

The Road to Warm Springs

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Transcript: Ministry Moment from Rev. Nancy and Rev. Richard Bruyere
Indigenous Spiritual Ministry of Mishamikoweesh

*More information including a video of this Ministry Moment at
www.anglican.ca/roadtowarmsprings*

The Rev Nancy Bruyere:

I'm Nancy Bruyere, if you don't know me yet. Our ministry started 20 years ago. I was ordained a deacon in 1997 and I think it was just after or before I was ordained when I first heard about the Sacred Circles. Our ministry is a big ministry. When I first started as a deacon, we looked after four communities in our area. Sagkeeng First Nation, Little Black River, Manitotagan and Hollow Water. And a lot of times in Winnipeg and Selkirk, Pine Falls.

Our ministry just took us all over the place, once we started, people called us to go all over the place, to go and minister to people, our people. And with people we didn't even know. Whenever we walked into the hospital, especially if I wore my collar, people would come up to me and ask me if I can go and pray for their relatives. And it's been an interesting ministry. A very—I don't know how you say ...

I'll just talk about a little about what we've done. We've been doing funerals, a lot of funerals. Well, we do our regular services on Sundays and then we have a children's ministry. Our children's ministry started out of when I got burned out before Richard was—or Richard was starting—I think he was just being ordained that time and I kind of got burned out. And so, I went into children's ministry. And that one was really, that was a big blessing. Because I see a lot of these children now, they're just graduating from high school and we're still praying for them that they'll keep on going, that they'll keep on, that they'll lead the community and not be afraid to be all that God has called them to be. That's our prayer for them and that God will keep them safe.

As a parent and as a grandmother, I find it hard to let go of my grandchildren. It was easier to let my kids go but to see my grandchildren leaving the community, it's hard. One of the things that I want to share with you too is we do a lot of weddings, like this month, we have, we have a wedding every weekend. So, and then we have at the end of the month, the last weekend of this month, we have a renewal of vows, marriage vows.

So, we're very thankful for that, that the people, you know, all these people that we minister, they don't always come to church. A lot of times they come to church when there is a funeral. That's when our churches are full. So, our ministry is not always in a church, it's outside of the church, outside of the church building.

Last week, we did a wedding outside the church for my nephew and that was a blessing because his wife is traditional. They followed the traditional ways, the dancing powwows. And for her side of the family, it was the first they'd been to a wedding like that. And it was a blessing for our whole family, for both families from a different community.

When we first started our ministry, one of the things I remember the most about our ministry is when I first was asked to go to the hospital, to go pray for an elder from our community, he stopped going to church for quite a while. And so I went to the hospital and I was just shaking because I didn't know what to expect. And I knew what to do because the priest before me, like he was the first indigenous priest in our community, told me what to do. He taught me what to do, to go and how to say the prayers and what to do.

And so I went and I was scared. So anyways, what happened was the family came and meet me at the door and they told me that he was very sick and they sounded like he wasn't gonna live very long. So anyways, I went inside, went into his room, with the family and we all stood around and then I started—oh before the—his wife said to the family and to this man who was very sick, "Nancy is here to pray for you."

And he looked up and he said, "What for? I'm not dying yet." I was scared but I wanted to laugh at the same time but it was such a serious moment. So those are the kind of experiences I had. And then there were times when we had to do funerals from each community, from one community to the next, you had to travel about 45 minutes to an hour and there were times when we had to pass the hearse on the highway to get there before them, before the hearse. But these are just, you know, it's just—it seems normal, I don't know.

But that's just our ministry and ever since we've had our own deacons, like not our own deacons but we've had deacons in these communities, we have Reverend Norman Meade who was supposed to be here today too. And Reverend Ernest McPherson in Little Black River. Ever since they were ordained deacons, it's made it easier for us because it's a lot of work. It's a lot of work.

And we do a lot of baptisms. We go and visit as much as we can and I just want to share some of the things with you, the things that I have done or the times that I have... I felt like a third of my own life was in the hospitals. I slept on hospital chairs, I slept once on a hospital floor in the washroom. But you know, it's our culture. We can't leave. Like, we just don't go there and pray and then leave. A lot of times, it's we stay there with the family members and even if it's in Winnipeg, or in the hospital or a neighboring town.

Anyways, I think that's, I'm not sure if I should keep on going but there's more to our ministry. And I think the first time we went to—I just want to share this real quick. The first time we went to General Synod, it was for me a culture shock. I really got scared when I went and we

had to sit at the tables and be a silent partner, we couldn't speak. And it was very hard not to be able to say things, especially when it had to do with water.

