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# CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY

## IN THE NORTH

*Lester H. Stahlke*

### *THE SCOPE OF OUR RESPONSIBILITY*

If we agree that our ministry is to the whole man, then our ministry to the people of the north covers a broad range of economic, environmental, technological, social and cultural concerns. All of these areas include matters which are vital to human relationships. Progress cannot be considered apart from the effect it will have on people.

Rich resources lie in the north. But when a bulldozer begins its work of exploration, just its tracks can disturb the permafrost enough to lead to erosion so bad that migrating caribou cannot cross the gully created. The result is that people lose their supply of food. If the mere making of tracks turns out to have moral implications, it's not hard to imagine what effect the men, equipment, roads, fuel and supply systems, and communications network will have on people.

Communication is such a basic part of human relationships. Isn't it logical to assume that if telephones, radio, and television could reach every northern community the information brought would broaden and benefit? These

technological miracles are realities in many isolated settlements. Where there was no electrical power in native homes a few years ago there is now live colour television beamed from Anik II, a synchronous satellite, 22,300 miles above the equator. What a splendid accomplishment! Yet what a disappointment to learn from a northern public health nurse that the first year of colour TV was also the first year that her remote community did not organize its traditional winter games. Instead the recreation for the winter was television.

Certainly our Christian responsibility would urge us to provide medical care for isolated communities. It is tragic when a Cree mother of seven dies of pneumonia because the weather is so bad that the ambulance plane can't reach her settlement for four days. Yet who is blessed by our help when the plane which brings a father 300 miles south to a hospital returns him a week later with a load of bootlegged liquor.

It is generally felt that a road is good for a community. It reduces the cost of supplies and speeds up resource development. Yet it also exposes the community to large scale alcoholism. One taxi chartered for a 180 mile trip from Fort McMurray was stopped short of its destination and over 80 gallons of wine were confiscated. Most of the liquor gets through, however. One acquaintance described his bootlegging operation to me. It grossed \$3,000 to \$5,000 every weekend in a community of 1700 people.

Nor must these paragraphs give the impression that the social problems of developing the north are limited to native people. The people transplanted from the south have problems of their own. Men separated from wives and families for long periods, wives transferred with their husbands to places they never wanted to go, youth bored during the summer with few organized activities and not enough work to go around -- all these have their own stories to tell.

The vexing questions of land claims, employment, pipeline and other construction, relocating, and retraining all have some point of contact with Christian responsibility. As Lutherans we could spend all of our time and resources on these concerns and many others. Behind these concerns, and more basic to them, are the spiritual strivings of the people of the north. While many of these social concerns are being addressed by other agencies, it is the Christian Church that is uniquely qualified to deal with the spiritual needs of people. We are a part of the Christian community which brings the purpose and power of God in Christ to life in people through a ministry of Word and Sacrament. For us the answers of our own personal dilemmas come from applying the law of love to ourselves and to those around us. As we understand forgiveness, we discover freedom and purpose. As we experience love, we discover power to change and to create. Through it all we find fulfillment.

It is this spiritual aspect of our Christian responsibility in the north to which I want to address myself primarily. But I don't want to be misunderstood. We

cannot talk about the things of God in a vacuum, i.e., apart from the concerns I have been mentioning. Yet we do have the unique ingredient -- the love of God -- that will meet the basic need that people everywhere have.

## OBSTACLES OF NORTHERN MINISTRY

There are obstacles -- some unique to the north, some not -- which make it difficult for us to fulfill any responsibility we identify. Let me identify some of these obstacles.

An Anglican mission church still stands in Stanley Mission, Saskatchewan. Built in 1871, it stands as a tribute to more than a century-long commitment of the Anglican church in the north. Many of the names mentioned in the histories of the north are those of Roman Catholic priests who were the first to bring the Gospel north of the Arctic Circle.

Lutherans, among others, are the *Johnnie-Come-Latelies* of northern ministry. We can identify isolated evidences of Lutheran ministry in the north, but to the best of my knowledge the first Lutheran baptism in the Northwest Territories took place in 1970 in Hay River. 1970 was also the Centennial Year of the Northwest Territories.

This tardiness of Lutherans was not due to a reticence on our part to go to remote places. Somehow we found ourselves in India, Japan, China, Africa, even New Guinea. There were other reasons. And some of the obstacles that kept us from starting still frustrate us today.

The magnitude and population density of the north combine to form the basic obstacle. Of Canada's 3.8 million square miles, the part we call the north covers at least 2.5 million square miles. We are told that 90% of all Canadians live within 200 miles of the U.S. border. Yet the distance from the 49th parallel to the top of Ellesmere Island is about 3,000 miles. How does one undertake to tackle such an immense challenge? The answer is simple. One doesn't. Especially not with other supporting considerations.

