve would have to be closed in the R.C. section during the procession.

On hearing the request, the Chief said the procession could not be just for the R.C. section, it would have to be for the whole reserve. Plans had to be altered slightly.

We would definitely start in front of St. Bernadette Church, but then we would process to the Northern Store, the Band Office, the Nursing Station, the Airport and the School.

Sanadius Fiddler, minister of the United Church, was invited to join us, along with his parishioners.

Excitement was in the air as two hundred people gathered in front of St. Bernadette’s on August 14th. A supper-time shower had just cooled the air and settled the dust in preparation for our procession.

When Bill heard that Sanadius and fifty of his parishioners were coming, he found a bag of rosaries in the rectory and strung them on his arm. He was busily shaking hands and handing out the rosaries to these visitors when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

It was big Louis, our organist. He said, "It's been a long time, Bill."

Not quite catching his train of thought, Bill said, "It has, Louis? How so?"

"Well," said Louis, "It's been five hundred years since Christopher Columbus came, and look, you're still giving us the beads!"

Some of the men were dressed in their ceremonial ribbon shirts, and the choir wore their blue gowns and veils. Several of these people carried guitars, and as well, our drummer was ready and willing.

After the opening prayers in front of the church, followed by the drumming and singing, those able to walk, processed behind the yellow rectory truck. Bill was driving the truck, and travelling with him were some of the elders.

A number of other trucks were called into service for others unable to travel over the rough terrain on foot. To make them more comfortable, chairs from the church had been placed in the back of these trucks. It was quite a sight to see.

At each stop, those able to climbed out of their vehicle as we stopped to pray.

Our last stop was in front of the United Church where Sanadius gave the final blessing. Then he and Bill shook hands. Each of them shook hands with the Chief. All three later lined up to shake hands with everyone present. It had been a good evening praying together.

The next August, Bill and I had just returned from a trip home to attend our youngest son's wedding. It was encouraging to find that all plans were in place for the Rosary procession and a few things had been changed.

To transport the elderly, the school bus had been called into service.

Most of the same stops were on the route, but two had been added: the new airport and the new filtration plant being built. It was then we found that the stops chosen for prayer were the most important places on the reserve: the Northern Store, the Band office, the Nursing Station, the airport, the school, the filtration plant and the churches.

After Sanadius gave the final blessing, his parishioners suggested that the following year they should provide a supper for all at the end of the procession.

Everyone agreed that this would be a great addition to what had quickly become a meaningful tradition.

## *The Church of All Outdoors*

One summer day in mid-August, Bill and I were invited by the United Church minister, Sanadius Fiddler, to attend the Berry Feast held annually to thank the Creator for the gift of berries.

Sidney, Harriet and two of their boys took Anian, one of the elders, and Bill and me in their boat.

Off we went up the river to a place where their ancestors had originally settled. Quite a number of boats were already pulled up on shore. Nets had been set and fish was being smoked over open campfires.

Many blankets were spread end to end on a flat area at the top of the hill. Men sat on one side, women and children on the other. The Chief, Deputy-Chief and Band councillors sat at one end with several elders who were passing on their oral tradition of what used to be.

Bill and I were asked to join this group. The speeches went on for a very long time.

At our venerable age, Bill and I quickly became uncomfortable sitting on the ground. It caused great amusement among those gathered when we turned back to back to provide each other with a backrest.

After the elders had finished sharing, Deputy Chief Randy Linklater attempted to summarize what they had said, translating it into English for those like us who did not understand Oji-Cree. They had talked about Kise Manito, the Creator, and His creation, “the church of all outdoors,” and what we were doing to it.

Afterwards, Bill approached Randy to ask if he would be willing to come to St. Bernadette Church some Sunday to speak about the same topic: “God and His creation and how we care for it.” Randy agreed on the spot.

It was a very moving moment then to see Deputy Chief Randy addressing his own parish congregation to share with them his message about caring for the environment in a manner pleasing to the Creator. He was so serious about it that, although he had been away on vacation, he made the effort to come back to speak at both Sunday services.

Many of the elders had persuaded their children and grandchildren to

come out to support Randy.

One memorable statement he made was that “We’ve taught our children what to do with a can of pop, but we have not taught them what to do with the pop can.”

As a gesture of thanks, Sidney, chairman of the parish council, declared the following Wednesday to be “Environment Clean-Up Day.” He invited as many parishioners as possible to join him to start cleaning up the area to the east of the church.

Wednesday dawned cold, grey and stormy. One minute, we were in bright sunlight; the next, you could hardly see a foot

in front. We were treated to our first snowstorm of the season as snow showers scudded down the lake, enveloping us in this swirling world of white.

Regardless, about twenty-five to thirty stalwart volunteers, many of them young people, arrived at the church at five p.m.

In spite of the cold and snow, a few feet into the bush we were quite sheltered so that it was almost pleasant. Two hours later, eleven truckloads of garbage had been loaded and carted out to the dump. Afterwards, many of the younger volunteers ended up sitting on the floor in the rectory kitchen enjoying apple slices, cookies and hot chocolate.

Several days later, we were pleasantly surprised to see a group of people industriously at work cleaning up the beach area below the church and rectory.

As one man said, “We’ve looked at garbage for so long, we don’t see it anymore unless someone points it out to us as you did.”

It was easy to see how the garbage accumulated. There had only been an official dumping area for four years when we arrived. Before that, people just dumped garbage wherever it was convenient. For many, without vehicles to transport their garbage, this “convenient” dumping seemed to continue.

The clean-up crew spent most of the day at the beach area, burning debris that would burn and carting what would not to the dump.

At one stage, two men rolled a huge cylindrical object up the hill, stopping to talk to Bill, who was working on the landscaping in front of the church. It seemed that this object could not be burned and yet seemed too good to just “dump.”

Someone suggested it be taken up to Deacon Bill, “He’ll use it for something.” The process of recycling was being reintroduced to Sandy Lake.

Recycling was a way of life with their forefathers. If an animal was killed for food and the hide for clothing, the bones were always buried as an offering

to the Creator, Kise Manito, hoping that the animal would come to life again to provide for the people.

Respect for creation was innate in these people, but some of the traditions had been forgotten and they needed to be reclaimed. These are an outdoor people, happiest when they can spend time in the Creator's "church of all outdoors."

## ❧ CHAPTER 21 ❧

### *Lessons: Music, Math and Baking*

One of the exciting things about Sandy Lake was the number of unexpected requests.

Not long after our arrival, the telephone rang. A young woman wanted to speak to the "Mrs." Her nine-year-old daughter's birthday was the next day. There wasn't time to order in a cake from Winnipeg or Red Lake. Could I bake her one?

This took me completely by surprise until I recalled that the two Grey Nuns in St. Theresa Point, our parent parish, baked cakes and expertly decorated them for weddings, birthdays and other special occasions. This was one of their big fundraising efforts.

Quickly, I assured the young woman that I didn't bake and decorate beautiful cakes like Sister Aline and Sister Marie Claire. However, I would be happy to help her out of a difficult situation by baking a birthday cake such as I used to make for our ten children when they were small.

So, racking my brain for the old familiar "Dream Cake" recipe and the method of turning it into a funny, pink elephant cake that could be cut handily into many slices at a party, I managed to make a passable birthday cake.

It had taken most of the morning to mix, bake and decorate, and I was tired.

When the child's father stopped by to pick up the cake in the early afternoon, his first question was, "Can you bake another one before dinner?"

Reluctantly, I had to refuse, as there was not the time, the ingredients nor the energy to repeat the morning's process. Besides, other obligations were already scheduled for the afternoon.

It was several days later when I discovered that one of the reasons for

such a request could be that many houses were not equipped with ovens.

In fact, on some of our home visits, it became apparent that some people cooked on one-burner hot plates supplemented by wood stoves in winter or outdoor fires in summer.

Another unexpected request came from the young girls who wanted to learn how to make muffins. They would come and bake and then take home their finished product. This became rather an expensive proposition both in time and in cost of ingredients, but fortunately became less of a demand as the summer holidays ended.

One of our newlywed couples had a shy request. Could they have my cookie recipe? Her birthday was the following Sunday. They would like to make and serve some of the cookies, which they had sampled at the rectory and liked.

Another time, one of our Children's Liturgy teachers, who also taught at the school, phoned to see what kind of cookies I made. She would like to serve some on Parent's Night just before Christmas. If she paid for the ingredients, could I make her some?

Then there was the young man who told his family we always served him coffee and cookies when he came to visit. He just couldn't resist our cookies.

Shortly after the old church organ returned from a trip out for repairs, there came another request: "Could you teach me to play the organ?"

Years ago, as a child, I had taken piano lessons, but certainly not enough to qualify as a music teacher. However, I could read music well enough to number the notes of simple Christmas carols and put corresponding numbers on the proper keys on organ or keyboard.

The first budding musician arrived with her own Casio keyboard and we tried the play-by-number method. Her mother was out for medical tests at the time and came home to the pleasant surprise of hearing her daughter playing her favourite carols.

The second aspiring virtuoso came and worked tirelessly for half an hour before being interrupted by a third hopeful with great play-by-ear potential. Then I discovered why real music teachers have assigned hours for students. More progress is made one-on-one. There is not so much competition and stress for playing on the one keyboard.

One day, a young mother of six arrived at the rectory door. Her father had suggested that she come. Maybe she would learn something. She had left high school at an early age to care for her children. Her big dream was to complete high school and get her diploma.

With a few inquiries, we were able to hook up the young mother with the Independent Learning Centre that offered correspondence courses. Her first course was Math, which we both struggled over in the beginning, but which she eventually completed, increasing her self-confidence tremendously.

All these experiences surfaced several needs for Sandy Lake, the first one being a qualified music teacher. The children were very musically inclined and the church keyboard could be put to good use for lessons and practice.

Another need was for some kind of cooking/baking instruction. The new houses being built were equipped with heavy-duty wiring for stoves and refrigerators. Women were going to want and need to know how to use them to advantage for their families and friends.

Now baking and music expertise and math ability seemed like the least important qualifications for our position as missionaries in Sandy Lake, but the Holy Spirit works in strange and wonderful ways.

## ☞ CHAPTER 22 ☞

### *Music in Sandy Lake*

**I**t was an eye-opener to see how important music was to the people of Sandy Lake. Hymn-singing was a big part of the first wake service we attended, lending a prayerful background and musical support to the mourners.

When one of our parishioners died mid-July, the speakers and portable keyboard were borrowed from the church and set up at her family home and there was dawn-to-midnight music broadcast through the area. Some of this was taped and played over the local radio station in the weeks following.

The favourite music in Sandy Lake seemed to be country-gospel music with a distinctive Sandy Lake beat.

During church services in our early days there, a familiar hymn would start and we would be ready to join in loud and clear, only to find we had to accommodate our old version to the new Sandy Lake beat.

It was always very moving to hear old familiar hymns such as “Nearer My God To Thee” sung in Oji-Cree. It was also great to have the time to sing all the verses.

In city parishes where parking lots have to be cleared in ample time for the next Mass, there is rarely time for more than one or two verses.

In Sandy Lake, all verses were sung and so the familiar tune became like a mantra, leading us deeper into prayer. Even when you could not understand the words, it was very prayerful and often moved me to tears.

It was amazing to find how many people in Sandy Lake could play a musical instrument, mostly by ear. Would the same thing happen in cities if music teachers were simply not available?

No doubt, when these older musicians are gone, there will be younger people to take their place even without formal music training. A sing-along at any gathering seemed to be the norm.

Occasionally, a family or group would be invited to sing on radio or TV for the community. A sing-along following our Wednesday study/prayer sessions became an important drawing card. Quite a number of young people came out for it and were open to learning new songs and attempting to sing them in rounds.

Visions of what could be done in terms of choir or glee club flashed through our minds. Oh, to have a bit more musical ability to touch these eager young people! It would give them something constructive to do, at least one night of the week.

Our eager organist-by-ear was ready to give a first performance for his mother, only to be surprised and overwhelmed by the stage fright he experienced when a number of people wanted to watch. However, after we moved out of his line of vision, he performed admirably for his mother’s benefit. She was pleased and surprised by his progress.

Perhaps, he is the family member who will follow in his grandfather’s footsteps as church organist. In the meantime, his enthusiasm and talent were being channelled productively.

## ☞ CHAPTER 23 ☞

### *The Children’s Liturgy*

**O**ne of our earliest attempts at fostering lay ministry and training was to initiate a Children’s Liturgy at each of our Sunday Communion services. The people were not quite sure what we were talking about, but seemed to go along with it quite willingly.

Harriet had been meeting with the First Communion candidates on

Sunday afternoons. As the good weather arrived, the children became more and more reluctant to spend their afternoon indoors studying. It was decided to discontinue First Communion classes until the fall.

Nonetheless, more and more children were attending our two Sunday services. They were bored and restless. What to do? We asked Harriet to help us find some volunteer leaders. Two young mothers, who were also teacher aides at the school, enthusiastically agreed to help.

A quick look through available texts for these budding catechists had produced a Grade 1 book with colourful pictures that seemed to fill the bill.

The theme was appropriate: thanking God for creation. The good weather was at its peak and there were many obvious things all around us for which to thank our Creator: earth, water, sun, sky, wildflowers and berries, to name just a few.

Evangeline Meekis arrived fairly early on the first Children's Liturgy morning so we invited her to carry the Children's Bible in procession in front of the reader carrying the Lectionary.

After the opening prayer, Deacon Bill invited all the children to line up behind her and off we went to the back classroom. The room was filled as the volunteers observed.

When it came time for the children to work on their pictures, they were ecstatic. In fact, we often wondered if the only reason that some of them came to the Children's Liturgy was to colour a picture. No doubt the Holy Spirit can work mysteriously even through a picture.

When a knock at the door told us it was time to return to the general assembly, many did not want to leave the classroom.

One by one, we had everyone lined up behind Evangeline carrying the Children's Bible.

Off they trotted to take their colouring to Deacon Bill who commented on each work of art, their offerings to God, and then placed them in front of the altar. The children and adults were enthralled.

The youngest member of the group was little two-year-old Jonah, whose mother Myrna Mamakeesic had volunteered to help. Jonah had used every colour in our box of crayons on his picture. He was thanking the Creator for colours.

As the weeks progressed, more and more children began to arrive for the Children's Liturgy. They were not always on time, so the lesson often had to be repeated again and again. Repetition became one of our valuable tools of

teaching.

The elders began to appreciate their quieter Liturgy of the Word. If a child or children arrived after the service had begun, they quickly saw that these little ones found the children's classroom.

One Sunday morning, our volunteer teacher could not be there and I had to fill in at the last minute.

The Gospel theme that day was the Good Shepherd.

It wasn't until the lesson started that I began wondering if these children would know what sheep were. How could I teach about the Good Shepherd if sheep meant nothing to them? Rather hesitantly then, I said, "Does anyone know what a lamb is?"

Dead silence! I waited and waited and finally little three-year-old Paul whispered, "A baby moose!"

I could have hugged him right there. For our First Nations people, moose provided everything that sheep had provided for the people in Jesus' time on earth: food and skins for shelter and clothing. The lesson was not lost after all as I silently thanked the Good Shepherd and little Paul.

With numbers increasing as the weeks went on, the classroom became overcrowded.

When September rolled around, First Communion classes got underway. The older children involved in these met in the second classroom, relieving the overcrowded conditions in the first room.

One of our newly married couples volunteered to prepare the aspiring First Communicants. They enjoyed this involvement so much that they also agreed to return for the afternoon service to look after the Children's Liturgy.

An early request to the Archdiocesan Office of Catechesis produced a beautiful Children's Liturgy series by Sister Celine Graf, O.S.U., from Muenster, Saskatchewan.

Sister Celine had set up her program following, quite closely, the format of the Liturgy of the Word used during Mass or our Communion Services. This included an introduction, an alleluia, the Gospel of the day in language the children could understand, a teaching on that Gospel and prayers for their special intentions.

Then there was an activity for the children: role-playing or a storybook to hear or a hymn to sing to help them learn about the Gospel message. Always, there was a picture to colour and take home to remind them of what they had learned.

Once they started to know some hymns and as they were called to rejoin the general assembly, the children would gather around the microphone and guitarist to sing their song. Proud parents and grandparents smiled indulgently, even when the music was slightly off-key. The children then rejoined their families for the remainder of the service.

It was amazing what the Children's Liturgy had done for everyone.

The children were now excited to come to church. They had an activity of their own which they could understand. Some of their drawings indicated budding artists in the church community. Their singing was improving. They were learning in words they could understand about Kise Manito, their Creator.

Adults could enjoy their Liturgy of the Word in relative peace and quiet without restless, bored children and grandchildren.

The teaching team was growing by leaps and bounds in new self-confidence, in selfless ministry, in the joy of achievement and in enriched faith.

How rewarding it was to see all this happen over such a short period.

## ∞ CHAPTER 24 ∞

### *Bible Circles in Northern Ontario*

**B**ible reading and study was a way of life in Sandy Lake. We tried to nurture this carefully.

Many young couples were coming to us to arrange their marriages. As part of their marriage preparation, we were teaching them to pray Scripture as a couple. This had quite an impact on their relationship.

One young man came to share about his concern because their marriage had been arranged and they didn't really know one another. Then he went on to say that it was through Scripture prayer that they began to discover each other, not just superficially, but on a deep spiritual level. They were very happy together and had even volunteered to help with the Children's Liturgies.

Another couple shared Scripture prayer with their parents as they prayed over which readings to use for their wedding service.

Bill and I had used this simple form of Scripture prayer for many years since we had first been introduced to it during a weekend on prayer facilitated by Father Christopher Rupert, S.J.

Not only did we find the prayer beneficial for ourselves as a couple, we had also used it successfully with groups of varying sizes from two to ten. Some of those occasions were with marriage preparation classes, Rite of Christian Initiation groups, prayer groups, school staffs and married couples' retreats.

Two of our sons, both teachers, learned the method to teach to their students during religion class.

When there is no priest available to celebrate Mass for the community, the pastoral administrator uses the best means available to nourish the faith of the people. So in late September, we decided to introduce more of our parishioners to Scripture Prayer after the homily at our two Sunday services.

In preparation for this, we invited the elders who spoke only Oji-Cree to come to a practice session at 10:30 on a Wednesday morning.

With Tom and Sidney interpreting for us, we attempted to lead them through a session on Scripture Prayer. All of the elders listened intently and then tried to put it into practice. When it was time for lunch, they still seemed very bewildered, saying, "We're not ready yet. Can we come back tonight and try again?"