And this was in 2001, I think or 2000. So we went to a General Synod and it was a big culture shock for me because so many things, issues that were being talked about. And the biggest one, for me, that time was the water. The water is very precious to us as indigenous people. It's sacred to us because it gives us life and just recently, I've started going into, I've been getting invited to our cultural events, just to go and observe and to pray and just to be there with our people.

And while I was listening to the woman speaking about how our bodies, the woman's body carries a child and all of a sudden I had this vision of a woman and the baby in the womb, how does that baby survive in that water? You know, for nine months? And it really made me think that whole how God created us so sacred and a lot of very young people don't know that our bodies are sacred. That God created us so sacred. So I feel like we have so much to teach our young people and our culture's so very important, it's a very important part of our ministry.

It was scary at first to go into our culture because we were taught not to even go to powwows and to speak our language for me is very hard because I still understand it, my language, my first language is Ojibway but to speak it, that doesn't, I have a hard time to speak it.

So we're trying so hard, in our communities, to encourage and teach and encourage our young people to learn the language and for us, it's very important, also to learn. I think, when I heard about, I heard somebody I think was saying something about how our people are really turning to the, our culture is going to sun dances and that's what's happening in our community, too. So I get invited to go to a lot of these events that they have. Sometimes I get worried that because the elders in our church don't approve it, yeah, not all of them.

Our community is still struggling with the suicide, drugs, there is so much drugs that are coming into our communities. It seems like such a big battle right now. But we keep on going and what I see happening in our community, in our ministry is that we're working together to help our people.

And I just wanted to say that I want to share this. When Mark called us to come and speak about our ministry, I thought about Philippians, about what Saint Paul said. "I know how to be abased and I know how to abound everywhere and in all things. I have learned both to be full and to be hungry. Both to abound and to suffer need."

And when I think about our ministry, this is what comes to me because all our indigenous ministries, most of us don't get paid for what we do. And what keeps me going in this ministry after 20 years is first the love. My ministry, I think, when I was ordained 20 years ago, I didn't think about money at all. It wasn't something that came, it wasn't ... or being a minister, I think, wasn't something that I had planned growing up.

I thought being a minister, you had to be perfect person. And then I started learning along the way that God uses imperfect people, imperfect lives. When I look at our people and when I look

at my own life, my own life, my past, my history and the hurt that I went through, I can empathize, I feel that pain of our people and it keeps me going.

The other thing is, because of what Jesus did for me, how he changed my life, how I used to be before, not having any purpose, I just want to tell people about Jesus. And it seems like people are afraid to hear about Jesus. Maybe because of how Jesus was represented before because I never knew before how loving God is, how compassionate He is, how merciful He is. And that's what we are sharing.

I feel that we are sharing in our ministry to our people is the love of Christ, not by judging or by preaching, you know? But by living by example. So for me, to keep on going all these years, what kept me was that when Jesus changed my life, all I had to offer God was myself and that's what He was waiting for.

So that's where our lives are and our ministry is, it's still. And you know, I did some work on suicide prevention and that's one of the hardest things to work on. But I think we're gonna talk about that a different time? Okay. So I'm gonna leave that where it is now and what else. No, I think that's it.

The Rev Richard Bruyere:

Thank you. Thank you for that clap. She said everything, she said everything I was gonna say. I was, in 2002, I got ordained as deacon and I was not just deacon for seven years, then when they come and ask me if I wanted to be priest, I said, "No, I like being deacon. She is the boss." So they made Nancy and I both associate priests in our area. But now she's the priest in charge and I'm associate. I like it that way.

But one of the things that's really hard for myself in our ministry is because we're both non-stipend priests and it's very, very hard. Like I really love the ministry, I really do. But in order for us to pay for the bills and gas and things like that, I have to secular job. And I think God that I was able to get a job in my background as an engineer, engineering. And I work for our community as a director of public works. And that takes a lot of my time.

And that's where it's really hard for me. When we first started, Nancy and I, we had four communities to do. And we had Hollow Water, Black River, Manitotagan, sometimes Bissett and sometimes Great Falls. And there was just the two of us because Andrew, Reverend Andrew Sinclair, he was the priest before us and he went to the—remember the tape program? Train an Indian priest? That's what he went to. And it was ... he was a

If it wasn't Andrew when I came back to church, he spoke in such a way that it touched me. Because it was relevant, he was talking in our language and he was talking about the things that meant to us and it just brought me back to church.

And one of the things that brought us back was the ministry was children's ministry. Andrew Sinclair's sister, Rachel, asked Nancy and I if we can help her with the Christmas concert with the kids, getting all the kids together and teach, practice them with the Christmas hymns and then we had like a little play, using the Bible reading and the Nativity story.

And that's what brought us back, we started working with that. And that's where we started coming back to church. And then I had no plan on being a clergy, I wasn't, not where I was raised with this. And I was way out the world and I was also baptized in the Catholic church, I was in Residential School at the Catholic Church and I was a Catholic. And Nancy and them were Anglican.