The climate is ridiculous. In the Arctic there are no more than 40 frost-free days. Except for river bottoms and deltas, the land could not support agriculture even if there were soil. The days in the summer and the nights in winter are endless. Only a few of the world's population have chosen to endure this land.

We say that even one soul is priceless. Ironically, it is partly for economic reasons that so few mission dollars have been spent in the north. Good stewardship dictates that we invest our resources where the most people live, not the least. In more populated areas we have used a multiple parish concept for a long time. In the north this is impossible at worst, or impractical at best. The drain on available manpower is entirely unrealistic when compared with other areas of opportunity.

But even in the more than 50 communities of 1000 or more mobility makes ministry difficult. High Level, Alberta, is one such community. Established in

1964, this community now numbers about 1700 people. About 40% of the population changed during one year. One teacher reported that every day except eight at least one child transferred in or out of the school of 600.

The fact that so many families know that their stay in the north will be brief makes them even more mobile. Because they do not identify their community with home, they go "out" whenever able. Rev. Gary Sartain, one of two pastors of Holy Family Lutheran Church, Yellowknife, illustrated this reality when he reported that his lowest attendance in April, 1977 was on Easter Sunday. Those who could went "out" for the long weekend.

Rev. Clif Haberstock, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Ft. McMurray, Alberta, commented on the same mobility problem in a letter:

We are not like a new mission in a typical suburban area. We have about an 80% turnover in membership every 2 years so our congregation tends to be spasmodic and our projects and programs tend to be more spontaneous than traditional. Every year is different. We are constantly coping with changing faces so that our congregational efforts tend to focus more on inner spiritual growth and cohesiveness rather than on consistent outreach into the community. We're like a huge foster home -- constantly trying to absorb a variety of Lutherans, new and temporary to our town.

The last obstacle I will mention is the most vexing. The north is such a collage, a melting pot of people and places and things that no one method of ministry works. I am often frustrated with the question, "What is it like up north?" The questioner thinks the answer can be given in a sentence.

The people are different. I visit a 70-year old trapper who spends most of his life all alone. I ask him what effect it has on him to have visitors on his trapline. He confesses that he must guard himself against becoming emotionally dependent upon visitors. If that were to happen he would have to leave the bush. On the same day I visited a housewife who is experiencing a real emotional crisis because she doesn't have visitors.

In a community where a Cree grandmother has spent her whole life, there arrives a geologist. The former speaks of two religions -- the minister's religion and the priest's religion. The geologist has had far more education and concludes there is no God. Both buy tea from The Bay and take water from the same lake, but they will never meet.

Some people from the south come north and stay a lifetime; others a day. Some love it; others hate it. They come for different reasons. One is transferred by his company and has no choice. Another chooses to come and works 12-hour days every day so he can leave as soon as possible. Another is escaping debt or the law or a bad marriage. Another moves north to translate the Bible. Eskimos, Indians -- Slavey, Beaver, Cree, Chipewyan, Ojibway, Dogrib, Micmac, and others -- Metis, Europeans, Americans, Orientals, Greeks, Pakistanis, and Arabs all make up the people of the north.

The places are different, too. Ft. McMurray is booming with a population of over 20,000. Ft. Smith is barely holding its own. Slave Lake is hardly doing

that. Holman is a model community of Eskimo industry, while the alcoholism at Pinehouse is described by a doctor as "legendary."

In a word, the diversity of people and places, of life styles and livelihoods, is so broad that one is overwhelmed at the challenge of being acquainted enough with the whole north to know what to do.

Let me conclude this section with this observation. The most significant practical aspect of our Christian responsibility in the north is that fulfilling it is impractical.

## FULFILLING AND RESPONSIBILITY

Impractical it may be, but impossible it clearly is not. Some working presuppositions that can make the impractical possible.

1. *Think small.* The mistake we can easily make is to generalize the north and act corporately. True, some generalizations can be made and some corporate action on the part of the church is required. Yet the challenge is not primarily one great one, but countless small ones which are often isolated from one another even within the same community.

Of the impact of an individual in an urban setting, we are apt to say, what is one among so many? That is no different in the few large communities of the north. However, in many settlements there is only one of everything -- one store, one school, one nurse, one hotel, one theatre, one service station, one hospital, one beauty shop, one curling rink, one arena, etc. The result is that the individual responsible for any one service can easily know and have contact with the majority of the people in the community. If the individuals providing key service are Christians, who have a commitment to live the life of Christ in their relationships, the community is going to know it and benefit.

What we are also saying then is that the ministry of the north is a laymen's ministry. Certainly this concept is neither new nor unique to the north, but here it is the only way. We are not saying that the clergy have no place in the north or that the priests and ministers, the nuns and brothers have been wasted. However, given the realities of our resources and manpower, it is the only way for us and at this time, it is practical.

Not only can we think small to emphasize the dramatic effect of the individual but we can think many. In this way we can turn the obstacle of mobility to our advantage. Large numbers of people are moving into the north as well as out. There are Christians among them. Our corporate efforts can be in working to increase the percentage of people who are going with God.