Of course, we agreed. Again, that evening, they tried very hard. Turning to Tom, I asked him if he thought the elders understood what they were to do.

In a quiet voice, Tom said, "From where I'm sitting, this looks next to impossible, but I think we have to give it a try."

With that, Sidney stood up to say that the last time he had seen Bishop Peter, he gave Sidney a message for the people saying, "I don't know when you will need it, but you will know the right time."

Sidney felt that was the right time and the message was, "Be not afraid. I am with you always." When the group heard that, there was a sigh of relief, and everyone departed, encouraged and uplifted. Following that, we had a practice session for the whole parish.

On the first Sunday, the usual number of people arrived. At each service, after the homily, we divided them into English and Oji-Cree groups of eight to ten people.

One person in each group read the Gospel aloud. After a short period of silence, each person in the circle shared the word, phrase or verse they found comforting, but gave no reasons.

A second person in each group read the Gospel aloud. This time, everyone shared the word or phrase or verse they found disturbing or challenging. Again, no reasons were given, because we were still letting God set the agenda. If we gave reasons on the first or second readings, we could have locked ourselves into that position, which might have been ours only, not God's.

After the third reading, we shared the comforting, the disturbing or challenging and our reasons why. The final task we did in each group was to share what it would cost us to live that Gospel that week. What would I have to do in my own life to live that Gospel?

Having spent several anxious sleepless nights before the practice sessions and live experience, we were amazed at what happened. Truly, God was with us.

People began to arrive earlier. Attendance increased until there would be four or five circles of eight to ten people at each of our Sunday services.

There was no opposition to the circles; the sacred circle of life is important to these people. Because there were no wrong answers, people felt free to share. After all, the way God speaks to me through Scripture can be different from the way God speaks to you. Neither is wrong, just different.

On the third Sunday, we asked one of the women if it was getting a bit easier. Her answer: "Of course, because we study the Gospel before we come

now."

Later on, we heard via the grapevine that relatives living in our parent parish in St. Theresa Point, Manitoba, were beginning to comment on the fact that the people in Sandy Lake were studying the Bible. Why couldn't they?

One young man, who had been baptized just two weeks earlier, when asked to share what he found comforting, chose "A reading from the Gospel according to Mark." That told him he was going to be reading the Bible and the most comforting thing he could think of was just that—reading the Bible. Pretty profound for a new convert!

The number of young adults coming out for our English service was inspiring. There was a "no-nonsense" attitude about them as they prepared to pray and to share the Word. Renewal was beginning. The Holy Spirit was certainly breathing new life into St. Bernadette Mission. It was exciting to watch it happen.

The intention when the Bible Circles started was that they would be held for six weeks in the fall and six weeks in the spring. We were with them for two six-week sessions but weren't sure that they would continue after our departure.

It was a pleasant surprise then, a year and a half later, to hear from Harriet that they had just completed their third series of sessions since we had left.

For those interested, here is the simple Scripture Prayer Formula:

- First Reading
- Short silence
- Share comforting word, phrase, or verse
- Second Reading
- Short silence
- Share disturbing/challenging word, phrase, or verse
- Third Reading
- Short silence
- Share comforting/disturbing/challenging word, phrase, or verse, and

why?

- What will I have to do to live this Gospel this week?

*(Note: You don't have to be in a group to do Scripture Prayer.)*

It works very well when you pray it alone.

Then the sharing takes place just between you and God.

∞ CHAPTER 25 ∞  
*‘Going Out’*

Whenever a person left the reserve for whatever reason, Sandy Lakers would say they were “going out.”

Our first experience of “going out” occurred at the end of July, about two months after our arrival in Sandy Lake.

We flew to a faith rally in St. Theresa Point. Both priests in residence there were away at the time, but the two Grey Nuns, Sister Aline Gazaille, S.C.S.H., and Sister Marie Claire Boucher, S.C.S.H., made us most welcome.

The day after our arrival, we became concerned because the twelve people who were to join us from St. Bernadette Mission had not yet arrived. Then, we received word that one of our parishioners had died. Fr. Dumont had also been alerted and he accompanied us back to Sandy Lake for the funeral. It had been a very brief respite, but a pleasant change, nevertheless.

Our next experience of “going out” started in October, as we headed home for some rest, relaxation and some fundraising. Most importantly though, we wanted to celebrate some time with family and friends.

The trip took about nine hours and three different planes. Sister Jean Cunningham, C.S.J., the administrator of St. John the Evangelist parish in Red Lake, met us at the airport. She helped us to pleasantly fill a two-hour stopover, treating us to lunch in Balmertown.

We were not prepared for the culture shock of seeing cement runways, driving on paved roads, and eating in a restaurant. Bill and I both enjoyed our first hamburger in four months.

Soon we were on our way to Thunder Bay. There, an unexpected stopover was occasioned by a Toronto Air Traffic Controllers dispute. However, eventually we were on the last lap of our 2,300-km journey south.

The old adage, “Absence makes the heart grow fonder,” was proven true as we were warmly welcomed home. One son and daughter-in-law met us at the airport. The new Terminal 3 had been completed and opened in our absence. It was quite an improvement.

Most of the family gathered at our home that evening for an impromptu celebration. Those unable to come phoned. It was good to be home again, to see our children and grandchildren.

Culture shock hit us once more, however. Having become accustomed to seeing olive-skinned people with black hair and brown eyes, we were now looking at fair-skinned people with red, blond or light-brown hair and blue eyes.

One of our granddaughters asked me for a drink. I stood in our kitchen looking at all the cupboard doors and found I could not remember which cupboard held the glasses.

Apologizing to little Julie for taking so long, she very sweetly said, “That’s all right Grandma, you’ve just been away too long.”

Could I really have forgotten in only four months?

Bill and I were both unprepared for the very evident hunger in our family and friends to hear as many details as possible about our lives in Sandy Lake.

Our three-week Toronto stay was crammed with get-togethers with family, friends and acquaintances. It became almost boring to repeat the same stories over and over. Yet people wanted to know and many wanted to be involved in whatever way possible.

One Sunday, Bill preached the homily at a small parish. Afterwards, we both shared about the beautiful people of St. Bernadette Mission, such as Esther Linklater and Norman Meekis. We told them about some of the drawbacks of life in Sandy Lake, such as the high cost of goods, all of which had to be flown in.

A second collection was taken up to help support our cause. The pastor was amazed at the generosity of his people. This was a working-class area with lots of young families, heavy mortgages and many out of work. Yet, they gave unselfishly.

One woman said, “No one ever told us about the Canadian missions before. Besides, you told us about real people and what they were trying to do and we wanted to help.”

Of course, all the advance publicity paved the way for our fundraising. There had been a full-page article on St. Bernadette’s with pictures of Sidney and Harriet, our parish council chairman and his wife, and Bill and me, in seventeen Catholic papers across Canada. As well, there were also articles in the Catholic Missions In Canada and the *Companion* magazines. Many people had read these.

When we first heard about all this publicity, we jokingly said to Sidney and Harriet that they could walk down the street in Halifax or Edmonton, or any large city across Canada and people would say, “Why, there are Sidney and Harriet from Sandy Lake! We just read about them in the paper.” Well, that very thing did happen to us in Toronto.

One day, we were doing many errands downtown before meeting friends for lunch. While renewing a newspaper subscription and rerouting it to Sandy Lake, we were busily answering the receptionist's questions.

Another woman, working away at her computer, kept looking in our direction. When she heard St. Bernadette Mission, her head came up and then when she heard Sandy Lake, she jumped out of her chair saying, "I just read about you two."

Shortly after, we were coming out of another downtown building, when a young woman walking towards us called out excitedly, "There's that famous couple from Northern Ontario."

Several years before, the young woman had participated in a workshop we were facilitating for lectors. Of course, she was very interested to hear about our involvement in Sandy Lake.

Because our visit home was brief, each meeting with friends and extended family seemed special, to be savoured in the long weeks of our next stint in Sandy Lake.

There was the annual Diaconate General Meeting, which enabled us to see a goodly number of our deacons and wives in one location all at once.

There was the drive to Lindsay to visit Bill's ninety-seven-year-old mother who was in a nursing home. She looked years younger in a powder-blue track suit, her hair nicely done, and sitting up brightly in the dining room waiting for her lunch. This trip also gave us the opportunity to visit Bill's brother and sister, their spouses and some of their children.

A neighbour decided she should entertain us at dinner. She also invited two other women. All of us had been original homeowners on our street. That was one of our common bonds.

Another bond was that Bill had tended each of their gardens at some point in time. You see, each of them had been widowed, two of them within days of one another. We had a marvellous evening celebrating our long-standing friendship.

On another occasion, my two sisters and I renewed our practice of "siblings' night out" which we had initiated after our mother's death to make sure we stayed in reasonably close contact.

Since all three of us lived in the city, there was no reason to write to one another, except for birthday or Christmas cards. It was a treat then to find how faithful my sisters were in writing to us in Sandy Lake to keep in touch. They also sent in a number of care packages, surprising us with how perceptive they were

to our needs.

Our youngest son was planning to marry the following summer. One of our celebrations was a joint potluck, Thanksgiving and "meeting the new in-laws" dinner.

Our children and their chosen partners have become excellent cooks, so the potluck celebration was like a trip to the Town and Country Buffet, a Toronto family restaurant which has since closed. Forty-some people feasted sumptuously, with at least twelve biblical baskets of leftovers. A good number of our children returned the next day to enjoy a second Thanksgiving Feast.

Another neighbour thought we should again experience our annual fall drive to the country to see the colours, enjoy the beauty of nature and taste again the goodness of lunch at Mrs. Mitchell's Schoolhouse. This is a great little restaurant on Highway 89 at Violet Hill, north of Toronto, across the road from that interesting little craft shop, called "Granny Taught Us How."

Mrs. Mitchell's chiffon pumpkin pie was worth the long drive, just as scrumptious as it had been the previous October. Again, memories were stored up for the months to come.

Slotted into our tight schedule was a trip to our dentist who had eagerly questioned our children about our welfare. He was delighted when Bill gave him two magazine articles to read. After our check-ups and X-rays, an appointment was squeezed into the next day for the necessary work.

Well, not only the dentist, but also everyone in the office: receptionist, assistants, hygienists, all had read the articles and had a number of questions for us when we arrived.

Bill had an extraction and I had several filling replacements.

As we were preparing a cheque for all of this, the dentist said, "Don't worry about that, it will be our donation to your work."

At today's dental charges, the bill must have amounted to over a thousand dollars. Not only that, the dentist and his wife were talking about the possibility of flying in to visit us in Sandy Lake during their vacation the following summer.

Our home parish was celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary. Fortunately, the special Mass in honour of the event was scheduled for the Sunday before our departure back to Sandy Lake. This was the first opportunity we had had to return to our own church, St. Timothy's parish in Toronto.

Bill was invited to assist the Archbishop, Cardinal Aloysius Ambrozic of Toronto. He did so, wearing the beautiful moose hide stole presented to him by

St. Bernadette parishioners the Sunday before we came out. So that they could be a part of his fundraising on their behalf, they had taken up a collection to have the stole made.

The beautiful beadwork had been created by one of the Sandy Lake artists and handcrafted by some of the women. Depicted on the moose hide was the sacred circle, the circle of life. In the circle, were two crossed peace pipes and between the pipes, the matches to light them, with smoke curling up from them.

Also between the pipes were the four colours and four directions: red for the East where the sun rises, yellow for the South and the warmth of the sun, blue or black for the West where the storms come from and white for the North and the snow. These also represent the four races: red, yellow, black and white.

Near the bottom of the front side of the stole was a beaded eagle. First Nations people have great respect for the eagle. They believe that because it flies so high in the sky, the eagle carries their messages to the Creator, and the Creator's messages back to them to help them become the people they are meant to be.

The tea in the church hall after the anniversary celebration gave us an opportunity to meet fellow parishioners and answer their many questions about our venture and about our new friends in Sandy Lake.

Several people handed us generous donations to help with our work. Others asked where donations could be sent. In fact, the day after our return to Sandy, a cheque for one thousand dollars arrived in the mail from one of them.

Then there were the final goodbyes to children and grandchildren, who hadn't forgotten that a visit to Gram and Grampa's usually meant an ice cream cone.

The one sad note during our trip out was the death from cancer of our daughter-in-law's sister Pat, a beautiful thirty-seven-year-old who had touched many people in her short life. We were only able to attend part of her funeral service before heading to the airport for the return trip to Sandy Lake, taking many memories of our loved ones with us.

## ∞ CHAPTER 26 ∞

### *A Native Pastoral Seminar*

The first stop on our return trip to Sandy Lake was in Thunder Bay to attend the annual Native Pastoral Seminar coordinated by Sister Eva Solomon, C.S.J., and her planning committee.

There we were in the line-up, impatiently waiting for a taxi to take us to Avila Centre where the seminar was to be held. Who should appear, but Sister Eva!

We recognized her immediately from the back by the beautiful beaded hair ornament she wore in her long, jet-black hair.

Sister Eva is Ojibway and a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie. She was at Thunder Bay airport to meet Oblate Father Achiel Peelman, a theologian from St. Paul University in Ottawa and resource person for the conference.

What luck for us! With a bit of re-arranging, we were able to put all four of us, plus our luggage, into Sr. Eva's car. Then, we had the pleasure of dining with Sister Eva and Fr. Peelman before driving to the Centre.

After settling in, we headed for the seminar room and were amazed to find how many familiar people were there.

Bishop John O'Mara had been at St. Augustine's while Bill was a seminarian there.

Father Christopher Rupert, S.J., had been our mentor for many years and his guidance has helped us tremendously.

Sister Bernadette Kinsella, G.S.I.C., from Ottawa, had been a counsellor at Petawawa Girls' Camp when Bill was on staff years before.

Sister Jean Cunningham, C.S.J., was then the administrator of St. John's Parish in Red Lake.

Linda Buch, formerly of the Catholic Office of Religious Education in Toronto, was involved in the Base Communities Office in Thunder Bay and was attending the seminar with her husband, Adam.

Later that evening, one of our parishioners from St. Bernadette Mission, Tom Linklater, joined us for the conference. He had flown from Sandy Lake to Red Lake and driven a borrowed car from there to Thunder Bay, arriving near midnight.

Tom was a rapidly emerging leader at St. Bernadette's. It was good to have him with us to help bring back the good news to Sandy Lake.

The first session Monday evening started with the Sweetgrass Ceremony, which is essentially a purification rite.

Sweetgrass is considered sacred because no animals use it for feed. It has no flowers and renews itself only by its roots. It signifies unity with all people across the land.

The person leading the ceremony takes sweetgrass, lights it and silently prays to the Creator and in the four directions, asking for purification.

When praying in the four directions, one asks for enlightenment from the East, as the sun of the East gives light to the day.

From the South, one asks for strength to pass on knowledge to the young people, as the warm sun of the South gives life to plants for growth.

From the West, one asks that our ancestors and children who have gone before might help us to lead a good life using wisdom and knowledge.

From the North, one asks for purity as white as the snow, and power as the polar bear to raise our young well in spite of hardships.

Lastly, one prays in thanksgiving for Mother Earth and for all gifts and blessings.

In a more elaborate sweetgrass ceremony, the leader lights sacred tobacco (a mixture of tobacco, cedar, red willow bark, sage and other materials to be burned as incense), and with an eagle feather directs the smoke upward in the four directions and downward cleansing the place. Sometimes, the leader walks around the whole group.

The leader then lights sweetgrass from the sacred tobacco and moves to each person standing in the circle, allowing them to purify themselves with the smoke. This is sometimes called "smudging" and is done with a gesture of taking smoke into one's breath symbolizing taking in all goodness... "Cleanse our spirit."

Then a gesture of taking smoke and wiping it over one's head to think, to see and speak only good... "our minds."

Next, a gesture of taking smoke, wiping again over one's head and upper body to love only good... "our hearts."

Lastly, taking smoke and wiping over one's head and down over one's whole body to act always in goodness... "our whole being."

After further introductory remarks, the first session was spent in getting acquainted and finding our clan. This was done by rescuing the portion of an animal picture taped to the back of our chair and matching it up with other

participants' portions until we had a whole animal picture, which then became the name of our clan.

Bishop O'Mara, Tom and I became part of the Fox Clan. Bill was a member of the Deer Clan. These became our small discussion circles for the remainder of the seminar, with each small circle regularly reporting to the full assembly.

The circle is important among our First Nations people. It represents creation, the circle of life, the equality of all.

On Tuesday morning, we started with the Sacred Pipe Ceremony, another purification rite. The person conducting the ceremony removes all metal objects—watches, rings, glasses. Some see this as removal of symbols of materialism. Then the person purifies himself or herself with smoke of the sweetgrass and sacred tobacco.

After the stem and bowl of the pipe are purified, the two parts are joined and the bowl is filled with tobacco in four gestures, each sequence observed in prayer. They light the tobacco and pray to the Creator, acknowledging creation and asking forgiveness for any wrongdoing.

Prayer is offered in the four directions and downward to Mother Earth.

Each time the leader prays, he or she smokes the pipe and moves it in a full circle, turning it first toward the east, then south, west, and north.

The leader may then pass the pipe to the person on the left who in turn prays and smokes the pipe or touches it respectfully, and moves the pipe in a circle before passing it on to the next person.

When the pipe returns to the leader, it is usually placed back on the altar.

The bowl of the pipe represents faith. When the pipe is smoked, one feels the faith, the sharing and caring for one's brothers and sisters for whom the pipe is being smoked.

The stem made of wood represents honesty. Sometimes things are added to the stem such as ribbons of the four colours—red, yellow, black and white—to represent the four races and the four directions. Some may add an eagle feather.

Tobacco represents kindness. Because tobacco is nurtured by human labour, it becomes a symbol of human labour when used as an offering.

Putting the pipe together represents sharing and caring. The four parts of the pipe contain the main message we find in the Ten Commandments.

The Pipe Carrier receives the authority to carry a pipe for personal or community use and can pray for an individual or group only after being invited

with an offering of tobacco.

The Carrier cannot refuse to accept an offering of tobacco. However, in prayer or dream, the Carrier may receive a message from the Spirit that does not allow him/her to do the ceremony as requested.

Sister Eva has been given the authority to carry a pipe by her people.

The rest of Tuesday was spent discussing and sharing with our clans or with the full assembly. That afternoon at Eucharist, Bill, wearing the moose hide stole presented to him by St. Bernadette's parishioners, felt right in keeping with the other deacon and the priests arrayed in their hide stoles.

Tuesday evening we were offered our first experience of the Sweat Lodge, another purification rite. Of course, we both approached it rather nervously, which we understand to be normal for first-timers.

