

# Spiritual gifts flow north and south as covenant relationship grows

One of the first things you notice about Fort Simpson is the silence.



Fort Simpson is a quiet village tucked into the pine forest where the Liard and Mackenzie rivers meet.

Tucked into the pine forest where the Liard and Mackenzie rivers meet, the village is marked by a quiet that can unnerve a visitor used to the bustle of big cities hundreds of kilometres from here.

No crowds hurriedly walk the streets. The occasional shopper or mom with family strolls along on the dusty dirt road that is the main drag, maybe heading for the Northern Store grocery. There's no rush of traffic. In fact, if the occasional car or truck does drive by, it too seems to make barely a sound.

Fort Simpson, a mostly Dene village of 1,200 people, is the hub of the Deh Cho region of the Northwest Territories, but it's a good six-hour drive to the nearest city, Yellowknife.

The difference can be just as stark for people here, when they head to the city.

"Noise!" and long stretches of concrete and pavement are what Melissa Hardisty noticed when she left her home in nearby Wrigley to attend college in Grande Prairie for a year. In the North, "we have ground. We're grounded here. We're closer to the Earth."

Hardisty's feelings are typical of the Dene here. Their spiritual groundedness is one of the gifts that will form part of an ongoing covenant relationship, or twinning, between the Archdiocese of Edmonton and the Diocese of Mackenzie-Fort Smith.

The covenant is an agreement to share the gifts of each region with the other. In Canada, a number of northern and southern dioceses have entered into these relationships, initiated most recently by a change in Church funding for the North.

Most recently the gift from the Archdiocese side was financial, a contribution through its Together We Serve annual appeal toward building the new Sacred Heart Church in Fort Simpson.

The covenant between the two dioceses was formalized three years ago, but it began years earlier and it's deeper than others in Canada. The details are still being worked out, but the relationship is more than just financial. It's spiritual.

"We have always envisioned this as mutual, a mutual sharing of giftedness," said Archbishop Richard Smith, who initiated the relationship soon after he arrived in Edmonton.



### Bishop Mark Hagemoen of Mackenzie-Fort Smith

Bishop Mark Hagemoen of Mackenzie-Fort Smith shared that vision.

"It was very important that, number one, it'd be a mutual covenant ... and that it's not merely focused, frankly, on the South with greater means supporting the North with less means, that it would be about mutuality," he said.

"It would be about a vision that involved shared ministry and living and accomplishing the Gospel in the world today. Certainly it would feature the aboriginal community of the North teaching the community in the southern dioceses about Dene, Metis and Inuit spirituality, the whole approach to life and faith as well," said Hagemoen, who has since left the North to serve as Bishop of Saskatoon.

"There are some rich, fascinating features of Dene and Inuit and Metis spiritual vigour that would be a real blessing for the Catholic community in the South."

Archbishop Smith said those values include time, listening, openness and, as Melissa Hardisty would attest, silence.

"We're not at all comfortable with silence," Smith said. "We're constantly filling up our attention with smart phones, the radio or the TV or babble, banal chatter, these sorts of things."

First Nations people, on the other hand, "don't mind being quiet and just sitting in silence, which certainly from a Christian perspective we can understand is of extraordinary value, because it's in silence that we encounter God. It's in silence that we ponder his Word."



An enormous wooden teepee commemorates the site of the papal visit to Fort Simpson in 1987.

That silence is an especially important and timely for the Edmonton Archdiocese, given the scriptural focus of the Archbishop's recent pastoral letter, *Living in the Word of God*.

"In order to engage the Word and encounter Christ in it, we need to be prepared to carve out time and within that carved-out time to stay silent to allow that Word to speak to us."

Here in Fort Simpson, Sacred Heart parishioners waited for decades for a new building, and even in the streets time seems to stand still. First Nations people, in particular, know the value of time. They even make light of their own relationship to it.

"There's an important lesson for us to learn in that. Time is a gift. Time is not the enemy," Archbishop Smith said. "Time is the opportunity given to us to encounter God and to encounter the other. When we are so ruled by time, we don't give one another a lot of it. But when we understand time is a gift and an opportunity, we'll take whatever time we need to be with the other and accompany the other."

Speaking with visitors, the Dene residents are remarkably candid about the healing their new church is bringing, and about the legacy of Lapointe Hall, the former residential school that once stood across the street.

Melissa Hardisty even speaks openly about her daughter "in heaven".

Some may be taken aback by that candour; others more familiar with First Nations spirituality are not.

"I find that First Nations peoples are comfortable in their own skin," Archbishop Smith said. "They are not afraid to acknowledge weakness, vulnerability, brokenness and to share that with one another and to grow with one another and to heal with one another."

"We in the more western kind of mindset tend to cover all of that up with pretense, which actually only deepens the hurt and causes it to fester, because it doesn't allow the other in, in truth, in order to help facilitate that healing."

Archbishop Smith also noted that First Nations people keep God at the centre of their lives.

"They do not allow God to be eclipsed. There's constant reference to the Creator in all that they do, even when it's not in a religious context," he said. "Our society here wants to eclipse God, wants to make God private and hidden."

It's in the context of these gifts that the covenant relationship between Edmonton and Mackenzie-Fort Smith is developing. It's relatively new and

further details are still being worked out – whether it’s sharing between regions, deaneries, or even schools.

“It’s hoped that the relationship will be organic,” Bishop Hagemoen said, “that in the spirit of subsidiarity, individual communities will also connect.”

In Mackenzie-Fort Smith, needs are focused on ministry. Even in Yellowknife, where the diocese is based, the Bishop keeps a “lean” staff.

“The biggest challenge I find here is related to geography and climate, and also what all of that presents in terms of bringing to bear important resources to (respond to the) needs issues for our widespread, isolated communities.”



**Roger Plouffe of Edmonton serves as a lay minister in Fort Good Hope, 700 km northwest of Fort Simpson.**

In the remote community of Fort Good Hope, Roger Plouffe, a parishioner at St. Thomas More Parish in Edmonton, is serving as a lay minister. He provides some of the sacraments, officiates marriages, and helps run the food bank in the town of 500, some 700 kilometres northwest of Fort Simpson.

And an archivist from the Edmonton Archdiocese recently spent weeks in Mackenzie-Fort Smith organizing their files.

So far, Bishop Hagemoen said, the covenant relationship has been good.

“Archbishop Smith joked to me one time; he said, ‘It feels like we haven’t been moving quickly enough.’ I said, ‘No, we’ve been doing fine.’ Sure, there’s a lot more to do, but we really appreciate the relationship starting, and steady as she goes. Let the Spirit lead us.”

As the people of Edmonton and Mackenzie-Fort Smith discern what the covenant relationship will look like in the future, Archbishop Smith refers back to the First Nations spirituality: “All in due time, as they will tell us. It will unfold, and I think it will unfold beautifully.”