

# **Canadian Province Ministries to First Nations' Communities**

*By Joan Helm, SSND*

## **Northern Ontario**

### **Aroland 1971-1990**

“We started the last lap of our journey, a 50 mile trip on a rough, hilly gravel highway twisting through the bush to Aroland. The road seemed endless...”<sup>1</sup> This was the historic beginning of SSND presence in the northern missions and the fulfillment of a dream for Father Alex Roland S.J., a devoted friend of the native peoples. The pioneer community of Sisters Adelaide Folick, Janet Disbrowe and Pauline Girodat were well suited for this mission among the Ojibway. Their home became a drop-in centre for children and teens who enjoyed playing games, reading comic books and listening to music.

One mother asked if a kindergarten class could be started to better prepare the children for school. She went from house to house and gathered fourteen preschoolers. Sister Pauline met with the School Superintendent of Indian and Northern Affairs. When he realized that this was volunteer teaching, he contacted the principal of the school to provide chairs and school supplies. Within a few months Sister Pauline was asked to teach the primary grades at the school. In September 1972 Sister Ruth McLaren taught junior grades.

The people loved to sing, especially their Ojibwa hymns. The sisters taught them the sung parts of the Mass which added to the celebration of Sunday liturgies. There was a request was to revive the Legion of Mary, an association of lay Catholics devoted to Mary. An average of thirty adults attended the weekly meetings following Mass.

Sister Janet, in addition to welcoming children and adults at the convent and being available for unpredicted needs of parents, accompanied Father Roland taking the census in Aroland, visiting his missions and attending Jesuit Mission meetings. She also helped the teenagers in July

with an “Opportunities for Youth” program. Gradually, the sisters extended catechetical instruction and spiritual input, always being sensitive to the receptivity of the people.

A highlight for the pupils, who ranged from nine to fourteen years of age, was a ten-day trip to southern Ontario in September 1977. A year of planning and fundraising preceded the venture. Historic and tourist sites and government buildings in Niagara, and Toronto were visited. Sisters in these areas provided hospitality. Sister Judith Pellerin wrote in the Newsletter, “The greatest excitement of all was the final 60 miles back to Aroland. The noise pitch rose and rose and as we pulled into Aroland, the entire community was there blowing horns and all, to welcome everyone back.”<sup>2</sup>

How different was the news in the Provincial Council Memo in March 30, 1979. The school in Aroland had been vandalized on numerous occasions, causing extensive damage. In the latest, fire burned two classrooms. Sisters Judith Pellerin and Celeste Swan decided to submit their resignations as teachers. “We will continue to serve and minister among the people through the parish.”

In 1990 Sister Vivian Zoller, Provincial, wrote to Bishop R. Despatie, Bishop of Hearst, that the sisters would be leaving Aroland. She cited that the parish and school were working well together, and individuals in the community had sufficient leadership ability to respond to community needs. She was assured by the Bishop that the clergy would attend to the spiritual needs of the people.

### **Beardmore 1974-1988**

Beardmore was a gold mining town with a population of approximately 4,000. Sisters were asked to teach at St. Theresa’s Elementary School with an enrolment of fifty-four pupils. Initially, Sister Ruth McLaren taught Grades 4, 5, and 6 and Sister Rita Ryan was part-time principal’s relief. During all the years at Beardmore there was a sister in the school. The sisters were involved in pastoral ministry, not only in Beardmore but also on three First Nations reserves. In Macdiramid they catechized in the public school; in Jellicoe they conducted catechism classes, did a parish census and taught English as a Second Language classes to the Portuguese women. The sisters did some sacramental preparation in Helen Lake, and Pays Platt until 1979.