The Lodge is made of eight to sixteen willow saplings forced into the ground and then interwoven at the top to form a dome.

Four rings circle the dome, representing the four levels of knowledge beyond our world. They also remind us of the four elements: earth, water, air and fire, without which we could not exist. They remind us as well of the four races of humans on earth.

A pit is dug in the centre of the Lodge to hold the stones which would be brought in from the fire where stones are heated until red-hot. These stones represent the Seven Grandfathers of the spirit world.

Ojibway tradition teaches that these Grandfathers were special spirits that the Creator sent to watch over the Earth's people. They could be compared to the seven spirits referred to in the Book of Revelations, particularly Rev.5:6.

The path from the fire to the doorway of the Lodge, like the umbilical cord, represents the Path of Life. The earth taken from the pit is used to form a crescent-shaped mound beside the fire. This crescent-moon mound reminds us that there is more to life than the physical aspects of it.

Like the moon that shows only one part, we know there is more present in the darkness. The spiritual side that we don't so easily see is also an integral part of the fullness of life.

The Lodge is covered with hides, blankets and canvas tarps to make it airtight and dark. It is designated as having four doors for the spirit world to enter from the four directions. Only the eastern door is used by humans.

Cedar boughs are placed around the perimeter of the inside of the Lodge. Cotton clothing is recommended, usually bathing trunks for men and a long gown for women.

In the Ojibway tradition, mixed sweats are uncommon. It was decided that Sister Eva would lead the women's sweat from seven to eight-thirty p.m. Twelve of us, mostly first-timers, headed down the path to the Lodge.

After a short prayer in each direction around the Lodge, and after we each had made an offering of sacred tobacco asking that our sweat be blessed, Sister Eva led us inside.

Crawling on our hands and knees, we followed her around the Lodge to find our spot on the cedar boughs. Seven red-hot stones were brought into the pit.

Sister Eva lit the Sacred Pipe, smoked it and offered it to us all to smoke. Then the pipe was taken out, to be placed on the crescent mound by the fire.

A pail of cedar water was brought in, some to be poured on the stones, and some for drinking. The flap was closed, leaving the Lodge in total darkness.

The woman beside me had settled herself in such a way that I had room to stretch out only one leg; the other, I had to keep bent.

For the first while in the Lodge, I was very uncomfortable, thinking, "I'll never be able to stand this for an hour-and-a-half, but I don't want to spoil it for anyone else, so I'll try to last as long as possible. Anyway, Jesus, this is supposed to be a sacrifice and it is nothing compared to what you suffered for me on the cross, so please help me to bear this."

Perhaps reading my thoughts, the woman beside me changed her position. I was able to stretch out both legs and became so caught up in the experience that any discomfort was forgotten.

Sister Eva poured cedar water on the rocks. Steam rose and enveloped all twelve of us. Sister Eva began to pray out loud. Then she invited all of us in turn to pray for what we wanted from this sweat.

The sweat is meant to purify the body, mind, heart and spirit. It is also for physical healing. As well, it is a prayer form for spiritual renewal for all people, not just those in the sweat.

In essence, it is held to ask a blessing, to give thanks, and to beg for protection, healing and purification.

When each of us had prayed silently or aloud, according to our choice, the flap was opened. We were refreshed by the cool air and by a drink of cedar water. Then seven more stones were brought in; the flap closed, cedar water poured on the stones, and the sweat continued.

This went on for four "doors" or "sittings." At the end, we thanked our sweat companions and the doorkeepers and returned to the Centre to be

refreshed with juice, fruit and bannock. It is suggested that one fast or eat very lightly before a sweat. We were all surprised to find that rather than eight-thirty, it was now ten-fifteen p.m. We had been in the sweat for three hours.

The men had been waiting a long time for their turn in the Sweat Lodge. However, they had not been idle, for they had been in their Healing Circle, praying for us and for each other and for all people.

Eleven of them proceeded to the Lodge led by Don Goodwin, a native deacon from Minnesota, U.S.A. Their sweat lasted until about one-fifteen a.m.

After refreshments and while the men were in their sweat, we women participated in our Healing Circle.

This was not unlike prayer meetings Bill and I have attended, except that before a person would pray or share, they would take a rock or eagle feather from those placed on a blanket in the centre of the circle. This would indicate that it was their turn to talk.

Some would choose to light sweetgrass or sage as a burnt offering. Sharing could be about how the Creator had been working in their life, or prayers could be offered for self or others and for the men in the sweat lodge.

On reflecting on our sweat experience, we found that a great feeling of unity existed among the participants. First-timers could hardly believe how clean and purified we felt. Our skin was incredibly soft and we experienced a complete feeling of well-being.

In Sister Eva's words: "The sweat lodge itself represents the womb of Mother Earth. The imaginary line between the fire and entrance is like the umbilical cord that gives life while a baby is in the womb. Crawling out of the lodge after purification is like a re-birth..."

"We seek to return to wholeness by our purification of body, mind, heart and spirit. We seek to restore healing to our brokenness. This is accomplished by restoring our relationships, with our Creator, with ourselves, with our fellow human beings and with all of creation. We do this through prayer, song, and Spirit power within the Lodge. Finally, by crawling out of the lodge, we experience a newness of life. Washing with cold water invigorates us and invites us to begin to live again in a new way. The Ojibway people as well as other native groups using the Sweat Lodge ceremony have found a way of returning to their mother's womb to be born again of water and Spirit power, in order to re-experience and share in the Kingdom of God, our Creator, our Father, and our Grandfather."

Wednesday evening, Bishop O'Mara was celebrant at Eucharist, outfitted

in his hide stole and chasuble and feather-headdress-mitre.

The native deacon from Minnesota, Don Goodwin, assisted. Since he did not have his own stole with him, he asked to borrow Bill's moosehide stole, which beautifully matched Bishop O'Mara's native vestments.

That evening, we were treated to a powwow. In the old days, a powwow was very sacred. It was a way of praying for healing, always focusing toward the Creator.

It was a way of honoring those in mourning, giving them permission to start participating in dancing powwow. It was a way of honoring achievements.

Bishop O'Mara had been presented with a ribbon shirt. The material and colours used represented his Indian name: Big Bear. He wore it for the powwow.

A large drum sat in the middle of the gym floor. Four young men sat around it and chanted to the music in a high-pitched keening sound. As they were warming up, a small boy, between two and three, started dancing around behind them in perfect time to the music.

One by one, the official dancers appeared in their elaborate and colourful costumes.

Some had rows of metal objects sewn on, which clanked every time they moved. Others had bells that jingled. The leader was in full feather headdress. They danced around the room, inviting people to join them.

Soon, everyone was up, including the Bishop and wheelchair-bound people. We were all caught up in the feeling of celebration.

The next morning, Bishop O'Mara spoke to the full assembly. For this, he brought in his Talking Stick. This was about as tall as a cane and was like a very beautifully carved totem pole. The significance of the Talking Stick is that as long as a person is holding it, he or she has permission to talk.

At the closing liturgy that morning, a number of diocesan elders were mandated as Anamiat or Praying Elders. Their special responsibility is to pray for the church community.

It was at Sister Eva's invitation that Tom, Bill and I were invited to participate in the Native Pastoral Seminar.

We were very grateful for the opportunity to experience native spirituality in such a rich way. We were also grateful to Sister Eva for her *Resource Booklet* which contains teachings from her seminars from 1987 to 1989 and was published in Thunder Bay in 1991. It is a wonderful source of background material about symbols and ceremonies.

## *A Welcome Home Feast*

**A**t the conclusion of the Native Pastoral Seminar, we were served a substantial lunch. The food at Avila Centre was excellent. Our good-byes were said to new and old friends. Father Chris Rupert had graciously offered to give us a tour of Thunder Bay while we awaited our flight to Red Lake.

The Art Gallery was our first stop. What a delight to view the beautiful display of native art. Native artists Benjamin Chee-Chee's and Norval Morrisseau's works were prominently displayed. Norval Morrisseau's work was of particular interest as Bill had recently baptized one of his grandchildren at St. Bernadette Mission.

Just as we were leaving, a group of Japanese tourists came by. Their tour guide introduced them to a resident artist, Roy Kakegamic. We went over to introduce ourselves to Roy. He was a cousin of Robert Kakegamic from Sandy Lake.

We took some of Robert's paintings to Toronto on our way out so they could be photographed for the 1992 Catholic Church Extension Society of Canada's calendar featuring the work of Sandy Lake artists.

The Thunder Bay Greenhouse in Confederation College was a beautiful oasis of greenery and blooms. Then we went on to Kakabeka Falls and Fort William Reserve.

On the way up to Mt. McKay, we stopped to visit the church built like a teepee. We were particularly moved by the shrine to Kateri Tekakwitha: statue, teepee and birch bark canoe. Beside it was a sacred drum.

A leisurely dinner followed at a favourite watering hole: Uncle Frank's.

Father Chris dropped us off at the airport in good time to check in for our six forty-five p.m. flight. Then we discovered the flight was delayed. We spent the three-hour wait examining every nook and cranny of the airport.

One variety shop carried a goodly supply of native art. Several pieces were by Johnson Meekis, whose paintings we had also carried with us to Toronto for the calendar.

Finally, our flight was cancelled and we were booked onto another airline. In spite of the three-hour delay, Sister Jean Cunningham, C.S.J., and Sister Diane Oberle, C.S.J., were faithfully waiting at the Red Lake airport. They had

kindly agreed to house us at St. John's rectory until Saturday.

Friday morning dawned sunny but cold. The view of the lake from the rectory was breathtaking. Bundled up against the icy temperature, we headed uptown to investigate Red Lake and to do some banking and shop for some staples. That evening, we had our last restaurant meal until our next trip "out."

On Saturday morning, we had been scheduled to facilitate a Ministries Workshop in St. John's parish.

A small, but dedicated group came out to spend the morning with us, learning about the history and theology of ministry and a few basics of specific ministries, especially that of lector or liturgical reader.

By four that afternoon, we were back at Red Lake airport, only to find our plane delayed again; this time, by an hour and a half. Finally, we were on our last lap, with stops at Pikangikum and Deer Lake in Ontario.

Sidney was at the airport with his van, which was a blessing, to help transport all our groceries to the rectory. He told us some people were at the church to welcome us back.

Fifty to sixty people were waiting patiently in the meeting room of the church, trying to keep the moose and turkey warm for our surprise welcome home feast. They met us with a standing ovation that brought tears to our eyes.

People rushed up spontaneously to hug us. It truly felt, as we told them, that we had left home to come home to our other family. It seemed to surprise all of us at how much we had missed one another.

Then things finally speeded up.

It was almost seven when we got there, so they must eat quickly and be on their way. Bingo started at seven o'clock. Bill said the blessing and everyone enjoyed their fill. It was amazing how speedily the crowd dispersed. Several willing helpers unloaded Sidney's van at the rectory and we spent the evening settling in.

It had been a good trip out, but we were happy to be back home again.

## ∞ CHAPTER 28 ∞

# *Hallowe'en in the North*

We were not sure what to expect of Hallowe'en in Sandy Lake, but figured that there would be some kind of activity. So in preparation, we brought in several bags of treats to hand out.

While in the bank in Red Lake, we had also spotted some simple Hallowe'en decorations on the wall and decided to dress up the doors of the rectory.

A large orange garbage bag, some rags for stuffing, two narrow strips cut from the top of a black garbage bag and a black magic marker provided us with the necessary materials. Half an hour of work and, *voila*, two ghosts as door decorations!

We knew they were a hit the next morning when one man arrived, saying, "I like your Hallowe'en ghosts. I was really scared!"

Their sense of humour is very refreshing.

One ten-year-old tramped up the front steps with his head down and almost bumped into the ghost on the front door, quickly backed up and then found that it was a decoration, not a person.

Hallowe'en night arrived, snowing and blowing and very cold. We had our bowl of candy ready, set handily near the front door, but wondered if any children would be out in this frigid weather.

We hadn't long to wait. Dark descended early and while we were still at supper, our first "trick-or-treaters" arrived, a small child accompanied by a parent, who was also in costume.

It took us a while to figure out who they were, but finally recognized our neighbour and her four-year-old son from down the hill. Treats in bag, they headed down the front steps, hopped on their snowmobile and whizzed off into the night.

That set the pattern for the next two hours. Children arrived on foot, on snowmobile, or in trucks, tramping from the church parking lot to the rectory.

The ultimate were the "his-and-hers" matching snowmobiles with a parent and child on each. They were delighted if we could not recognize who they were. That meant that their costumes were a success.

Some carried plastic pumpkins for their treats, others had plastic

shopping bags and still others carried pillowcases, hoping for a real haul.

Hallowe'en was the same as at home. The children were still excited to be getting handed-out treats. They still revelled in the fun of dressing up.

What was the difference? The weather, of course, and the mode of transportation.

We learned one thing though; neither wind nor cold nor a foot of snow could daunt determined "trick-or-treaters."

## ☞ CHAPTER 29 ☞

### *The School System*

The pupil enrollment was quite high for a village the size of Sandy Lake. With a population of close to seventeen hundred, over five hundred of these attended the Thomas Fiddler Memorial School.

The principal and vice-principal were quite progressive in their plans for this school. Many of the teachers came from Newfoundland. They said the Sandy Lake terrain reminded them of home.

Gradually, more and more First Nations people were being trained.

Starting as teacher aides and learning on the job, as well as taking summer courses, these native people could eventually obtain an Ontario teaching certificate. How much better that these First Nations children be taught by their own people who understood their thinking and their traditional culture. No more need the children be separated from their families to attend residential school.

While we were there, most of the young people went to Sioux Lookout, Thunder Bay, Winnipeg or Toronto to attend high school after Grade 10. This meant leaving home at quite an early age. They might get to fly home for Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter and summertime, but the rest of the year they lived away from the reserve.

Going home during school holidays became a very scary trip one time as the students were returning home for Thanksgiving. Because of fog and bad weather, the plane could not land at Sandy Lake and had to continue on to St. Theresa Point.

As it returned to Sandy Lake, the small plane nearly crashed as it landed. Fortunately, no one was injured. However, both parents and students were very nervous about them flying back again to school.

Several years after we left, a new high school was built on the reserve so these young people can now complete their whole high school diploma work right there.

In fact, a number of community college courses have also been brought into Sandy Lake.

One of the concerns of the elders had been that the children could not all speak their first language: Oji-Cree. Since this was the only language many of the elders spoke, it was often difficult for them to communicate with their grandchildren. Oji-Cree is now taught in the elementary school.

As well as their native language, the children are also learning native art, much of which is based on their legends. Sandy Lake has been rich in talented artists. Some of them are very well known in art circles today: Carl Rae, Norval Morrisseau, Robert Kakegamic, Bart Meekis, Johnson Meekis, Randy Fiddler, to name a few.

The 1992 *Catholic Church Extension Society of Canada Calendar*, featuring the work of Sandy Lake artists, has taken their fame far and wide. Several of these artists have taught at the school. Their work is very exciting and inspires the children.

## ☞ CHAPTER 30 ☞

### *Blessing the Learning Centre*

On December 17, we received a call inviting both of us to the official opening and blessing of the Gabbius Goodman Memorial Centre. Would Deacon Bill please bring the holy water?

Gabbius had been an elder who had served on the Band Council for many years. He believed sound education for the children to be of great importance.

The two-storied Learning Centre opened that fall of 1991, providing more classroom space for activities such as high-school upgrading, community college courses and distance learning courses.

A number of people had gathered for the ceremony. Instead of ribbon-cutting, a saw-horse had been set up before the front door. On it sat a beautiful log.

After an opening prayer, this log was sawn in half and the Centre declared officially opened.

Bill was then invited to do a four-directional blessing and sprinkling of holy water on the four sides of the new building. It was a crisp, clear -30 Celsius day.

The blessing of the first three sides of the building went well, but by the time we got around to the fourth side of the Centre, it was being sprinkled with ice cubes, the water in the container having almost frozen.

The warmth of indoors thawed the holy water enough that the two classrooms upstairs and the two down, as well as the furnace room were well sprinkled and blessed.

Representatives of the different denominations on the reserve were invited to speak to the people assembled, or to offer a prayer. Then we all shook hands and moved to the coffee and goodies offered. There was a genuine feeling of camaraderie as we spent a while just socializing.

## ∞ CHAPTER 31 ∞

### *Knit One, Purl One*

A missionary serves in many different and unimagined ways. This was brought home to us very forcefully shortly after our arrival in the North.

Winter was fast approaching. One of the gokums, or grandmothers in Oji-Cree, arrived at the rectory door. There had been snow in time for the children to do their Hallowe'en trick-or-treating by snowmobile. The gokum's concern was that there were not enough mitts, scarves and tuques available for their grandchildren. Could we do anything about that?

An urgent phone call was placed to Catholic Missions In Canada. It wasn't long before a large shipment of beautifully-knitted scarves, mitts and tuques arrived. These we set out on two long project tables in the church hall.

Our multipurpose facility had two sections to it, the church proper and the church hall, which were divided by a folding wall.

Sunday attendance had increased to the point where we had to use both sections for our Sunday service, so the folding wall was open.

To keep parishioners from being distracted by the knitted goods, we had covered the lot with sheets.

At the end of our Liturgy of the Word with Communion Service, Bill announced that many tuques, scarves and mittens had been shipped in and would be available for one dollar each during our coffee/tea social which followed each Sunday service.

Just giving the articles to the people was considered charity and was unacceptable to them. Putting a nominal charge on each item seemed to solve the problem.

Mothers and grandmothers initially ignored the coffee and tea as they quickly sorted through the varied goods. In less than ten minutes, every article was gone, except for one scarf neatly folded in the centre of one of the project tables.

We wondered why, and discovered the answer on closer examination.

Unfolding the scarf, we found it to be about six feet long. It was six inches wide at one end and about sixteen inches wide at the other. Obviously, numerous stitches had been added along the way. None of the mothers or grandmothers seemed to know what to do with it.

So I took it back to the rectory and carefully unravelled the whole thing, ending up with a very large ball of wool. It was so large, in fact, that I was able to create thirteen pairs of small mittens from the one scarf.

The following Sunday at the end of our service, Bill was able to announce that another supply of mittens was available in the church hall for those interested.

Again, the women initially ignored the coffee and tea. In about two and a half minutes, all thirteen pairs of mittens were snatched up, mostly by the gokums.

It was rather a joyful experience for the rest of that winter to see and recognize the brightly coloured tuques, scarves and mittens keeping tiny tots, as well as older children, warm in the -40° Celsius weather.

