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### Two bishops traverse harsh lands to bring faith to remote communities



Archbishop Martin Currie of Grand Falls, Newfoundland (L) and Bishop Gary Gordon of Whitehorse, Yukon. Aaron Lynett/National Post

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**Charles Lewis** November 28, 2010 – 6:42 pm

They live an 8,100-kilometre drive apart and the history and geography of their respective lands could hardly be more different than any two places in Canada — at least on the surface.

Bishop Gary Gordon of Whitehorse and Archbishop Martin Currie of St. John's and Grand Falls both deal with the vagaries of extreme weather and traversing great distances to bring the faith to handfuls of Catholics in remote communities in their dioceses. They share a deep love for their adopted homes, and revel in the natural beauty and peace of the landscapes they constantly traverse. But they are realists who understand how tough it can be to be a priest in places where isolation, cold, alcoholism and domestic discord, brought on by men leaving for months at a time to make a living, are constant problems.

Added to that, they both struggle getting the right men into the priesthood and overcoming the legacies of the sexual abuse that had specific histories in each place.

"Necessity is the mother of invention," said Bishop Gordon. "That's been a healthy thing. We're the leading edge of the wedge in finding new ways of bringing the Church to

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the people.”

The two bishops were in Toronto this week visiting the office of the Catholic Missions in Canada, the group that funds 90% of the activities in Newfoundland and the Yukon.

Bishop Gordon came to the Yukon 10 years ago after former bishop Thomas Lobsinger was killed piloting his own plane. It was a tragic event but it inadvertently paved the way for Bishop Gordon to leave Vancouver and find a “dream” location in which to minister, albeit one that was severely under-manned.

“The transition from having 22 priests in the 1970s and 1980s to having four priests two years ago has created a huge gap between the expectations of parishioners and what we’re able to deliver,” Bishop Gordon said. “That meant that many of the 22 missions would only have mass once every three months.”

In the past two years he received four new priests, which means mass can be served at least once a month in the remote communities outside of Whitehorse. But he constantly has to tell parishes that they will have to develop lay leadership because new priests are not coming anytime soon.

For Archbishop Currie, who from rural Nova Scotia, the cultural transition to Newfoundland was not as great but he still had to face a staffing crisis, one that had started years before.

Over the past few decades, for example, 14 priests in Grand Falls — 40% of all the priests in that area — left the priesthood.

“We never really recovered from the loss of priests but the expectation remained the same. We’re relying much more on the resources of lay people and religious sisters to fill up the gaps,” Archbishop Currie said.

The Archbishop brought in six priests from the Philippines and two from Africa, but the experiment has been fraught with problems.

“They’re not sure what to do when they arrive here,” said Archbishop Currie. “They’re used to seeing big crowds in the street and overflowing churches. I’ve had to send to send one African back and the Filipinos want to move to Toronto where there is a big ethnic community. They’re not committed to the diocese they way they should be, so we have a constant turnover.”

Though Bishop Gordon has one Nigerian priest, he agrees with Archbishop Currie that the cultural challenges may be too much.

“If we get 12 people at a service in one of the missions it’s like the Super Bowl. It’s too big a shift. The cold is incredible. I have to worry about their mental, spiritual and psychological health.”

However, having Canadian priests may not be the answer either. The men who used to cover the far North, priests from the Oblate order, were tough men whose self-reliance made them ideal candidates for the North.

“I don’t want an individual priest in some of these places. The guys coming out of the seminary today don’t have what the old guys had. The young priests coming out of seminary don’t have the toughness physically, intellectually or spiritually to be by themselves.”

Bishop Gordon is looking at bringing Catholic families into remote communities, where they can take a leadership role and become the focus of the Church where there is no resident priest.

“If I have good Catholic families living the Catholic faith they’re going to be the witness that will be transformational in the community.”

In Newfoundland, the situation is a bit different because there are larger urban centres — though Archbishop Currie noted that outport communities are dying out and it is almost impossible to service those communities as it was in the past.

“So instead we are trying to get the adults to take the role of educating the young in the faith.”

Always hovering above all the best intentions of both men is the history of abuses scandals — the residential schools in the Yukon and the Mount Cashel Orphanage in Newfoundland.

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“Just when you think you’re making some headway, along comes something like the Lahey issue that stirs it all up again,” Archbishop Currie said. Bishop Lahey of Nova Scotia was arrested earlier this year for allegedly having almost 1,000 child pornography images on his computer.

“We’re trying to do our best, but I now realize that there is a systemic problem in the worldwide Church that is bigger than just Newfoundland,” he said.

But at least in Whitehorse, the problem of overcoming bad memories may find a solution in the demographic shift.

In the past few years, Filipino families have come to Whitehorse and Dawson City to work in the service sectors. They are also starting to fill the churches in Whitehorse, which may have the side benefit, along with increased lay leadership, of helping the Catholic Church move out of the shadows of the residential school crisis.

“The people who are moving here don’t have any of this history,” said Bishop Gordon. “The face of the church is changing.”

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