The decision to leave Beardmore was due to the declining population. During the fourteen years of SSND presence, the sisters fostered leadership among the parishioners, trained parish ministers and catechists, and established parish councils. In announcing their departure, they told the people they were going to places where there were no priests. Tearfully, a few native women were able to say, "We have to help ourselves. We have to learn to be responsible for our lives."<sup>3</sup>

### **Grassy Narrows 1984-1993, 1994-2004**

In June 1982, Bishop J. O'Mara of the Thunder Bay Diocese initiated conversation about the possibility of two sisters living at Grassy Narrows, an Ojibwa reserve. The following June four SSNDs visited the area. On their return they recommended that a mission be established. Pastoral ministry and sacramental preparation were to be the main focus for Sisters Petra Klotz and Celeste Swan who moved into Grassy Narrows. Sister Celeste began teaching religion to all classes in the school but within a year she took over a Grade 2 class. By 1987 problems developed with the Grassy Narrows Education Authority and the Teacher's Federation. In September 1988, Sister Irene Freeman filled one of the available positions in the school.

What a shock to the residents in Grassy Narrows when fire destroyed their school on August 29, 1989. Portables were brought in for classrooms. These were troubled times on the reserve as the Band was struggling to gain self government. In May 1993, Sister Rose Mary Sander, Provincial, wrote to Chief W. Fobister and Bishop O'Mara that the sisters would leave Grassy Narrows. In 1994 the Grassy Narrows Education Authority began construction of the new Saskatchewan-Anishinabe School. Sister Irene Freeman was invited to be principal of the grade school and to begin planning for the high school (Grades 9-10) for September 1995. All SSNDs from the area were present for the official opening of the school. Roger Fobister, Director of Education, thanked the School Sisters of Notre Dame for their donation to set up a library. Sister Margarida Da Silva joined the staff.

In 1998 Roger Fobister and Sister Irene initiated a teacher training program for Grassy Narrows Band members. Professors from the Thunder Bay campus of Lakehead University came to the reserve to provide some courses. SSNDs again donated monies for this educational program. In 2003, thirteen graduated as certified teachers. Indeed a historic event in Grassy Narrows.

### **Kenora 1986-2005**

The request from Bishop O'Mara called for "witness of community life and to serve in the parish as teacher, counsellor and parish minister ... and help to continue the integration of natives and whites into a more united parish..."<sup>4</sup> Three sisters went to Kenora to fill his request. Sister Margarida DaSilva joined the staff at Mount Carmel School as teacher's aide in the special education class; Sister Ruth McLaren served as pastoral assistant to the pastor at Notre Dame Parish; Sister Catherine Begin visited the shut-ins and residents at the nursing home, and coordinated volunteers for the Agape Table, a noon luncheon program. In 1988 Sister Catherine assisted with interviews for the Diocesan Marriage Tribunal. 1992 saw the opening of the Ojibwa Youth-Elder Resource Training Centre on the Rat Portage Reserve for which the School Sisters of Notre Dame gave a substantial donation as seed money. In 1994 sadness came upon the community of Kenora. Sister Catherine, who had come to be regarded as the "mother" of the SSND northern missions, was diagnosed with cancer. She chose to remain in Kenora rather than move to the Motherhouse infirmary. She succumbed to the disease on September 29. During the last years the sisters continued to volunteer in pastoral ministry to the parish and the community.

### **Dryden 1988-1994**

With the closing of the mission in Beardmore, Bishop O'Mara asked the sisters to minister among the people in the outlying areas of St. Joseph's parish. Sisters Carla Marie McCarville and Hedwig Ganter moved into a house owned by the diocese and formerly occupied by the Sisters of St. Joseph of North Bay. Although their main ministry was to the First Nations people of Wabigoon, Dinorwic and Eagle Lake, they did pastoral work in St. Joseph Parish. In 1992 Bishop O'Mara appointed Sister Carla Marie administrator of Our Lady of Fatima Parish in Vermilion Bay. With only Sister Hedwig in Dryden from 1993 to 1994, it was decided to close this mission.