What a great example it was of how gifts from southern Canada could fill the needs of our Northern missions.

## ∞ CHAPTER 32 ∞

### *Ecumenism in Sandy Lake*

**O**n our arrival in Sandy Lake in May 1991, we had told the people we would stay until Christmas.

As December neared, they began asking, “Do you have to go? Can’t you stay a bit longer? We’re not ready yet. We need you to walk with us for a while longer.”

So another petition was prepared and sent off to Archbishop Peter Sutton and Cardinal Aloysius Ambrozic, Archbishop of Toronto, requesting an extension of our stay. Both granted permission and our commitment was extended to the end of September 1992.

We found the people in Sandy Lake to be very ecumenical, even if they had never heard the word.

Sanadius Fiddler, the United Church minister, invited members of all the churches in Sandy Lake to meet at the United Church on Saturday, December 21 to pray together in preparation for Christmas.

A small group of about twenty-four gathered at 7 p.m. Eight of the twenty-four were St. Bernadette’s parishioners.

John Mamakeesic, the Mennonite minister, was asked to say an opening prayer.

The United Church guitarist then played “Joy to the World,” which we sang in Oji-Cree.

Another minister, whom we had not yet met, spoke at great lengths in Oji-Cree.

Sidney was invited to play the next hymn. His choice was “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” which we sang in English. Sanadius then asked Bill to speak. He chose to read a passage from the Gospel according to Luke, which told the story of Jesus’ birth.

Abel Rae of the Pentecostal Church played and sang the hymn “Safe in the Arms of Jesus.” He had a very beautiful and powerful voice that touched us all.

One of the United Church elders spoke next for quite a long time and read from Scripture in Oji-Cree. So too did one of our parishioners, Norman Meekis.

Then, Harry Rae of the Revival Church shared with us the story of his conversion. This he told, simply and movingly, in both English and in Oji-Cree.

Two other people, whom we had not yet met nor knew, spoke. Interspersed among these speeches, those gathered sang more hymns, including “Silent Night.”

At the end, Sanadius invited all the ministers and elders to come forward. They lined up across the front of the church and Sanadius led them and us all in a closing prayer.

Everyone smiled and shook hands and then moved to another part of the church to socialize over coffee.

As we walked back to the rectory on that crisp, cold December evening, we wondered just where in the big city would members of six different denominations come together for two-and-a-half hours of prayer in preparation for Christmas.

## ∞ CHAPTER 33 ∞

### *The Loved and Respected Elders*

**T**his is one society where the elders are truly prized as being of great worth to their community. Much is made of them and great efforts are put forth to see that they are included in and present at community functions.

On the third evening we spent in Sandy Lake, we were invited to meet some of the elders. None spoke English, or only a smattering, but all graciously welcomed us and told us, through our translator, Sidney, how pleased they were that we had come.

As the good weather arrived, the elders were brought to church each Sunday. It was very moving to see how pleased everyone was to have them with us.

Because trucks are the most common conveyance here, and since only three people could occupy the front seat, either many trips had to be made to transport them, or else some had to travel in the back of the trucks.

It was edifying to see these older people, some quite badly crippled, scramble up into the back of these trucks, just happy to be included.

After our prayer services, they delighted in sitting on the church steps, enjoying companionship, a cigarette and the beautiful view looking out over the lake before their return trip home.

As the weather turned stormy and cold, it was no longer possible for the elders to be at church every Sunday, but they made every effort to attend the wake services, supporting the mourning families simply by their presence. Sometimes we would see them at feasts, or other village celebrations.

Every year before Christmas, the staff at the Nursing Station prepared a special Elders’ Tea.

Statistics told us there were eighty elders in the village. Not all were able to get out for the Tea, but a good half of them did. We also were invited. At the time, we hadn’t quite considered ourselves as elders. However, judging by our chronological age, I guess we did qualify.

The room in the Nursing Station used for the event was festooned with streamers strung from wall to wall. Colourful Christmas decorations transformed all the windows. Long tables stretched the length of the room, and were covered with cheerful Christmas tablecloths.

After Anna, supervisor of the Nursing Station, welcomed everyone, she invited Bill to say Grace. Then the Tea commenced.

Actually, it was quite a feast, with a choice of ham or turkey sandwiches, coleslaw, macaroni salad, bannock and jam, tangerines, pie, fruit cake, cookies, jello and fruit cup. Doggie bags were even provided for those who could not finish their ample portions.

Santa arrived in full regalia. He and Mrs. Santa (one of the nurses) both handed out gifts—a pair of warm socks and a bag of goodies (mints, tiny chocolate bars, candy canes, chocolate buds, fruit gums)—for each participant.

The elders felt cared for and much appreciated. They certainly had a healthy and plentiful meal that day, with leftovers to enjoy for supper at home.

By way of help for these elders, the Band provided a cleaning staff. Their function was to clean the elders' homes weekly, once they were no longer able to do this for themselves. Wood and water were also provided for them. The hunters and fishers on the reserve made sure these valued members of this society had some fish or game meat to eat.

We can learn much about caring for and sharing with our elders from these people.

Their wisdom of years of learned experience is valued. Even when they can no longer work productively for the Band, they are respected and appreciated because they are elders.

Would that the rest of society could adopt this mentality.

## *Christmas in Sandy Lake*

**C**hristmas in Sandy Lake was a wonderful time of celebration. People in the community decided we needed special music to put us in the proper frame of mind.

Several of the men worked very hard to hook up a speaker system over which Christmas carols could be played for anyone within earshot of St. Bernadette's Church.

The tape had most of the tunes we had heard since childhood. Even though the words were all in Oji-Cree, the music still worked its special magic.

If anyone needed to fly out for medical treatment, early December was a good time to go. People could do their Christmas shopping while they were out.

On the home front, the Northern Store cooperated by offering events such as Ladies' Only Night. The women could then shop for their men and children without their purchases being seen by family members. There also was a Midnight Madness Sale.

A representative of the Wee Jee Way Gin Club called on December 20th asking if we would be home that evening to receive a parcel. This club liked to use some of its fundraising proceeds at Christmas to honour those who had done some good in the community.

Although we waited up until after eleven o'clock, no one came to our door. However, the next day, a beautiful frozen turkey was delivered. We were touched to be added to the list of recipients.

Bill invited some of the men to help him build a teepee Christmas crib inside the church. Somewhere in the rectory basement, we found traditional porcelain figures of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the Magi and shepherds which looked quite at home in the teepee crèche. It was beautiful!

On Christmas Eve, the people had a Snowmobile Train tradition. Several snowmobiles started out on the R.C. side and drove through the reserve. Other snowmobiles joined in at the end of the line and continued on. Eventually, the Train wound its way out onto the frozen lake.

We had been told about this and were watching for it from a ringside seat at our sitting-room window.

It was an unforgettable experience to see the lights of the snowmobiles

travel through the village and then settle in formation out on the lake. The Snowmobile Train ended with a lovely fireworks display. Then, everyone dispersed and prepared for Midnight Mass.

A visiting priest had flown in to be with us for the Christmas Liturgies.

People were in the church very early. So many wanted to go to Confession before Mass, that we were late in starting. No one was upset by that at all, but waited patiently. The dividing wall was opened and every chair was pressed in to service.

Many people had to stand around the perimeter. All were attired in whatever finery they had; some in fringed moosehide dresses, jackets, hats or beautifully beaded snowshoes or mukluks.

Extra musicians had joined our regulars to help make the music even more beautiful for the celebration. Our drummer was on hand to “call us to worship” and to lead the Entrance procession.

Readings were done in both English and Oji-Cree, as was the homily, which the priest preached and Tom Linklater translated.

At the Consecration, Father opted to do a four-directional elevation, which John Fiddler accompanied on the Sacred Drum.

As I looked out over this gathering of our deeply spiritual First Nations people, I felt a great sadness. It seemed so incongruous that this assembly be led by two white men: the visiting priest and Deacon Bill.

I hope that in the not too distant future, more of our First Nations people will be ordained to minister to their own.

After Mass, bags of fruit, nuts and candies were distributed to the children. Of course, they were ecstatic.

It had been decided that Midnight Mass should be televised to the whole reserve so that those who could not come to the church could still participate.

While there was a TV and radio station on the reserve, it still took a great deal of effort to hook everything up so this would work. Before closing the church after everyone had gone, the camera was focused on the teepee Christmas crèche. This was the image sent out to anyone turning on their TV Christmas Eve, Christmas night and Christmas morning.

Our congregation on Christmas Day was very small.

Before the homily, the priest and Deacon Bill opted to “pitch their tent among us,” which was part of the Scripture reading just heard. A small table was brought in and covered with a white cloth. Chairs for the twelve of us present

were moved into a small circle around the table.

Father beautifully explained the Gospel in a way none of us had ever heard before. It was a very intimate breaking of the Bread of the Word and of the Eucharist which moved us all profoundly.

That afternoon, Father decided to get some fresh air and exercise by walking across the frozen lake towards the airport. While out, he met some small children playing in the snow. As he neared them, they called, “Hello, Santa! Hello, Santa!”

The priest said, “I’m not Santa. I’m too skinny to be Santa.”

They chatted for a few minutes and as he left them, they called, “Goodbye, Santa.”

While he was not dressed in red, Father did have a white beard. Perhaps meeting him and being convinced that he was Santa was the highlight of the day for the children.

Our people spent the rest of the day and of the following week visiting relatives and friends, sharing in their feasts. Having celebrated Christmas with our Northern family, it was time for us to journey “out” to celebrate some time with our southern family.

Before leaving for our previous trip home, I had asked Harriet where I could go to have moccasins made for our twenty-four grandchildren for Christmas. She sent a woman to see me who said she would be willing to do that. All I would need to do was to get newspaper prints of their feet.

To do this, and still keep the moccasins a surprise, we made up a story that the nurses in Sandy Lake were doing a survey to discover whether children from southern Ontario had larger feet than children of the same age in Sandy Lake. Could they please outline their feet on newspaper and print their name and age on each for us?

As Christmas neared, I began to panic in case these would not be ready by the time our flight south was scheduled. However, the day before we left, the woman phoned to say I could come to pick them up.

What a beautiful sight awaited me! She had all twenty-four pairs sitting on her kitchen table. Each pair was beautifully beaded in a different design and decorated with rabbit fur, white for the girls and brown for the boys.

We needed a big suitcase to accommodate all of these beautiful moccasins on the flight home.

The grandchildren were ecstatic. Most of them, that is. One little grandson sadly wondered why the bunny had to die to decorate his slippers.

Some wore them until they literally fell apart.

Others just outgrew them. Some took them to school for “show-and-tell.” Others didn’t want to wear them; they just wanted to take them to bed like a teddy bear.

Some of the older ones knowingly said, “So that’s why you needed our newspaper prints!”

∞ CHAPTER 35 ∞

## *A Child of Christmas*

So very precious in many eyes and much loved, she had been named Wapunokapowekway Allana Princess Kateri.

Her Indian name was Wapunokapowekway which means Early Riser. Her biological mother named her Allana. Princess was what her real father called her. Her adoptive parents, Sidney and Harriet Fiddler, chose to call her Kateri.

She was a tiny bundle of joy, flawless in the eyes of those who loved her. A small harelip awaited surgery (and would soon be corrected perfectly).

Allana’s birth mother had chosen her daughter’s parents. “Will you raise my baby?” she asked them, months before the birth. The adoptive father shared with us, “If someone offers us their baby, we won’t say no.”

The advent of the baby’s coming coincided with and contained as much anticipation as the Advent that we all celebrate, in preparation for Christmas, although her actual arrival was closer to Epiphany or Little Christmas than it was to December 25.

Baby Allana was a wonderful, belated Christmas present to the whole adopting family that consisted of father, mother, four older brothers and two adoring sisters. The entire family was enthralled with this tiny mite of humanity.

At the slightest whimper, her seven-year-old brother was at her side instantly. There always seemed to be waiting arms to rock her and soothe her. She must have truly felt that she was precious and loved.

Soon after a baby’s arrival, the parents usually hold a welcoming feast. We were invited to Allana’s. She was sharing the feast with two-month-old Chyenne.

Anian, one of our elders, said an opening prayer, then took Chyenne in his arms and spoke to her in her native language, Oji-Cree.

For the whole of his talk, Chyenne looked at Anian with her big brown eyes. Occasionally, she broke into a big smile, as though she understood what he was saying. I found myself wishing I could understand, too.

Then it was Allana’s turn. Her mother passed her to big Uncle Louis Fiddler, who took her lovingly in his arms and began to speak. Although she was almost asleep, Allana also broke into smiles several times.

At the end, Louis kissed Allana gently on her cheek, just as Anian

had kissed Chyenne. Then, they fed each baby a small helping of baby food (condensed milk), which was symbolic of the nourishment they would receive throughout life.

Fr. Dumont had flown in from St. Theresa Point for the weekend. He spoke briefly in Oji-Cree, ending with a blessing. A plate containing small pieces of bread was passed to everyone, followed by a blessing cup of juice.

Then came the feast! There was moose, rabbit, turkey, fish, bannock (plain and raisin, with butter and jam,) mashed potatoes, peas, salad, pie, both cherry and raisin, jello for the children, tea and coffee.

As we ate, I asked Louis what he had to say to Allana. He said that he had told her she was a beautiful baby and that God had chosen her parents to look after her. He said she would have many hardships to bear in life, but would always have the help she needed. He told her not to worry about her harelip. That was going to be fixed for her. It was at this point that she smiled.

Often, babies are told that they come into the world naked and that the Creator has provided all the gifts they need to become the person they are meant to be. It is their responsibility to search for those gifts and the elders will help them in their search.

It is believed that when these babies are grown and the right time comes, they will remember what was said to them by the elder at their welcoming feast. Watching the expressions on the faces of these two beautiful infants, we believed.

Many people are invited to these feasts. If the tables do not hold everyone at once, there will be as many sittings as necessary until all are fed.

Again, when the child is a year old, there will usually be a Thanksgiving feast in gratitude for this new life that has survived its first year.

Our next celebration was held the following afternoon when Allana was brought to the church for her Naming Ceremony, the first to be held in the new St. Bernadette Church.

The Naming Ceremony is an ancient tradition following the Indian teaching that a child needs a name to be a complete person.

Billy Meekis and his wife, Irene, had been chosen as Namers. They were offered a gift of tobacco to pray and fast to find an Indian name for Allana.

Sometimes, the Namers will discuss with the parents any unusual events in nature or surrounding the baby's birth.

When they decide what the child's name should be, they share that name with significant people in the baby's life—parents, godparents,

grandparents—until a consensus is reached as to what the baby's name will be. This is done before the ceremony itself.

We arrived at the church to find a large cloth spread on the floor in the centre of a circle in the community room. On the cloth were placed platters of fried fish, rabbit, bannock and bowls of berries.

Billy was resplendent in his navy blue suit, dress shirt and tie. His greying hair was carefully arranged, ending in two braids tied with red ribbons. A red flower was pinned to his lapel. His wife, Irene, was beautifully dressed in white. Between them sat Billy's mother, Kanette, matriarch of their family.

Billy spoke briefly in Oji-Cree. He was just learning his role as Namer and had asked his mother to share the oral tradition of the ceremony, which had been passed down to her by her grandmother.

In her role as the Sacred Pipe Carrier, Kanette spoke quite eloquently. She lit two pipes that were then passed to each one of the 24 people in the circle, which represented the circle of life.

The Sacred Pipe Ceremony is not just a purification ceremony prior to an event, it is also a sign of covenant-making; thus when we share in it, we are covenanting to live our lives by its teachings and/or the event it is marking. So when Allana was given her name, she was covenanting to live what her name truly meant

When we had all finished, Billy took Allana in his arms and said, "From now on, she will be known as Wapunokapowekway, which means Early Riser."

He gave her a goose feather (in some areas, eagle feathers are used, but in that region goose feathers were more common) as a symbol of protection for her in life. These birds are looked upon as "guardians."

Allana was passed first to her parents and then to everyone in the circle to call her by name and kiss her on the cheek. Afterwards, Deacon Bill was asked to bless the food, which we then shared.

Feasting finished, we moved to the church proper for Allana's baptism.

When Sidney and Harriet were asked, "What name do you give your child?" they replied, "Wapunokapowekway (Early Riser) Allana Princess Kateri." This is the way it is inscribed in the church register, and is a perfect way of blending the ancient Naming Ceremony with the Baptismal Ceremony.

Irene and Billy had also been invited to serve as godparents. This they did very efficiently.

Allana, while she had made her presence known quite vocally during the Naming Ceremony, made not a peep, even when water flowed freely over her

head into our unique holy water/baptismal font.

While often done when the children are young, Naming Ceremonies, just as Baptisms, can take place at any time in one's life. Both invite one to "Take your name. Give it dignity. Carry it proudly. Live it!"

Allana's combined Naming Ceremony and Baptism was very beautiful, starting a new tradition at St. Bernadette's. At a time when First Nations people are encouraged to reclaim their Native spirituality, it seemed right and just that, as a child of God, Allana receive her name and become a complete person in her Father's house...the House of God.

"I have called you by name...Wapunokapowekway (Early Riser) Allana Princess Kateri. You are precious in my eyes and I love you."

An interesting follow-up to these ceremonies occurred with the arrival of our new grandson that spring. His parents asked if it would be possible for him to be given an Indian name in remembrance of our time spent in Sandy Lake.

This request we took to the elders and before long, they came to us with Liam's Indian name: Manito Onapewekewaywin or God's Gift. So on our next visit home, a Naming Ceremony was held.

Probably, over the years since, we have not reminded Liam often enough about his special Indian name.

When he was in Grade 3, we were invited to his class to speak about our experiences on the reserve.

In describing the Naming Ceremony, we told his class about Liam's Indian name. Afterwards, he came to us and said, "I didn't know I was Indian. I always thought I was Irish."

## ❧ CHAPTER 36 ❧

### *Med-Evacing*

One of the concerns our children had when we travelled so far North into isolation was, "What will happen if one of you gets sick so far from home?"

Bill had had one heart attack and many bouts with pneumonia.

Particularly after hearing about the deaths of the two native deacons—Naham Fiddler dying in a snowmobile accident and Walter Mamakeesic from a sudden heart attack, one daughter voiced her concerns: "Great! Thanks for telling me. I just don't want Dad having a heart attack or dying from pneumonia thousands of miles away from home."

They were pleased, then, to hear about the well-equipped, excellently-staffed Nursing Station. What great treatment Bill received both times he went for advice and medication for his heavy chest colds.

We had been careful to have all our teeth checked thoroughly by our own dentist before leaving for Sandy Lake.