And the way it was in our community, they were always fighting amongst each other. You're Catholic, I'm Anglican, you're up river, I'm down river, you're cross river, that kind of stuff. But when I came back, when I was listening to Andrew, it really drew me. Then I felt like I was at home with a family, you know, this is my family. And the love that he had. It just drew me. And that's why I just loved my ministry.

But because of the things that we go to now, I helped Nancy with the suicide prevention. And it's a very hard work, it's very hard, especially in our communities. A lot of young people are just crying out right now. And there's a lot of times, you feel like you're just by yourself. Or I think that's how they feel too.

But I really thank God that we do have a lot of people are together, like all of us here. The Anglican indigenous peoples, we are not alone, we're together. And last night, we came in late 'cause we were at the Selkirk hospital, we had to go and pray for our granddaughter and she's alright now. But it really scared me, scared us. And because of the things that we, as part of our ministry, when families, they phone us to go to Winnipeg, sometimes at three, four o'clock in the morning, we rush off to Winnipeg, go to hospital, go and pray for them and be with them. Sometimes we do it all night.

And a lot of it is we pay for our own gas, and parking, meals and some people, we went to the hospital, we even gave them money because they are there with nothing, so we helped them out. That's part of our ministry.

And on Monday, we went to Winnipeg and we went and did shopping for this lady. I think she's dependent on pills, and she was in-between welfare. So we went and bought her groceries, we took them to her. These are the things that we do in our community.

And I love the ministry, but at the same time, we have to live. And our church, also, we have a really, really loving congregation. They're not well to do, but they give what they have. And a lot of them, especially when there's wakes, when Andrew Sinclair was there, as part of our church, we built an extension. And this plan was to have the Sunday School for the children. But it evolved into a place where people come to do wakes because a lot of our people have homes that have small but big families so they all come to the church and we have the wake there and we go and pray with them.

And when we have wakes, that is where you see our people really come together. They come and sing. The way we do it is we have three nights wake. Then they would sing, Rachel, you know the beautiful gospel hymns, the ones that are healing, healing sounds? And that's what they do, they just come together. Some of them are Full Gospel, some of them are Catholic, some of them are Anglican but they come together and they—no, they just—how do you say it again,

they're with the family to help them out through that mourning and a lot of people, they come to us and they just thank us.

And we just did a memorial service for a lady. She did not want a funeral or a wake. So she got cremated, but the family, we wanted them to have a place to grieve, to let go. So they invited us on Sunday to go to her place and have a feast. Then we went to the graveyard and we buried her ashes. And there, we made it like a wake and a funeral at the same time. And the people are all together and they just started crying.

And then after that, one of the ladies came and thanked me, she hugged me. She said, "I really love going to your church. It makes me feel like I'm loved and I'm at home with a family." That's what she said to us. But it takes a lot of—like I really love it, I do. You know, that's part of it.

And Nancy's Sunday School. She gets about 20, 30 kids sometimes. Well Fred was there one time, remember Fred when you were there? We made him work.

We made him work. He did a work of—Yeah. Remember, do everything: baptism. Prayers of the People, except for wedding.

Yeah. And the children all with him there. And so that's it, when he came, it is a blessing when he came too. Same with Mark when he comes, too. It's always a blessing. And it makes our people feel like when the bishop's come that, you know, it makes them feel good. You came and blessed us, thank you for that, you blessed our people.

And there's a lot more to our ministry but these are the just the things that I remember. And we did, when we do baptisms, sometimes, we do about seven, eight, nine, 10. And this year, remember doing a funeral one after the other, one week after the other, for about two months. One week after the other. And Father Augustini, the priest in the Catholic Church, says, "I'm praying to God that I do not do any more funerals on a Saturday." And he did Saturday for about three months, every Saturday. It's a big community.

But one of the things that the people are saying is 'cause our community they thought that... We got 7,000 people in Sagkeeng. That's why you're seeing a lot of this, it's a big community. But the ones that are really hard to do is the ones that are young people, we did one funeral for a young man that took drugs with a bad drug in there. I don't know if it was fentanyl or a heart attack. So we did that funeral.

Then next week after it we did a funeral for a young man that hung himself, that family. And then 10 days after, it was his cousin, died on the streets of Winnipeg. See, these are the things that, you know. But we have to. It's not only, we do the funeral but we also go to the family and it takes a lot out of us. Yeah. And sometimes, I'm really glad that our daughter Linda, she ran for the Chief and Council, now she's in the council but still she asks: I have to be there.

But sometimes, I gotta take with my, like today, I was supposed to be at work. But they understand and they support me with our ministry and I thank God for that.