### **Sioux Narrows 1990-2008**

To continue the work of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Sioux Narrows, especially with the First Nations people, SSNDs moved into the sisters' former residence. The aboriginal people on the reserves sought to improve their life style through education, better housing and employment. Sister Ruth McLaren set out to help them find ways to integrate their native spirituality with the

Christian tradition. Sister Katharine Reiter was involved with the parish activities and participated in the Sunrise Seniors' Club. Sioux Narrows is a tourist area during the summer months. When the regular liturgist left during the winter months, Sister Katharine assisted with the Sunday liturgy. When Sister Ruth departed due to health problems, the sisters continued their presence within the parish and community.

## **Northwest Territories**

### **Fort Resolution 1988-2003**

After many years with the services of clergy and religious, this settlement of approximately 550 Métis and Chipewyan were left without a resident priest. Sisters Petra Klotz and Gertrude Huber came to provide pastoral assistance, some sacramental preparation and to be present to the community. Through the years the ministry of the sisters broadened to include parish administration and health care.

### **Wha Ti 1996-1998**

Bishop Croteau inquired about the possibility of Sister Claudette Morneau, who had been serving in Fort Resolution, to move to an area of greater need in his diocese, the mission of Lac La Martre, north of Yellowknife. This First Nations community requested the presence of a pastoral worker to assist them. It is a very remote reserve accessible by plane in the summer and transportation across the frozen lake in winter. Sister Claudette's ministry was one of presence and support.

### **Fort Good Hope 2003-...**

This fly-in village is 50 miles south of the Arctic Circle. Two sisters are involved in pastoral ministry to the First Nations residents.

## **British Columbia**

### **Kelly Lake 1994-2001**

It was Bishop G. Weisner OMI who notified Sister Rose Mary Sander, Provincial, about the possible principalship position at Kelly Lake, a Métis community of approximately forty families and a school enrolment of forty to fifty pupils. In response Sister Rose Mary wrote that whether or not a teaching position was available “we still feel that Kelly Lake is a good place for us to be and to minister in pastoral and religious education”<sup>5</sup>

S.Doreen Lackenbauer ministered at Kelly Lake during the seven years, offering her expertise in language arts and catechetics. S.Pauline Girodat taught part time and did pastoral work in the community. Her manual skills were put to good use in painting the interior of St. Anne Mission Church and doing other repair jobs. A three bedroom mobile unit beside the church served as their spacious home. Due to pastoral needs in Fort St. John it was decided to close the mission at Kelly Lake.

## **Manitoba**

### **Thompson 1987-1994**

The dream of Father V. Bonatti OMI, pastor of St. Lawrence parish, to form a pastoral team to address the needs of the First Nations reserves and Métis settlements of northern Manitoba, was finally realized in September 1987.<sup>6</sup> Three sisters from different religious congregations, a lay missionary, a priest and a Cree representative formed the Maranatha Mission Team. Sister Barbara Ann Schnarr, with the other two sisters, formed an intercommunity religious group which lived in Thompson.

Initially, Sister Barbara Ann taught religion classes in six different schools and substituted when volunteers were ill. Discipline problems often interfered with the lesson. By 1990 sister had devised a better plan, a Parish Religion Program. The fact that 331 children attended the Sunday classes proved the success of the program. Children’s Liturgy of the Word, monthly Family Mass, and dramatization of the Gospel increased attendance at Sunday Mass. Sixty-eight trained volunteers helped with the children’s programs.

In November 1987, the Chief of Shamattawa band announced that the new skating rink was not used because the families had no money to purchase skates. Sister Barbara Ann asked Sister

Mildred Straus in southern Ontario to contact schools and parishes in her area requesting used skates. The response was overwhelming. More than 200 pairs were collected, plus 80 pairs from Bauer Skate Manufacturing Company in Waterloo. Again in 1991 a plea went out for the community of Pukatawagan. Companies transported 200 pairs of skates free of charge. Articles about both skate drives appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press and Nickel Belt News.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Aroland Chronicles

<sup>2</sup> Newsletter October 1977

<sup>3</sup> Newsletter May 1988

<sup>4</sup> Provincial Memo #16, 1986

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Bishop Weisner, o.m.i., April 19, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> *Soundings*, May 1988 Barbara Ann Schnarr