In fact, our dentist had even thoughtfully provided us with sets of X-rays to bring with us. It was a nice surprise to discover that a dentist came in periodically to deal with local dental problems. I needed to call on his help once during our stay and was more than happy with his excellent treatment.

While ordinary health problems could be handled at the Nursing Station, we soon learned about the method of med-evacing (medical evacuating) cases that are more serious. This method of treating severe illnesses was very common.

Rarely a day passed that there was not at least one med-evac by helicopter, float, ski or regular plane. Destination could be Sioux Lookout, Red Lake, Thunder Bay or Winnipeg.

In most cases, an escort accompanied the patient, sometimes one of the nurses, sometimes a relative or friend, particularly in the case of an elder who spoke no English.

One of the duties of the escort was to relay information about the condition of the patient back to the reserve. This was done in a number of ways: by telephoning a relative of the patient, by calling the escort's family who in turn passed on the information, or by setting up a pre-arranged time to call the radio station so that the latest update could be broadcast to the whole reserve.

In any case, Sandy Lakers were kept well-informed on the condition of people who were out for medical treatment.

So ordinary was this med-evacating method of treating serious illness that it truly has become a way of life in the far North.

One tends to forget how difficult it must have been to obtain help for similar accidents and conditions before this form of treatment was made available.

When transcribing the church records and discovering the number of accidental deaths, stillbirths and infant deaths, we wondered how many lives were lost in the past due to lack of medical evacuation.

## ∞ CHAPTER 37 ∞

# *Transcribing the Church Records*

**B**ilingualism on the reserve did not mean French/ English, but rather English/Oji-Cree. However, all the early priests stationed there had been French Oblates, so they kept the parish records in their first language: French.

This presented a bit of a problem for the parishioners when they no longer had a resident priest, only one who visited maybe every other month. If duplicates of records or information were required, lay leaders were at a loss to decipher the French documents. Over time, one of our “missions” was to set up a three-by-five alphabetical card system, transcribing the church records from the original French to English and cross-referencing so one could easily find the original entry if needed.

Armed with only limited high-school French and an English/French dictionary, it was a tedious but interesting task. Certainly, it helped us to get to know parishioners and families better. Nevertheless, we were unprepared for how caught-up we would get in the lives of these people, most of whom—in the early pages especially—were just names on the paper in front of us.

Take Lucas\*, for instance. He first appeared on an early page as the father of a newly baptized child. We also learned that he was married to Jean\*. Lucas and Jean had quite a large family and the registry continued telling their story as the children were baptized, confirmed and eventually married.

However, Lucas also seemed to be a pillar of the church. His name repeatedly appeared as father or godfather of the newly baptized, as sponsor for those being confirmed, or as witness for weddings and funerals.

Then Jean died and Lucas married her sister Marie\*. Lucas and Marie had several children, some of whom died in infancy.

We well remember the Thursday evening when Bill walked into the small room where I was working on the registry cards to find me in tears. “What on earth is the matter?” he asked. “Lucas just died!” I replied. “I feel as though I’ve lost a close friend.”

Sadly continuing my task, little did I know that more sorrow was reported on the next page. Lucas’s and Marie’s little son, Nathan\*, was born seven months after Lucas’s death. Then the tears really flowed. It was a joy for us to actually meet Nathan and his mother Marie during our time on the reserve.

What a memorable experience! The names on pages had become living, breathing people for us. These people had endured the joys and sorrows of everyday life, just as we all do on our continuing call to mission.

*\* Names have been changed to respect the privacy of the family.*

## ∞ CHAPTER 38 ∞ *Brother Phil*

Just two days before we left Toronto heading North, Brother Phil Kelly, O.F.M. Conv., editor of the Franciscan *Companion* magazine, phoned.

In tying up loose ends and attending to last-minute details, Bill had renewed our subscription. He enclosed a note to Pat Poole who was circulation manager. Could she re-route our subscription to Sandy Lake?

Pat and her husband, also named Bill, are friends and former neighbours. Our children had gone to school together. She showed our note to Brother Phil, saying there just might be a story there. That prompted the phone call. Could we keep a journal and send some articles to *Companion*?

At the end of the conversation, Brother Phil casually mentioned that if an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) Retreat seemed needed, he would be delighted to come to Sandy Lake. Money was no object. He would beg, borrow or steal to finance his trip if necessary.

Two months later, an AA weekend seemed like a very good idea. The parish council approved it, and Bill was speedily on the phone to Brother Phil.

We had been warned not to schedule it during September or October as too many people would be out hunting. November appeared like a good time, in between hunting and Christmas preparations. The only time in November convenient for Brother Phil was November 21 – 26, and so his flight was booked for then.

We didn't know at the time, that we would be smack-dab in the middle of National Addiction Awareness Week. How appropriate! Several of the First Nations' Bands in the area were quite concerned about the number of attempted suicides by young people, particularly women. A whole program was prepared for that week. All scheduled meetings, including bingos, were cancelled. Only activities connected with Addiction Awareness would be permitted.

Brother Phil's coming was looked on as a great asset. Could he be the

guest speaker at the Friday night feast honoring our youth? In fact, could he come back to Sandy Lake a number of times? This was even before they had met him.

He arrived Thursday afternoon. That evening, a number of elders and young people as well as Addiction Centre workers met with Brother Phil to discuss how the weekend should go. It was like no other AA weekend he had ever experienced.

After much discussion, it was decided that it was far too early for a straight AA program. The chief concern of the elders was the breakdown in communication with the young people.

The planned agenda was that at the Friday night feast, Brother Phil would talk to the youth about the elders' desire to improve the lines of communication between them. Then, on Saturday afternoon, there would be a get-together for any young person who wanted to attend. Brother Phil would be the only adult present.

About eleven young girls and boys showed up for this meeting on Saturday. They were much younger than anticipated, ranging in age from seven to fourteen. This seemed to point out that the younger age group was the group that should be addressed.

They were very open and knowledgeable about substance abuse. The proper terminology rolled off their tongues as though they had been using it all their lives.

They shared the concern they felt when their parents and older siblings drank. Particularly, they were concerned when pregnant women drank! They worried what that was doing to the babies those women were carrying.

Often, they lived in fear when their relatives were drunk. They would like a safe place to go when that was happening. In their experience, drunkenness and abuse went hand in hand.

These young people wanted to meet with some of the elders. They wanted to be able to talk to them about their concerns and fears, and to hear about the traditions of their people. Could they have regularly scheduled meetings? The girls, in particular, requested segregated meetings.

Brother Phil brought these requests to the general meeting held Monday evening for him to make his report and submit his recommendations. They were to be discussed more fully during our parish Advent reflections, allowing the Holy Spirit room to guide us in what actions should be taken before Brother Phil's return visits in February and March.

His presence on the reserve allowed a number of people to share with him one-on-one. It is not always easy to find an objective listener in a small community where everyone knows everyone else.

Brother Phil was our speaker at both Communion services on Sunday, telling us about his visit to Rome when Mohawk Kateri Tekakwitha was proclaimed Blessed. He talked about the excitement of Pope John Paul II and the people gathered when the First Nations' contingent entered St. Peter's Basilica—the largest church in the world—but not as large as Dreamer's Rock, which is the Creator's church of all outdoors.

However, the weekend was not all work for him. He also enjoyed participating in a thirty-second wedding anniversary renewal of vows followed by luncheon.

As well, there was also a baptism to celebrate and a double birthday feast. It was only afterwards that we discovered the camera we had been clicking all afternoon was without film.

An impromptu music practice on Sunday evening also gave Brother Phil the opportunity to tape some of the local country gospel music.

Many of the pieces were familiar to him from his childhood. Some of it was so lively that the deacon and his wife were tempted to indulge in their once-a-year dance, a happening that caused great hilarity among the viewers, especially the children who wanted to know "How do you do that?"

There was also the opportunity to meet at least one of the local artists, Robert Kakegamic.

After purchasing some of Robert's original greeting cards, Brother Phil suggested he send Robert some reading material on St. Francis of Assisi. Perhaps Robert might like to paint a First Nations' St. Francis and the animals. Robert did. His beautiful rendition of "St. Francis and the Wolf" hung for many years in a place of honour in the Companion office in Toronto.

Not only did Brother Phil grace us with his presence, he also had Pat Poole phone us from the Companion office just before he flew in for each of his visits. Knowing how difficult shopping could be in Sandy Lake at times, he had her inquire as to what we needed in the grocery line. Then using the staff coffee donation money, Pat would shop for us in Toronto and Brother Phil would back-pack it in to us. What an added blessing that was!

Just the fact that Brother Phil made the time and effort to travel the 2,300 km from Toronto to Sandy Lake touched and pleased the people. His presence spoke of caring and concern for them. They looked forward to his return

visits as much as we did.

## Winter Carnival

Sunny skies and clear crisp air welcomed Winter Carnival activities the last Thursday, Friday and Saturday of March.

We first heard of it when two little girls arrived on Thursday afternoon just after lunch with early homemade Easter cards for each of us.

Inquiring as to why they were not at school, we were told that, “There is no school this afternoon. It’s Winter Carnival time and in just a little while, the plane is going to fly over and drop goodies to us.”

Then we realized that a crowd was gathering on the lake near the dock below the rectory.

Cars and trucks were dropping off whole families. Snowmobiles were whizzing across the lake from the airport side and many young people were walking hurriedly to join the gathering crowd.

It wasn’t long before the sound of the float plane could be heard revving up at Tommy’s Place down the hill behind the church. The children streamed out further on the frozen lake.

There was great excitement as Tom Brotherston, owner of the float plane and Tommy’s Place, flew over twice, dropping treats each time. Some children caught envelopes full of candy or other treasures. Some got coupons to be used to borrow videos. Others got coupons that could be exchanged for cash.

Brother Phil Kelly arrived on Friday on the one p.m. flight. After he had settled in and had a late lunch, we wandered down to the lake in the brilliant sunshine to see what activities were scheduled.

The children were having a glorious time snowmobiling, skating, and sledding down the embankment and out onto the lake. However, they didn’t have to be coaxed to pose for a picture for Brother Phil. They were wearing mitts, tuques and scarves sent in by The Women’s Auxiliary Group of The Catholic Church Extension Society of Canada (now Catholic Missions In Canada).

We sent this letter of thanks to the Women’s Auxiliary:

*Dear Anne Marie Quigley,*

*Many thanks to you and to your wonderful helpers for the beautiful knitted goods forwarded to us by Sisters Virginia and Mary Regis Nelson to St. Bernadette Mission, Sandy Lake, Ontario.*

*As well as saying “thank you,” we also wanted to share with you our experience of the Extension Auxiliary from both ends of the line.*

*From the time I was a small child, my mother (Anna Mulligan) had been a member of the Auxiliary. Over the years, it became a way of life to see her working on different projects for the missions: children’s pajamas, mittens, scarves and tuques. Whole bolts of white flannelette would be cut into diaper lengths and patiently machine-stitched or beautifully hemmed by hand.*

*After my father died, Mom’s “mission work” filled even more of her time. She was not a great reader but loved to keep her hands busy with sewing or knitting, especially as she became less physically active and more house-bound. Her Auxiliary work helped her to feel she was still able to contribute to society. It was very important to her, and she continued it until well into her eighties.*

*Following Mom’s example, I began to do a bit of knitting for the missions while I was at home raising our ten children. I even tried, rather unsuccessfully, to start an Auxiliary group in our Parish of St. Timothy, Willowdale. Mary Donahee was much more successful at accomplishing that.*

*Fully aware of the great work your organization is doing, it came as a complete surprise to be on the receiving end this past Christmas. Bill and I had a wonderful time unpacking the box forwarded to us by Sisters Virginia and Mary Regis. It arrived the day before our Christmas Bake and Rummage Sale.*

*How beautiful all the hand-knitted articles looked, set on a special table. It was decided that a small price would be put on each article...certainly not enough to cover materials and labour, but enough to allow the people the dignity of purchasing their gifts, rather than receiving handouts.*

*One young man wanted a matching hat/scarf/mitten set for his mother whose birthday was the next day. Several young mothers had fun picking out scarves and tuques for their children. One grandfather spent a long time deciding which pair of colourful mittens his grandchild would like. So it went. They were delighted and so were we. The hand-knitted articles were the hit of the sale. That wasn’t the best part, though. Then we had the pleasure of seeing these colourful warm articles of clothing on the grateful recipients. How proudly they wore them and how appreciative they were!*

*So, you see, ladies, your work is tremendously important in more ways than one. We feel privileged to have seen both sides of the story.*

*Sincerely,*

*Bill and Molly Callaghan*

*St. Bernadette Mission*

*Sandy Lake, Ontario*

As the Winter Carnival fun continued, women were gathering and starting their fires right on the snow for the bannock-making contest.

Bannock is their quick bread. So many handfuls of flour, a bit of baking powder, a sprinkle of water and the dough was mixed quickly by hand, as mounds of lard melted in the huge frying pans.

While the bannock cooked, the men were gathered out on the lake for the “snow-snake” contest. Special pieces of wood called “snakes” had been carefully carved from spruce.

Rounded in the centre and pointed on one end, these “snakes” were sanded, waxed and polished to an incredible smoothness. They were truly works of art, with beautiful wood-grain visible in each “snake.”

The men took turns throwing them in three different directions. If thrown properly, they would skim over the ice for great distances. The one who threw their “snake” the farthest was the winner. This seemed not to be determined by age or experience, but by skill.

Wherever the “snake” stopped, it would be stood up on its pointed end so all could see the winner immediately.

Clarence Rae won with two out of three long throws, beating his father, Paul, as well as the other contenders.

Their contest completed, some of these men became judges, along with Brother Phil and Deacon Bill for the best bannock-maker. Clarence’s aunt, Samelia Fiddler, was declared the winner. Her bannock was ready first and was also declared the best tasting.

The young women then borrowed the “snow-snakes” and tried their skill. Some had never competed before, but had fun trying. One first-timer, Brenda Fiddler, combined skill, luck and perseverance to win a fifty-dollar prize.

Again, it was such a pleasant day that many of the children tobogganed until dusk, eagerly looking forward to Saturday, the final Carnival day.

Although elections for Band Council were also being held on Saturday, there was still a good turnout for the outdoor Carnival events. As well as the events taking place below the rectory on the Roman Catholic or “R.C.” side, there were duplicate events being held at another location on the United Church or “U.C.” side.

It seems that at one time, all the Roman Catholics settled near their church—St. Bernadette. This became known as the R.C. side. Similarly, the

United Church people settled near their church on the other side of the reserve that became known as the U.C. side.

In spurts, people have begun to settle in many different spots on the reserve, but the R.C. and U.C. designations still prevail.

These are an outdoors people. Being in God’s cathedral of all outdoors is part of their heritage. They seem happiest when they are outside, no matter the weather.

In fact, if there isn’t a reason why they should be outside, they will invent one before too long, not just as individuals but also as groups. So Winter Carnival days are naturally accepted and people need little persuasion to participate.

One may think of life on an isolated reserve as dull and boring. Far from it! There is usually some reason to celebrate.

There are welcome feasts for new babies, naming ceremonies, baptisms, birthday feasts, weddings and feasts, funerals and feasts, anniversary feasts on the first anniversary of one’s death, Christmas feasts, berry feasts, and feasts to welcome the ducks in spring and in thanksgiving for them in the fall.

While there were no restaurants on the reserve while we were there, there were frequent opportunities to break bread together with family and friends. It was good to be included in the festivities.

∞ CHAPTER 40 ∞  
*Missionaries*

Something that came to our minds often during our sojourn in Sandy Lake was how lonely it must have been for the early missionaries and how lonely it still can be for solitary missionaries assigned to isolated outposts.

At least, our mission experience had been as a couple. When we felt lonely or worried that things did not seem to be working well, our partner was always there for support.

How difficult it must have been for these early priests and Sisters, not knowing the language, and often without someone to cook and clean and launder for them. Often, they were without the bare necessities of life, such as food.

Particularly in our area, many of these missionaries came from France, a completely different country and culture. Is it any wonder that amidst severe weather conditions, isolation and deprivation that some of them became ill physically, emotionally or spiritually? Isn't it a greater miracle that so many of them managed to pass on the faith to such a degree that it still flourishes so well today? Surely, the Holy Spirit must have a hand in this great work.

However, as winter closed in around us and fewer people phoned or came to the door on the spur of the moment, as happened during the summer and fall, we often thought of the terrible loneliness these men and women must have suffered.

At least, we had one another to talk to and there was a phone, a radio and a TV. News of the outside world was immediately available, although newspapers were a rarity.

Oblate Father Wilfrid Dumont shared with us that when his father died in Quebec, it was three weeks before that news reached him.

Our house was equipped with indoor facilities, hot and cold running water.

What a shock it was the first time we saw a young mother, with her baby strapped to her back in a tikinagan, snowmobile out onto the lake below the rectory, cut a hole in the ice and bring up a pail full of water. It became a common occurrence to see snowmobiles, with sleds attached, being used to haul pails of water from the lake.

We were forced to look at how basic survival must have taken up much

of the time of these missionaries.

In fact, statistics tell us that in the early days, missionaries spent 80 per cent of their time on survival and only 20 per cent on ministry. Hauling water alone would have been a big time-consumer each day.

As we turned up the thermostat on a particularly cold day, we were reminded that missionary priests probably spent considerable time chopping wood to keep their fires going.

Did these clerics come equipped with basic cooking skills, or did they have to learn by trial and error?

While setting bread to rise, we wondered if they became expert bannock-makers. Their cupboard shelves would not have been as amply stocked as ours were.

If we became frustrated when a necessary (at least in our minds) ingredient was unavailable, we were reminded that the early missionaries might often have had no food at all.

When one of our people would arrive at the door with some fish or moose meat, we wondered if these clergy pioneers ever received such welcome care packages, or did they have to go out to net or shoot their own?

When a storm raged and the missionary priest was forced to stay indoors just for safety's sake, what inner resources did he possess to keep from going stir-crazy? Was he welcomed into the hearts and homes of the parishioners, or was he constantly thought of as "that crazy foreigner"?

Sometimes, when we tried to get a message across to the people with the help of one of our able translators, we wondered how these early workers bridged the language barrier before they learned a basic vocabulary. They certainly did an admirable job of passing on their faith, as they knew it. Many gave their lives for their people. We have much for which to thank them.

## *A Day in the Life of...*

**I**t started as a typical mid-week day with nothing specific on the calendar.

We awakened about seven-thirty, exercised a bit to fully wake up, then showered and dressed.

Prayer time was next, followed by writing time, as we attempted to journal thoughts and events while they were still fresh in our minds.

After breakfast, we prayed the Office, the Christian Prayer of the Church.

Discovering that the cookie tins were almost empty, baking would have to be part of the day's agenda.

Our impromptu visitors enjoyed their tea and cookies. In fact, there was one young man who kept coming back and we were not quite sure why. Did he come because he enjoyed the stimulating company, or the reading material we passed on to him, or for the tea and cookies?

Regardless, he kept coming. Since he was a recent convert, we felt this contact, for whatever reason, was important. If we could foster the interest, he could become a great parish worker.

Soon, the raisin-oatmeal cookies were cooling on the counter and the oatmeal cake was nearly baked. In came a young couple who had phoned the night before for a wedding certificate.

We invited them in and they stayed for nearly an hour-and-a-half, chatting right along.

They had both been given the same Indian name at their Naming Ceremony, but didn't discover that until after their marriage. Their name meant "Standing In Front of People."

We invited them to "stand in front of people" the next Sunday at our afternoon Communion Service as they renewed their wedding vows to celebrate their fifth anniversary. With a surprised, pleased look at one another, they quickly agreed.

After thanking us for the tea and cookies, they took their reading material, hopped on their snowmobile and whizzed off through the snow, the hope of the future.

Walking to the kitchen to prepare lunch, we found the oatmeal cake had

been forgotten in the oven, an hour after it should have come out.

Rescuing it just before it burned, we found it not in A-1 shape but still edible, especially warm from the oven with a dollop of applesauce to hide the over-crustiness.

After lunch, a young man arrived to ask for three pails of hot water to do laundry.

Most people cart their water from the school, but cannot get it from there during school hours.

Some people haul their water from a hole cut in the frozen lake, as their forefathers did. So a request for water served to remind us of how comfortable we were in the rectory, with hot and cold running water, indoor facilities, a washer and dryer.

Most people hung their clothes outdoors no matter the temperature. They worked against great odds to keep themselves and their clothes clean.

On his way out the door, this young man asked if he and his wife and their two small children could visit that evening. Of course, we said "Yes."

Then it was time to phone the Archdiocesan Office of Catechesis to find out what materials were available for Confirmation classes. It was great to have such back-up support when we were so isolated on the reserve. It made us think again of the early missionaries and how did they ever manage without that kind of help. They had to use their own ingenuity and whatever inner resources they could muster, including the help of the Holy Spirit.

Next, a young woman arrived. Her husband was out for drug and alcohol treatment. Their marriage had been seriously close to complete breakdown. She needed to talk to an unbiased listener. Two-and-a-half hours, several cups of tea and many Kleenexes later, her two sisters arrived at the door. They had been worried about her when she failed to turn up for work. They didn't know for sure that she was at the rectory, but came just to inquire. Relieved to find her there, they joined us for tea, cookies and a chat.

The sisters enjoyed seeing the first Christmas-Tree-ornament picture of our seventeenth granddaughter, which had just arrived in the mail. They also admired the baby shawl-in-the-making for our next grandchild expected shortly. This shawl was a replica of the one I made for our son for his christening.

The day's mail produced two birthday letters that we answered after a hastily-prepared dinner. It worked better if we could keep up with correspondence daily. It wasn't always possible, but we tried. Then it was time for evening prayer.

Our expected visitors, the young couple with two children, never did arrive. However, another parishioner phoned to see if we were free for him to come.

Another pot of tea was prepared and the cookie plate replenished as we spent several hours sharing. He told us a few of the exciting plans on the drawing board for Sandy Lake for the next year.

The Band council and the Economic Development Corporation were researching ways and means of providing more job opportunities to help eliminate some of the drug/alcohol/abuse problems caused by unemployment. Much was happening on the reserve. It was an exciting time to be there.

The visit ended with a request for some typing to be done. The typewriter we had brought in with us had been working overtime to provide necessary correspondence, requested articles and transcriptions of the Church records from French.

After tidying-up our snack dishes, we were on to our nightly cribbage tourney that happily ended in a tie. Then it was time for bed, but not sleepy yet, we spent a short time catching up on some of the reading material awaiting our attention.

Lights out at last. Another unplanned day had ended up being very full of a number of things—all in God's plan. We wondered what the next day would bring!

## ∞ CHAPTER 42 ∞

### *Easter Lilies*

**A** lily will always remind us of the Easter we spent in Sandy Lake. Bill and I had been at St. Bernadette's for almost a year.

The Mission had long been without a resident pastor and its two deacons had both died. Our purpose in being there was to assist the people in any way possible until new leaders emerged.

Father Wilfrid Dumont, O.M.I., the former pastor, flew in for Easter. The elders especially appreciated this as Fr. Dumont, during his eighteen years at Sandy Lake, had learned to speak the Oji-Cree language well. This meant that the parishioners, particularly the elders, could "confess" in their own tongue.

Father was so busy hearing confessions that the Holy Thursday liturgy was late in starting. This disturbed no one as the musicians warmed up and led us in song.

Bill and I found that while we didn't understand the Oji-Cree hymns, sung slowly to a distinctive Sandy-Lake beat, by the time all the verses had been sung, the music became almost like a mantra, wrapping us in an aura of prayer.

We were preparing for Holy Week and wondered what could be done to enliven the celebrations?

There was no flower shop in Sandy Lake. The only flowers we could find to enhance our Altar of Repose had been some faded, plastic lilacs and lilies, and they would have to do.

Although there had been a goodly crowd at Confession and Eucharist, few showed up for Adoration. This was scheduled from 9:30 p.m. to midnight.

Around 11 o'clock, Sidney arrived with his two young sons, Elliot and James, and their cousin, Philip. Briefly and simply, Sidney explained to the boys that they were there before the Blessed Sacrament to praise God.

After a long period of silence, Sidney prayed aloud spontaneously and asked the boys if they had anything to say to Jesus before leaving.

Each one in turn asked Jesus for their requests and thanked Him. Then they all prayed the "Our Father," genuflected, and left. What a privilege to have witnessed the faith so beautifully handed down from father to son!

Ever since Archbishop Peter Sutton had blessed the main altar in December 1990, it had been covered with a beautiful cloth of many colours. This

new altar was square rather than oblong, as the previous one had been, so the old altar cloths did not fit.

What to use for the Vigil and Easter? A large box unearthed in the rectory basement revealed a treasure-trove of beautiful, Irish linen, embroidered cloths.

A bit of piecing together produced two more-than-satisfactory creations to adorn not only the altar, but the lectern as well. If only we had more suitable flowers!

Well, the good Lord must have heard our prayers. Lo and behold, a parcel arrived on Easter Saturday morning from Sisters Virginia and Mary Regis Nelson.

Guess what was in their care package? A dozen beautiful long-stemmed white silk Easter lilies!

That night, at the appropriate time during the Easter Vigil, Mary and her able assistants dressed the altar and lectern in their new white finery. The crowning touch was the beautiful lilies.

Some weeks later, Sister Val Leibel, S.S.N.D., religious education director for the Keewatin-Le Pas Archdiocese, spent a week in Sandy Lake working with a team of volunteers who would prepare the Confirmation class. She was talking about signs and symbols, giving a few examples of each, and then asking the participants if they could find other examples.

Abigail chose one of the lilies. This was a symbol for her of Easter...of Resurrection...of new life.

We did find Resurrection and new life in Sandy Lake. New leaders did emerge who could do what needed to be done between a priest's visits. Being privileged to travel that part of the journey with them was for us an Easter experience.

## ∞ CHAPTER 43 ∞

### *Can One Person Make a Difference?*

**C**an one person make a difference? Definitely! At least, if that person is Esther. She was close to 80 when we first met. There was a twinkle in her eye and a smile on her face, even though she had a hip problem and needed a walker to get around.

Esther Linklater was the matriarch of St. Bernadette Mission when we arrived. She liked to be at church early enough to greet her people as they came for our Sunday services.

In the spring, summer and fall, Deacon Bill would pick her up in the yellow Nissan rectory truck. However, as soon as snow covered the ground he would receive a phone call informing him that Esther would not need a ride. The first time that happened, we wondered why.

On opening the church, we were astonished to see her driving down the hill on her snowmobile with her walker hooked over one arm. She had a broad grin for us as she parked in front, and with the help of the walker, made her way into the church, obviously enjoying her independence.

Esther's faith was deep. She was in her mid-twenties when the first missionary arrived in Sandy Lake.

We asked how she felt about that. Her reply was that she had always believed what the missionary taught; she had just never seen it written down before.

If the statement "Faith is caught, not taught" is true, Esther was the perfect role model.

Many years before, Esther had served on the Band Council. During that time, she was instrumental in bringing health care to the reserve.

Interestingly enough, the only flowers we found growing in Sandy Lake, aside from wildflowers, were the tiger lilies she had planted in front of the original Nursing Station. It was amazing that they had survived in about an inch and a half of soil among the crevices of the rocks. We were able to transplant some of them successfully to the new flower beds in front of St. Bernadette Church.

There was a radio station on the reserve which was operated mainly by volunteers. Esther was among those who took a regular turn in keeping listeners informed about current happenings and entertaining them with easy-listening

music.

When people were flown out for medical treatment, the whole reserve would get daily updates regarding their condition.

If the power were going to be temporarily shut down for some reason, a radio announcement would be made ahead of time.

Our only difficulty with this was that announcements were all in Ojicree, which we did not understand.

Soon, the parishioners caught on to this and one of them would take pity on us, phoning with the current news. This was particularly helpful if the power was going to be shut off. Then we would know not to bake bread that day.

Esther happened to be on radio duty one time when Archbishop Peter Sutton had flown in for a visit. She dedicated a song to him and invited him to come over to the station to broadcast a message to all the people, which he did. Needless to say, everyone was delighted.

Brother Phil Kelly flew in on several weekends to work with the people.

On one of those visits, he had a very heavy cold. In speaking with the people, he mentioned that his mother had died several years before.

After our gathering, Esther, with the help of a translator, told him she was sorry to hear his mother was dead, that he should have a mother, and if he liked, she would be his mother.

With tear-filled eyes, Brother Phil said he would love that.

“That’s good,” she said, and then, just like a mother, “Here’s some medicine for that cold. It’s what our people use. Wait until you get home, then take it for three days and your cold will be gone.”

It was.

On another of Brother Phil’s visits, he had just arrived at the rectory when the phone rang. It was Esther saying “My son. My son!” She wanted Brother Phil to visit her right away. So off he went up the hill.

When he returned about an hour later, he accused us of telling Esther what size shoes he wore and showed us the pair of fur-trimmed, beautifully beaded moccasins she had made for him.

We said that we had known nothing about this at all. The next morning at church, we asked Esther how she had known what size to make them. Spiritually she said, “For someone I call my son, shouldn’t I know what size his feet are?”

We were invited to Esther’s eightieth birthday party. There were many little people running around, so we asked her how many grandchildren she had.

She just shrugged her shoulders. Obviously, she had lost count.

One granddaughter who had heard our question said, “One hundred and eighty-eight.”

We weren’t sure these were all blood relations. Because Esther was so caring and compassionate if there was anyone hurting on the reserve, they would be sent to her to be loved back to wholeness.

In fact, she introduced a beautiful young woman—about 20 years old—to us as her baby. The young woman’s traumatic story was that she had seen her best friend raped and murdered. Simply by loving her, Esther was helping with her healing process.

From age and lived experience, Esther had great insight and wisdom. She was highly respected by young people and generously agreed to work with a team preparing couples for marriage.

On a sunny warm afternoon in May, our first flowers were in bloom: three daffodils. Cutting these, we found an impromptu vase, a washed and de-labelled salad-dressing bottle. Adding two sprigs of pussy willow in various stages of bud and bloom, we walked up the hill to Esther’s house. She had surgery just two weeks before and was now at home.

Thinking she would be feeling badly because the weather was so nice and she was stuck inside recuperating, we decided, “If she can’t get out, we’ll bring some of the outside in to her.”

How mistaken we were! As we rounded the corner of the house, the first person we saw was Esther ensconced in a big chair close to the outdoor fireplace where she had smoked so many fish in the past.

A loose shelter had been erected around the fireplace and blankets on top provided welcome shade from the hot sun. With Esther were assorted daughters, daughters-in-law and grandchildren.

Some of her sons and grandsons who were skilled hunters had brought in their kill.

The women were skinning and cleaning beaver, muskrats and ducks. Only the innards were disposed of, everything else had a use.

Furs were stretched and sold.

Beaver paws and tail were skewered on a pointed stick and held over the fire until the skin ballooned. Then it could be easily peeled off. The meat was then boiled. This was considered a great delicacy and was often served at babies’ welcome feasts.

As matriarch of the family, Esther loved being right in the middle of all

the activity...not doing the work, but adding her valuable presence and advice.

Although it was necessary work, the women liked doing it outdoors where they could enjoy the beautiful weather and each other's company.

After we left Sandy Lake, Esther had hip-replacement surgery and was eventually able to get around without her walker. However, old age was slowly taking its toll.

Father Bart Burke, pastor of St. Bernadette Mission, spends two weeks out of every two months in the parish before travelling on to the other three missions he shepherds.

He wrote to us that Esther was close to 90 and confined to the house. He visited her each time he returned to the reserve. Her mind was still quite alert and many of her people still came to her for advice and wisdom. She taught them by example how to live their faith; she was teaching them by example how to grow old gracefully and die.

In the summer of 2002, Father Bart told us that Esther had died peacefully in her sleep. He had anointed her and given her Communion during his last visit.

"She said she was ready to go home as soon as God wanted her," he wrote. "I believe she is a saint in heaven. I will miss her very much." So will her people.

## ∞ CHAPTER 44 ∞

### *Storms and Forest Fires*

There were frequent storms in Sandy Lake and they came up suddenly: bright sunlight one minute and pouring rain the next. However, in spite of the suddenness, we had a unique warning alert there.

Our view from the church and rectory was a beautiful panorama of the lake with evergreen trees bordering its shores and an island in the centre.

Most storms came from that direction and we could actually see the storm moving down the lake towards us. This happened so quickly that the storm could come into view as we stepped out the door of the church. Then, before we had time to cross the few feet from the church to the rectory, the rain would be pelting down.

As well as storms, forest fires could also occur frequently, especially in the hot, dry weather.

The first one we experienced seemed quite close. We rather nervously listened to the radio hoping we might understand an emergency alert if one were issued.

However, distances could be deceiving.

Although the fire looked close by, it was perhaps 25 miles away and on an island. It was mainly scrub brush that was burning. Nevertheless, the fire was over in the direction of the Northern Store, which was quickly closed for safety's sake.

A number of people joined us as we sat on the steps of the church watching the water bomber.

Time after time, it dropped down and hovered over the lake below us while it filled up with water from the lake before flying over the fire to drop its cargo.

Years later, this was all brought vividly to mind. Our family was spending a week camping at one of our provincial parks.

One afternoon while we were at the beach, a water bomber flew down directly in front of us to hover and fill up and then took off to help extinguish the fire we could see in the distance. For those few minutes, at least in our mind's eye, we were back in Sandy Lake.

On another occasion, in the middle of our Sunday morning service, the

Northern Store Manager Allen Feeney and our firefighters got up and left. A fire had broken out, again in the direction of the store and their help was needed to prevent it from spreading.

While at dinner one evening, we glanced out the kitchen window to see heavy smoke near the TV station antennae. Again, the smoke seemed to be much closer than it actually was.

Firefighters were alerted via the local radio station and the fire was speedily extinguished.

Around this time, there was a serious fire in the Deer Lake area, about a 15-minute flight from Sandy Lake.

This fire became so widespread that most Deer Lake inhabitants were evacuated and three houses were lost to the fire. This was a major disaster where there were already too few houses to fill the local need.

The most severe fire we experienced started out beyond the gravel pit. It raged for quite a while.

Firefighters were flown in from Ottawa, and camped nearby. They stayed until the fire was out, then some of our men kept watch to make sure no underground fires erupted. That could be a serious problem if not spotted. At one stage, the smoke from this fire became so heavy that everyone was warned via the radio to keep their windows closed.

Since the tragic deaths of two untrained volunteers a number of years before, only fully trained firefighters were allowed on the job. Sandy Lake had five teams of eight men each. They had trained for several years before they were accepted as fully competent firefighters.

These teams were on call and might even be flown quite a distance away to assist other teams in firefighting. If such a request was made of Sandy Lake Firefighters, the decision, as to which of the five teams would go, fell to the Chief.

If there happened to be any dissension or drinking between the members of a team, the whole team suffered, by not being assigned to duty. As one young man put it, "My life may depend on what a teammate does during a fire. I need to be able to trust him and know what he will do during that kind of stress."

However, firefighting is seasonal work, which means these dedicated men are usually unemployed during the off-season.

That can cause the usual problems of unemployment, boredom, purposelessness, lack of incentive, excessive drinking or other substance abuse.

On the other hand, this time-off can free up these young men to follow their cultural pursuits of hunting, fishing and trapping to their hearts' content.

An interesting follow-up observation to these forest fires occurred towards the middle of August. We had been told that we would have to go to a burnt-out area to pick blueberries.

One afternoon while driving out beyond the gravel pit to see the damage done by the fire, we were amazed to see that a lot of new growth had taken place since the fire.

In fact, what were all those little plants we could see growing between the burnt stumps? They were laden with blueberries! What a find! After enjoying many right off the bush, we took a few back to the rectory in whatever containers we had in the truck.

We returned several other days to pick more for freezing to supplement our diet for the coming winter.

How quickly the earth reclaims and reproduces! It was truly a first-hand lesson in ecology.

## *Givers of Tender Loving Care*

Oblate Archbishop Peter Sutton was a wise man. He had chosen to live in community with many of his administrative staff members. How astute it was of him to find the value of coming home to a caring “family.” Then, he could set out on his travels again, throughout the diocese or with his episcopal confrères, with new life and zeal.

This kind of nurturing and renewal was also available for all, particularly to the missionaries of the diocese—priests, religious and laity. Having visited the Bishop’s House in The Pas, we found ourselves blessed with this hospitality on several occasions, and would like to tell you about the people who provided this “tender loving care.”

Sister Rose Arsenault, R.S.R., chancellor of the archdiocese, along with Father Denys Ruest, were like the “host and hostess with the mostest.” They were like substitute parents, welcoming all the diocesan children home and seeing to their comfort and well-being.

Sister Rose addressed our administrative concerns. When we couldn’t visit in person, hers was usually the voice we heard at the other end of the phone as we called the Chancery Office for answers and information.

If we had something that needed fixing, we would bring it to Father Denys, better known as “Father-fix-it.” A tour of his “neat-as-a-pin” basement workshop was mind-boggling, revealing the many-faceted, multi-talented person he was.

Oblate Father Edward Kosa was Vicar General. He lived in the Cathedral Rectory nearby and often stopped in at dinnertime, particularly when visitors were there.

Father Gerard Nogue, O.M.I., was like a favourite uncle. His hearty laugh and winning smile set us at ease instantly as he welcomed us “home.” Fr. Nogue visited the hospital and nursing home in The Pas. No wonder, the sick and elderly loved him! He listened intently as we shared our successes and failures. On parting, he invited us to be united in prayer.

Oblate Brother Jules Loranger was diocesan treasurer. Much of his time was spent ironing out our financial problems as he wielded his unique wizardry with facts and figures. A lover of the great outdoors, Brother Jules could often be

found, in wintertime, at the end of the snow blower.

As diocesan director of religious education, Sister Val Leibel, S.S.N.D., was attempting to enable local catechists to take up the challenge of catechizing, thus enabling families to assume the task of handing on the faith to their children and preparing them for the sacraments. She travelled in her trusty truck to any parish or mission in need of assistance.

Sister Val’s current endeavour was to devise some kind of family-oriented home program that followed the liturgical year and emphasized the truths of our faith in a simple, basic way.

Sister Betty Lackenbauer, S.S.N.D., was assistant administrator in the Diocesan Office of Catechetics. In need of a current video or book to help with Lay Leadership or Baptism or Marriage Preparation? Call Sister Betty. Your request would receive immediate attention and the necessary material would be on its way as soon as possible.

Supporting Sister Rose was Carole Thorne, her secretary. She was “Jill of All Trades” as she cheerfully did whatever was asked of her. Carole’s ever-ready smile brightened up the office.

Then there were the two Sisters of St. Martha from St. Hyacinthe, Quebec, Sister Clarisse and Sister Jeanne D’Arc. They delighted in spoiling everyone with their tasty home-cooked meals and special treats.

For birthdays, a beautiful cake and an extra-special meal would always appear.

When one would leave the Bishop’s House, the Sisters would ask, “Would you like a lunch to take with you for your journey?”

No brown-bagger has ever had a more substantial repast. Usually, there would be an extra surprise included, such as a jar of their home-made apple jelly wrapped in a pretty napkin containing a greeting such as “Happy Easter” or “Happy Thanksgiving” or whatever the closest feast.

These two women in white were enrolled in evening classes to perfect their English so they could converse more competently with visitors who do not speak French.

Celebrating Eucharist and saying morning and evening prayer with all these loving caregivers added a deeply spiritual dimension to our visits.

The chapel in the Bishop’s House has a beautiful stained-glass window depicting Oblate Bishop Ovide Charlebois, the first Bishop of Keewatin-Le Pas.

His first “cathedral,” a small log hut, is pictured in the background. This united us with those dedicated missionaries who had gone before us to prepare

the way.

As we returned to our own parish renewed and revitalized, and continued to pray the Office daily, we were spiritually united to our diocesan support staff and to all our brothers and sisters who prayed the Prayer of the Church.

## ✧ CHAPTER 46 ✧

# *The Perfect Way To Go*

We first saw Dickie Laughing in Sandy Lake at a wake, paying his respects to the mourning relatives. His long grey hair was neatly braided. After that, Dickie seemed to be at every major function on the reserve though we hadn't yet been introduced.

Then Sister Eva Solomon, C.S.J., joined us for a teaching weekend on Native Spirituality.

On the last evening, we were gathered in the community hall of St. Bernadette Church.

Behind the main circle sat several men who could not be persuaded to join the rest of the group.

After preparing her materials for a teaching on the four directions and the four colours, Sister Eva turned to start the session. Glancing over at the men in the outer circle, she let out a shriek, "Dickie Laughing! Is it really you?"

Running to where he was seated, she threw her arms around him saying, "I never dreamt I'd see you here!" It seemed that Dickie, a Mohawk from the Akwesasne community near Montreal, had spent some time travelling with her parents. They had become close friends.

Following the session, Sister Eva asked Dickie to lead us in a powwow dance. The ecstatic children were soon up dancing and most of the adults joined them.

Esther was there with her walker, enjoying the fun, but not wholly a part of it until we sat her in the centre of our circle, holding eighteen-day-old Allana. The rest of us danced around these two beloved people: our eldest and our youngest. The joy on everyone's face was something to behold.

We saw Dickie just once more at our Soup and Bannock Rummage Sale event. After eating heartily, he looked over the available clothing, investing in the last of our hand-knit mittens so he would have extras for his Grade 3 students

when they came in to class with wet...or no...mittens.

Early in August, we heard that Dickie was in a boating accident in British Columbia.

After attending morning Mass, he accompanied a priest friend across the lake to take Communion to some elders. The priest was wearing a life jacket and so was able to make it to shore. Though Dickie's life jacket was found, his body was not.

There was much grieving in Sandy Lake. Dickie had been well-known and well-loved. Many were concerned for the children who were to have been in his class the coming year. A Blessing Ceremony was scheduled for the Friday before school reopened.

The school trustees, teachers and Grade 3 students gathered in Dickie's former classroom and an opening prayer was said.

The Director of Education invited Joshua, an elder, to speak to the children. Gently, Joshua asked if they all understood Oji-Cree, then, using their first language, he told them Dickie would not be back with them that year. However, they should not be too upset because Dickie's spirit would be with them to help them. Sarah, the principal, translated Joshua's speech for us.

Fred performed the Smoke Purification Ceremony, first blessing himself, then the room and finally, each person present. Sarah read a Scripture passage, the vice-principal, Ralph Bekintis, recited the Twenty-Third Psalm, and Deacon Bill led us in a closing prayer.

As part of First Nations tradition, the belongings of a person are given as mementoes to relatives and friends.

First, each of Dickie's students received something and then the adults were invited to take a reminder.

Afterwards, everyone moved outside to the field behind the school where a barbecue ended the celebration. Dickie, who always loved a party, would have enjoyed his feast.

An interesting follow-up to this occurred while we were serving in St. Patrick's parish in McBride, British Columbia, about four years later.

Two priests from Edmonton stopped in on their way to Prince George. While chatting over coffee, we discovered that one of them had been Dickie's companion on that fateful boat ride.

A sudden storm had come up and the boat overturned. Because his life jacket had been found floating, it was presumed that Dickie had drowned. However, when his body surfaced the next spring, it was discovered that he had been

struck by lightning and had died instantly.

No doubt, Dickie would have thought it the perfect way to go to his Creator.

## *So Long, It's Been Good to Know You*

**W**e kept warning the people that our time left in Sandy Lake was short. Our mandate had been to maintain a Christian presence and to encourage, train and empower lay leaders.

As we prepared to leave, the people asked, "Who is coming after you go?" There was no one available to come at that time and we had to say so, but we quickly added, "That's all right. You people are ready." Slowly and shyly they would smile and say, "Yes, now we know we can do it."

And they could!

There were people who could lead their Liturgy of the Word Services with Communion; there were lectors, musicians, ushers and Extraordinary Ministers of Communion; there were people to take Communion to the sick and shut-ins, and volunteers who could lead the Children's Liturgy at both Sunday Communion Services.

Others could prepare the children for First Reconciliation, First Communion and Confirmation.

Still others could prepare couples for marriage and the baptism of their children.

There was even a team in place who could lead funeral services, both in Sandy Lake and North Spirit Lake when a priest could not be there. When Father did come in, he would celebrate a Memorial Mass for the deceased person.

Yes, they were ready.

As Tom Linklater, one of the leaders said to us, "We always knew what had to be done. We just needed someone to walk with us for a while and tell us we were doing it right."

The Sunday evening before we left Sandy Lake, our people gathered in the community room of the church to bid us farewell. There had been another death on the reserve and people were in mourning. It was unusual to have a feast at such a time.

We mentioned that to Sidney, saying we understood and would not feel badly if the feast had to be cancelled. "No, no," he said. "We can't let you go without a farewell."

We were deeply touched by the number of people who came. The food was delicious and plentiful. Then, after breaking bread together, the speeches began and brought tears to our eyes.

Many parting gifts were presented to us: moose hide gloves, snowmobile mitts trimmed in polar bear fur, a fluffy white rabbit skin, and a fox pelt with the outline of a cross in its fur. There was also a ceremonial ribbon shirt for Bill; for me, there were two moose hide purses, a lovely moose hide brooch, several beaded mandalas (symbolic necklaces), another necklace of tiny beads, and an ornately-beaded wall hanging.

As well, we were given a Peace Pipe in a hide carrying case, another case holding sweetgrass, tobacco, sage and cedar (all the ingredients for a Smudge Ceremony), several eagle feathers and a beautifully hand-painted drum.

How touched we were by this show of appreciation and affection!

It took a long while to shake hands with all our friends and bid them a fond farewell. Then, we returned to the rectory to do our final packing.

The next morning, Louis and Hattie Fiddler, with their little son Stanley, and Lorraine Linklater, with her daughter Margaret, were the official send-off committee at the airport. Most of the others were at work. Again, there were tears in our eyes as we said, "So long, it's been good to know you," boarded the plane, and took off.

Megwetch Sandy Lake for inviting us to share this part of the journey with you.

Megwetch for teaching us so much about loving and caring and sharing, about living close to God and close to nature, about living the Sacrament of the Moment.

Because we have walked this way together, you will always be a part of us, in our thoughts and prayers.

Megwetch, we love you!

## ❧ EPILOGUE ❧

While we had left Sandy Lake physically, Sandy Lake had not left us.

Periodically, the phone would ring and it would be Sidney or Harriet on the other end of the line, updating us on what was happening at St. Bernadette Mission. How good it was to hear their voices and the news of all our friends.

Around Thanksgiving, Harriet phoned us in Lynn Lake, Manitoba, our new posting. She told us that Sidney had gone out hunting, leaving her in charge of the Sunday services that weekend.

When we had first arrived, Harriet had seemed rather shy and retiring, never putting herself forward as a leader. We were anxious to hear how everything had gone, since that was her first experience of leading the congregation. With all the confidence in the world, she enthusiastically said that all went well. Everyone wanted to help and she felt comfortable doing it. Praise God!

The next call we got informed us that Paul had died. He was the police chief and had often sat at the very back of the church during our Sunday morning service. More than that, he was also well versed in the traditional medicines his people had used for many, many years.

Shortly before we left Sandy Lake, Paul had come to see us with his brother-in-law, Tom, as translator, to ask Deacon Bill if he could bless some of this medicine for him. He wanted to continue the traditions of his people, but he also wanted the blessing of the Church.

Paul's sudden death was quite a shock to all. The Oblate priests were all on their annual retreat and were unavailable to come in to Sandy Lake for the funeral. Could Deacon Bill be there for it?

Many phone calls later, arrangements had been made. It only took us four planes to get there, from Lynn Lake to Thompson, Thompson to Winnipeg, Winnipeg to Red Lake and Red Lake to Sandy Lake. How good it was to be with our friends again, even at such a sad time.

Paul's wife, Penina, welcomed us with open arms.

Funeral service and interment over, all too soon it was time to make our reverse journey. Four planes later, we were back in Lynn Lake again, tired, but privileged to have again shared their grief at the loss of a loved one.

Several years later, during the warm weather, Sidney phoned to tell us that Bella's husband, Zach, Esther's son, had dropped dead suddenly during a ball game. Again, the community was in mourning.

One fall, we heard that two of the men had gone through the ice. Their

boat was found but their bodies were not. One of them was Tom's son-in-law, his daughter Lorraine's husband. The other was Sidney's brother, Gilbert, who helped so beautifully with the music at St. Bernadette's Sunday afternoon services.

The following spring, Sidney phoned to say he had good news and bad. The bad news was that the two men were dead, but the good news was that their bodies had been found at last. The community could now hold their funeral service and finally put their loved ones to rest.

Then, the Christmas Spirit came to our house early the year that we received a phone call in mid-November. Vaguely, we remembered David, who had been quite a young man when we left.

Now, seven years after our departure, he was old enough to serve on the board of directors of the Recreation Committee, representing the R.C. section of Sandy Lake.

There was an infant crying in the background as David said, "We're having a toy drive. Hopefully, we can gather enough toys so every child on the reserve can have one for Christmas. We're calling everyone we can think of, and wondered if you can do anything to help."

"Leave it with us, David. We'll get back to you," we said, writing down his address and telephone number.

The next day, we were travelling to the west end of the city, and decided to leave early enough to visit a discount store in Bolton, Ontario.

Often they had stuffed animals and other toys at very reasonable prices. Sure enough, there was a good supply on hand.

When a sales clerk appeared, we inquired as to price. The lower shelf held twenty-five-cent items. The middle shelf toys were worth fifty cents and the top shelf ones cost a dollar. When she heard that the toys were for a First Nations' reserve, the clerk went off, returning shortly with two very large plastic bags. "Fill these," she said, "Five dollars each!"

Another customer had observed the proceedings and commented on what a worthwhile Christmas project this was. She happened to be directly in front of us in the checkout line. After completing her purchase, she handed the cashier an extra twenty-dollar bill and pointed to us, saying, "This is towards the next purchase."

When the cashier assured the woman that our selection would not cost that much, the customer replied, "Then give them the change to help with the postage." Barely giving us time for a heartfelt "Thank You," she waved a "Merry Christmas!" and left.

We were overwhelmed by her unsolicited generosity. Friends and relatives, upon hearing her story, wanted to be part of the toy drive, too.

When all the donations were packed for mailing, there were six large boxes with at least 125 toys. Mickey Mouse and muppets, teddy bears and beanie babies, colouring books, crayons and puzzles, all toys our own 35 grandchildren enjoy. It was easy to imagine the delight in the beautiful dark eyes of the Sandy Lake little ones.

A week after David's first phone call, we were speaking with him again, alerting him that the six boxes would be arriving within the next ten days.

Again, we could hear an infant crying in the background. At first hesitant in answering, David's voice quickly became excited as he thanked us and said, "You'll be hearing from us!" We knew that the Christmas Spirit was coming early that year to Sandy Lake, too.

That experience started a new tradition among our family and friends. With their help and support, the annual Sandy Lake toy drive continues with the much appreciated addition of scarves, tuques and mittens from our dedicated knitters.

Then in 2002, nine of our friends from Sandy Lake came to meet Pope John Paul II for the World Youth Day in Toronto. It took them a plane ride and three long days of driving to accomplish that, but what a marvellous experience it was for them. Most of them had never been to Toronto before, so it truly was an adventure.

The highlight of their visit was attending the Papal Mass at Downsview Park, at the closing ceremony of World Youth Day. There were ominous clouds in the sky as we boarded the shuttle bus, which would take us within walking distance of the Park.

As far as the eye could see were empty buses lined up bumper-to-bumper waiting to pull into the station to pick up other pilgrims and transport them to the site.

When we left the shuttle bus, it was exciting to see the immense cross atop the stage where the Pope would celebrate Mass with us, and to join the growing throng of people streaming on to the field.

Well ahead of the scheduled time of the Pope's arrival by helicopter, we found a suitable spot to set up our folding chairs. It was a great distance from the stage, but within sight of a giant screen, so we could see and hear the proceedings.

The sky was getting darker by the minute. We had not come prepared

with regular rain gear, but did have a stack of green garbage bags and a pair of scissors. It seemed like a good time to get ready for a possible deluge.

Several of the women undertook to cut head and armholes in enough bags for all of us and we quickly donned these as the rain started.

Within minutes, we were drenched and decided we also needed bottoms as well as tops. More bags were quickly called into service. We all chuckled about our very stylish outfits, but were pleased with the bit of protection they did provide.

Harriet said she thought God just wanted us to be clean all over before we met Pope John Paul II. She felt sure that the sun would come out to dry us off. It did.

Areta and Annie found their way up to one of the barriers along the route the Popemobile was following. They were thrilled to get a good view of the Holy Father, a moment they will not likely forget.

Of course, those who were there, or watching on TV, will remember. This drive around was accompanied by First Nations drum music.

Our Sandy Lakers felt right at home. Glancing behind, we saw a group of pilgrims a short distance from us engaged in their own powwow dance in time to the drums.

We were amazed at how efficiently Communion was distributed. There were two stations with four ministers at each, very close to our area. There were also some priests available if anyone wished to go to Confession before receiving Communion.

Sidney had brought several bottles of water, which he asked one of these priests to bless.

When Harriet and Sidney travel out to a conference, they always bring some blessed water home with them for the sick and elderly, who not only bless themselves with it, but also drink it.

Many people were leaving immediately after Communion. Our group wanted to stay to the end to absorb the most from this wonderful opportunity. Then, they stood in awe at seeing so many people marching out of the park together in such orderly fashion. Never had they seen so many people in one place. There are only close to 2,000 people on their reserve.

Needless to say, they were very weary that evening and all decided on an early bedtime.

Next day, the morning papers brought back the excitement of their experience with such beautiful pictures that brought tears to their eyes. These

pictures and stories were packed to take home to share with relatives and friends.

Departure time arrived all too soon. There were hugs and picture-taking as all nine piled into their large van for their long trek home: three days driving and a plane flight back to the reserve. Everyone agreed that it had been a very special meeting, and well worth the effort.

Following our time in Sandy Lake, we accepted two other postings, one at St. Maria Goretti parish in Lynn Lake, Manitoba, and then at St. Patrick's parish in McBride, British Columbia.

Each of these were parishes without resident pastors. Sometimes a priest was able to come to celebrate Mass nine times a year, sometimes only five times.

Our mandate was to maintain a Christian presence, to be a liaison with the bishop and to train lay leaders. Each of these parishes benefited from and was very grateful for the financial assistance given them by Catholic Missions In Canada. They pray regularly for their benefactors.

It has been said that some "give by going." Not all of us are in a position to actually go to the missions, although some of you may feel that call as we did. In which case, we encourage you wholeheartedly. The Northern bishops are always looking for volunteers.

It has also been said that "some go by giving" but not all of us are in a position to help financially. However, there is something that all of us can do and that is pray for our missionaries and their people.

Bill and I have always believed in the power of prayer. We have never felt that more strongly than when we were serving in the North.

If ever we became the least bit discouraged, wondering why on earth we were there, someone would phone or write saying, "We're praying for you and your people."

We know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the wonderful things that happened in all three places were the result of much prayer by many people, just like you. So we encourage you to pray daily for our missionaries and those they serve.

Our time in all three parishes was a wonderful sojourn in our golden years. We are home again now, celebrating time with our family, our ten children, their partners, our 35 grandchildren and our nine great-grandchildren.

We are grateful every day for the health we still have. People often ask us if we still have any unfulfilled dreams. Our response is that the wonderful reality we have been privileged to live far surpasses any dreams we might have had.

Since returning home, our mission has not ended; it has just changed

format.

Now, we take along the beautiful gifts presented to us by all three parishes as we speak to Catholic Women's League and Knights of Columbus Councils.

The school classes involved in their Native Studies programs delight in seeing the lovely artifacts and hearing about our First Nations people. We, in turn, delight in speaking to whatever group will listen to us.

What a great blessing and privilege our time in the North has been. It has changed our lives forever.

Our love story has truly been the story of a love triangle: love for God, love for each other and God's love for us.

Megwetch!

## ∞ APPENDIX ∞

### *First Nations Words and Phrases*

**Anamiat:** praying elders whose special responsibility is to pray for the church community

**Bannock:** a kind of quick bread, usually prepared by pan-frying

**Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha (1656-1680):** beatified on June 22, 1980, by Pope John Paul II; the daughter of a Mohawk warrior and a Catholic Algonquian woman, she lived a life dedicated to prayer, penance, and care for the sick and aged

**Gokum:** grandmother in Oji-Cree

**Goose feather:** in some areas, eagle feathers are used, but in Sandy Lake region, goose feathers were more common: it is a symbol of protection for life of a baby about to be named. The birds (eagles and geese) are looked upon as "guardians"

**Manito Onapewekewaywin:** God's gift

**Megwetch Kise Manito:** Thank you, Creator God

**Naming Ceremony:** The naming ceremony is an ancient tradition following the Indian teaching that a child needs a name to be a complete person

**Oji-Cree:** a mixture of two native dialects, Ojibway and Cree, spoken in Sandy Lake, Deer Lake and North Spirit Lake, Ontario

**Sacred Pipe Ceremony:** not just a purification ceremony prior to an event, it is also a sign of covenant-making; thus, when people share in it, they are

covenanting to live their lives by its teachings and/or the event it is marking

**Talking Stick:** as long as a person is holding the stick, s/he has permission to talk.

**Tikinagan:** traditional baby carrier; a beautifully moulded wooden board used to carry a baby; First Nations' older version of the Snuggli

**Wapunokapowekway:** Oji-Cree name meaning "Early Riser"

## ∞ OTHER TERMS ∞

**Futures Program:** a program to help communities develop and implement local solutions to local problems

**Northern Lights:** natural light displays in the sky, usually observed at night, particularly in the Northern Hemisphere; also known as aurora borealis and most often occurs from September to October and from March to April. The Northern Lights have had a number of names throughout history. The Cree people call this phenomenon the "Dance of the Spirits" (*Wikipedia*)

## ∞ PLACES ∞

**Anishinabe Native Spirituality Centre:** a retreat and spirituality centre run by the Jesuit community in Anderson Lake near Espanola, Ontario

**Archdiocese of Keewatin-Le Pas in Manitoba:** a missionary diocese covering a land mass of 430,000 square kilometres in northern Saskatchewan, Manitoba and a small corner of Northwest Ontario. The Métis, First Nations of Cree, Oji-Cree, Dene and non-natives make up the richness of a mixed culture. The territory west of James Bay was called "Keewatin," meaning "North Wind Blowing" (From Archdiocese of Keewatin-Le Pas website: [www.dioceseofkeewatinlepas.ca](http://www.dioceseofkeewatinlepas.ca))

**Gabbius Goodman Memorial Centre:** named after a Sandy Lake elder who believed in education; provided more classroom space for high-school upgrading, community college courses and distance-learning courses

**Kakabeka Falls:** a waterfall on the Kaministiquia River located beside the village of Kakabeka Falls 25 miles west of Thunder Bay, Ontario (*Wikipedia*)

**Fort William Reserve:** an Ojibway reserve south of and adjacent to Thunder Bay, Ontario

∞ THOSE WHO SERVED ∞

## *Priests and Brothers*

**Father Antonio Alberti, O.M.I.:** was then pastor of St. Theresa Parish and the missions in Garden Hill and Wasagamach, Manitoba, and St. Bernadette Mission, Sandy Lake, Ontario; resided in St. Theresa Point, Manitoba

**Father Bart Burke:** ordained in 1956 for Peterborough diocese; served for many years in Labrador-Schefferville diocese; presently pastors four missions: St. Bernadette (Sandy Lake, Ontario), Canadian Martyrs (God's River, Manitoba), St. Francis de Sales (God's Lake Narrows, Manitoba), and St. Antoine Daniel (Oxford House, Manitoba) in Keewatin-Le Pas archdiocese

**Father Joseph Dubeau, O.M.I.:** built the original frame church in 1936; came to Sandy Lake accompanied by Brother Joseph Dussault

**Brother Joseph Dussault:** arrived in Sandy Lake with pioneer-priest Father Joseph Dubeau, O.M.I.

**Father Wilfrid Dumont, O.M.I.:** spent eighteen years at St. Bernadette Mission as resident pastor. He learned the language and was much loved by all. It was at Fr. Dumont's urging that two of his parishioners studied to be ordained as permanent deacons in order to serve their people.

**Brother Phil Kelly, O.F.M. Conv.:** former editor of the Franciscan *Companion* magazine

**Father Edward Kosa, O.M.I.:** was then vicar general of the Archdiocese of Keewatin-Le Pas

**Brother Jules Loranger, O.M.I.:** was then archdiocesan treasurer, archdiocese of Keewatin-Le Pas

**Father Gerard Nogue, O.M.I.:** was then chaplain to the hospital and nursing home in The Pas

**Bishop John O'Mara:** bishop of the Diocese of Thunder Bay from 1976 to 1994

**Father Achiel Peelman, O.M.I.:** a theologian from St. Paul University in Ottawa, Ontario

**Father Alain Piche, O.M.I.:** Manitoba provincial superior of the Oblates

**Father Denys Ruest, O.M.I.:** lived at the Bishop's House in The Pas and shepherded the parishes in Cormorant, Cranberry Portage, Grand Rapids and Moose

Lake, Manitoba, visiting each one weekend a month

**Father Christopher Rupert, S.J.:** spiritual director; long-time friend and mentor of Deacon Bill and Molly Callaghan

**Archbishop Peter Sutton, O.M.I.:** archbishop of Keewatin-Le Pas from 1986 to 2006

## *Sisters*

**Sister Rose Arsenault, R.S.R.:** was chancellor of the Archdiocese of Keewatin-Le Pas

**Sister Marie Claire Boucher, S.C.S.H.:** assisted pastor at St. Theresa Point, Garden Hill and Wasagamach, Manitoba, as well as occasionally at St. Bernadette Mission, Sandy Lake, Ontario

**Sister Clarisse, S.M.S.H.:** St. Martha Sister from St. Hyacinthe, Quebec; was cook at the Bishop's House in The Pas

**Sister Aline Gazaille, S.C.S.H.:** assisted pastor at St. Theresa Point, Garden Hill and Wasagamach, Manitoba, as well as occasionally at St. Bernadette Mission, Sandy Lake, Ontario

**Sister Jean Cunningham, C.S.J.:** was administrator of St. John's Parish in Red Lake, Ontario; assisted pastor of St. Francis Xavier Parish, Balmertown, Ontario

**Sister Jeanne D'Arc, S.M.S.H.:** St. Martha Sister from St. Hyacinthe, Quebec; was cook at the Bishop's House in the Pas

**Sister Bernadette Kinsella, G.S.I.C.:** was director of Catholic Pastoral Centre for Thunder Bay diocese at the time

**Sister Betty Lackenbauer, S.S.N.D.:** was assistant administrator in the Diocesan Office of Catechetics for Archdiocese of Keewatin-Le Pas

**Sister Marie Lanthier I.B.V.M.:** friend of Rhoda Meekis

**Sister Val Leibel, S.S.N.D.:** was diocesan director of religious education for Archdiocese of Keewatin-Le Pas

**Sister Diane Oberle, C.S.J.:** assisted Sr. Jean Cunningham at St. John's Parish, Red Lake, Ontario, and the pastor of St. Francis Xavier Parish, Balmertown, Ontario

**Sister Eva Solomon, C.S.J.:** an Ojibway and member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Sault-Ste. Marie, Ontario

## *Friends and Visitors*

**Linda Buch:** formerly of the Catholic Office of Religious Education in Toronto, was involved in the Base Communities Office in Thunder Bay, and in 1991, was attending a seminar with her husband, Adam, in Avila Centre, Thunder Bay, Ontario

**Pat and Bill Poole:** friends and former neighbours of Deacon Bill and Molly Callaghan. Pat was then circulation manager, *Companion* magazine

**Dawn MacDonald and Steve Deme:** founders of Villagers Communications; at the time preparing the 1992 Catholic Church Extension Society (now Catholic Missions In Canada) Calendar

**Carole Thorne:** Sister Rose Arsenault's secretary

## *People of Sandy Lake and Area*

**Sidney and Harriet Fiddler:** Sidney, chairman of the parish council, and his wife, Harriet, were mandated by Archbishop Sutton as Extraordinary Ministers of Communion, and have been leading the Sunday Communion Services when a priest or deacon could not be present

**Anian Fiddler:** one of the elders; member of the parish council; often read the Scripture readings at the Sunday morning Oji-Cree service

**Alfred Fiddler:** father of Sidney; organist for many years at St. Bernadette Mission

**Jonas Fiddler:** chief of the First Nations community in Sandy Lake, Ontario

**Naham Fiddler:** permanent deacon and elder; ordained in 1976 and died in a snowmobile accident in 1984. Naham Fiddler's grandfather brought the first missionary to Sandy Lake by canoe in 1936

**Jemima Fiddler:** widow of Deacon Naham Fiddler

**Sanadius Fiddler:** United Church minister as was his grandfather before him

**Louis Fiddler:** chairman of the finance committee, church organist

**Hattie Fiddler:** wife of Louis and active member of the parish

**Gilbert Fiddler:** Sidney's younger brother; helped with music at Sunday afternoon services; died in a boating accident

**Timothy Fiddler:** son of Jemima and Deacon Naham; appointed in charge of Kubota tractor and plowing of plots for those who wished to garden

**John Fiddler:** adopted son of Jemima and Deacon Naham

**Samelia Fiddler:** wife of Timothy; winner of bannock-making contest

**Lillian Fiddler Stoney:** Sidney's sister; worked at the Children's Centre

**Allana Fiddler:** daughter of Sidney and Harriet Fiddler. At the time of the story, she was sharing the welcoming feast with two-month-old Chyenne

**Elliott Fiddler:** son of Sidney and Harriet

**Jacob Fiddler:** son of Sidney and Harriet

**Stanley Fiddler:** adopted son of Louis and Hattie

**Allen and Brenda Feeney:** Allen was manager of the Northern Store. He and Brenda have three sons Christopher, Steven and Timothy

**Gabbius Goodman:** an elder who believed education of great importance for the children. The Gabbius Goodman Memorial Centre was named in his honour

**Dickie Laughing:** a Mohawk from the Akwesasne community near Montreal; a Grade 3 schoolteacher in Sandy Lake

**Randy Linklater:** deputy chief of Sandy Lake First Nations reserve

**Esther Linklater:** matriarch of Linklater family and of St. Bernadette parish

**Tom Linklater:** served as translator during Liturgy of the Word; played guitar at Sunday services; was "Mr. Ontario Hydro" in Sandy Lake

**Edna Linklater:** wife of Tom; died in 1991

**Lorraine Linklater:** daughter of Tom and Edna

**Steve Linklater:** church custodian

**Bella Linklater:** Esther's daughter-in-law, wife of Zach; often served as escort for patients who were flown out for treatment

**John Mamakeesic:** the Mennonite minister in Sandy Lake

**Mary Mamakeesic:** widow of Deacon Walter Mamakeesic

**Walter Mamakeesic:** permanent deacon and elder; ordained in 1979, and died of a heart attack in 1990

**Myrna Mamakeesic:** Mary and Deacon Walter's daughter-in-law; teacher-aide at the school in Sandy Lake; Children's Liturgy teacher

**Jonah Mamakeesic:** son of Myrna, grandson of Mary and Deacon Walter

**Bart Meekis:** a Sandy Lake artist, Bart did a special commemorative painting of a First Nations Sacred Heart which hangs in St. Bernadette church

**Billy and Irene Meekis:** were asked to be Allana's namers. Billy was head-care-taker at the elementary school in Sandy Lake

**Evangeline Meekis:** led the Children's Liturgy procession

**Kanette Meekis:** matriarch of the Meekis family; Sacred Pipe Carrier for her people

**Norman Meekis:** an elder and close friend of Deacon Walter; often escorted patients when they were flown out for treatment

**Rhoda Meekis:** wife of Fred and sister of Sidney; photographed the tearing down of the original St. Bernadette church and the building of the new one

**Fred Meekis:** husband of Rhoda, son of Kanette, brother of Billy; carved log Baptismal/Holy Water font for St. Bernadette church

**Abel Rae:** a leader of the Pentecostal Church

**Harry Rae:** a leader of the Revival Church

**Kanina Rae:** a well-loved eighty-four-year-old elder known for her walking in and around the village

**Morris Rae:** an elder who had died in Winnipeg and whose body was brought home to Sandy Lake. The band had chartered two planes to bring the body and all of Morris's relatives home. Morris had been a member of the United Church but all six denominations on the reserve were represented at the airport

**Paul Rae:** often called Barnabas; husband of Penina and police chief

**Penina Rae:** wife of Paul; Harriet's sister; played guitar at wakes and funerals

**Clarence Rae:** son of Paul and Penina; winner of snow-snake contest

**Réal Rioux:** a contractor from Winnipeg, Manitoba who supervised the building of the new St. Bernadette church

**Benjamin Chee-Chee, Carl Rae, Norval Morrissette, Robert Kakegamic, Bart**

**Meekis, Johnson Meekis, Randy Fiddler:** artists from Sandy Lake, Ontario.

**Tom Brotherston:** owner of the float plane and Tommy's Place

## ∞ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ∞

Our gratitude goes out to:

Pat Poole, former neighbour and long-time friend, who was circulation manager for the Franciscan *Companion* magazine. She really started the ball rolling. She took our request to reroute our subscription to Sandy Lake to the editor, Brother Phil Kelly, saying, "There might be a story here."

Brother Phil Kelly, O.F.M. Conv., who suggested we keep a journal and send any of our stories to him for *Companion* magazine. He also volunteered to fly in to Sandy Lake if he could be of any assistance. This he did on four different weekends, to the delight of all who benefited from his presence. As well, Brother Phil has encouraged us all through the intervening years to get the story down on paper. So while Pat started the ball rolling, Brother Phil kept it moving.

Patria Rivera, editor of *Catholic Missions In Canada* magazine, who continually invited us to submit more "Mission Tales." Patty's advice and wisdom provided the final impetus needed to bring this project to completion.

Sister Eva Solomon, C.S.J., who so generously shared her vast knowledge of Native Spirituality with us and our people.

Joan Freedman, valued friend and neighbour, who first critiqued our manuscript and encouraged us in so many ways.

All those who have supported us spiritually and financially throughout our "mission adventures." We could not have done it without you.

Finally, to all our friends in Sandy Lake. Without you, there would be no story.

Some of these stories originally appeared in the following publications and are reprinted with permission:

- *Catholic Missions In Canada Magazine*
- *Mission Highlights*
- *Companion of Saint Francis and Saint Anthony*
- *The Word is Life – Catholic Biblical Association of Canada*

## ∞ EPILOGUE ∞

So much has happened since Catholic Missions In Canada printed *Walk with Us for a While* in 2009. Our family home for forty-five years was sold in 2010 and we moved into a comfortable retirement home. That first year and a half was a great lesson in learning to “stop and smell the roses.” Bill particularly enjoyed his raised flower bed in the garden below our fourth-floor suite... “the easiest weeding I’ve ever done,” he’d say. We also enjoyed the in-house exercise classes and aqua fit in the saltwater pool. I appreciated the luxury of not having to shop, cook, or clean.

Deacon Bill was still well enough to travel twice a month to Port Perry to preach at Immaculate Conception Church to ease the workload of the pastor in a growing parish.

God called Deacon Bill home at the age of eighty-eight in September 2011.

The Knights of Columbus in Port Perry were forming a new fourth degree assembly and asked permission to name it after him. The family was deeply touched as the Deacon William Callaghan 4th degree Assembly # 3358 received its charter in 2012.

While Bill is no longer physically present, he continues to be present in many unforeseen little ways every day. Recently, a friend sent a CD of a conference at which Bill had been asked to introduce and thank the guest speaker, so I got to hear his voice again—a very special treat. The children and grandchildren speak of him constantly. So widowhood seems like another phase of marriage which will end when our love triangle is united again in heaven.

The family continues to grow. Our ten children, thirty-five grandchildren, and fifteen great-grandchildren visit when they can. Or they keep in touch by phone, e-mail and Facebook. They love to hear stories about our time as missionaries. You might, too.

Health issues necessitate that I stay close to home. However, our retirement community provides activities to stretch our bodies, minds and souls. Our local church provides a weekly Communion Service every Sunday and the pastor or associate celebrates Mass for us every other month. One of our residents taught those of us interested to weave. Another group had fun learning bell-ringing and even held a concert to exhibit our latest skill. Our knitting group continues to produce premie bonnets, scarves, toques and colourful lap robes for whoever can use them. Of course, there is always that lonely person who needs a smile and cheery “hello” or someone who just needs a listening ear.

I still hear from Sandy Lake, but many of the Sandy Lakers we knew,

such as Esther, Bella, Zach and Tom Linklater, Norman, Rhoda and Fred Meekis, and Louis and Hattie Fiddler have since died. Sidney and Harriet are still the main leaders in St. Bernadette Church. They are gradually training younger members to do what has to be done between a priest’s visits. Father Bart Burke, although now retired and living in a retirement home in Winnipeg, still tries to fly in to Sandy Lake for Christmas and Easter celebrations.

Copies of *Walk with Us for a While* are available in Aurora Public Library, and also in the Ontario Provincial Police Reference library in Orillia as a useful resource for officers serving our First Nations people. The stories told are as relevant today as they were when they were written. The needs of our missionaries in our 26 Canadian mission dioceses are just as pressing. They are grateful for your prayerful and financial support. Along with the people they serve they pray for their benefactors every week.

It is a privilege to share our missionary experiences with you. I hope you will enjoy reading them as much as we enjoyed living them.

Megwetch—thank you, and God bless!

Molly Callaghan

August 2015