One other significant benefit of this kind of emphasis is that in each Christian layperson, the artificially separated social and spiritual aspects of our responsibility are embodied in one person. The "real" and daily

relationships become vehicles by which cultures can be crossed, experiences shared, lessons learned and Christ's love discovered.

2. *Think together.* There are Christians who are not Lutherans. Did any Lutheran ever say there weren't? Probably not, but speaking from the background of my own attitudes, we may risk saying one thing and doing another.

There is likely no community in the north where Lutherans were the first to bring the message of Christ. Yet there is no community where Christ is not known by some.

It is my view that thinking together means more than recognizing the ministries of others. It must mean planning together, working together, and supporting one another.

Fortunately that concept is more natural in a northern environment than farther south. There are several reasons for it.

People need one another for survival in the north. Sometimes that means real physical survival, sometimes emotional or economic survival. Spiritual survival is no different. The need for a Christian to be in fellowship with another Christian is usually greater than maintaining a tradition of separation learned farther south. Since there is frequently only one spiritual leader (if that many) in a community, nearly all fellowships cross lines to some extent. There are also a growing number of house fellowships bringing Christians together.

Clergymen feel the same bond of fellowship across denominational lines. The desire to relate to a theological peer is great among Roman Catholic and Anglican priests as well as United Church and Lutheran ministers.

Similarly at the administrative level, churches and missions are in frequent dialogue. There are some exceptions. While we have enjoyed excellent relationships with Anglican bishops in the north, there is one who thinks of us Lutherans as a sect and as intruders. Some evangelical missionaries would rather not ride in LAMP airplanes for fear of giving native people the impression they support infant Baptism. But these are exceptions.

How much are we willing to think together? Enough to plan together? For years we have benefited from regional mission planning committees among Lutherans. A similar committee of Christian churches at work in the north could be beneficial.

It is true that with a spirit of cooperation there is room for any number of Christians in any community. Yet the fact is that all of our resources put together are limited. We could cover more if we planned together.

Are we Lutherans willing to participate in such a northern planning council? Could we take the initiative in organizing one?

What about supporting one another? The Reformed Church in Canada recently decided to become involved in northern ministry by supporting the Lutheran Association of Missionaries and Pilots. They are purchasing a \$12,000 set of aircraft floats.

There are other Christian groups in need of financial resources for valid ministries. Would we Lutherans consider sponsoring a Wycliffe Bible

Translator or a Pentecostal medical facility or a Roman Catholic mission? Would we encourage individual Lutherans to support northern missions with other names?

3. *Think new.* Creativity and resourcefulness are words that describe what is needed in fulfilling our responsibility in the north. Such inventiveness was illustrated recently in Chipewyan Lake, Alberta, when an Indian woman came to the storekeeper with the report that her husband had a loaded gun and was going to kill himself. John Horstemeier, LAMP's Christian in Service in that Cree settlement of 150, accompanied the woman to her home. How does one deal with such a situation? Should he distract the man and grab the weapon? Should he talk him into giving it up? John's decision must have surprised even him. He bought the gun. Not only did he end the crisis for the moment, he also improved the man's cash flow and, last but not least, had the rifle he'd been wanting.

Every method of ministry was new at one time. Surely there are ideas, methods applying new technologies, and experiments yet to be discovered. With its myriad of situations, the northern environment is a great place to explore new ideas.

Furthermore, what is old and stale in one place may be new and effective in another. The church to the south may have forgotten more ideas than Christians in the north know. How can we assemble, share, and generate new ideas? Could we sponsor a brainstorming session with Christians of other denominations?

One real possibility for innovative Christian involvement is in education. After 107 years the Northwest Territories still does not have a university. Quite likely that will change in the next four years. There are evidences that Christian input would be welcome in the establishment of a university. Here is an excellent opportunity for the Christian community to gather the resources of the ethnic cultures of the north and provide a live climate for intellectual and spiritual growth. Surely within the Lutheran Church in Canada we have ample experience and expertise to add to those of other Christian churches. Can we take the initiative in this project?

4. *Think slow.* A bush pilot told me that a trapper asked him upon landing, "How long did it take to get here?" "An hour and a half," was the reply. "That's too bad," the elderly white trapper responded. "It takes me three days. There's a lot you never saw."

Time is a paradox in the north. One month it's light all night, six months later it's dark all day. You expect an isolated settlement to be slow and peaceful only to find yourself busier than ever. Life is fast and life is slow. We should think slow. One of the pet peeves of northerners is the southerner who spends a day in the north and becomes an expert. Some northerners get paranoid about that, but it is true that we should be careful not to impose southern values and assumptions onto northern situations. The best advice to give new Christian workers going north is that they should try not to do



anything for six months. That's an overstatement, but only by about three months.

We can learn patience from the Indian people. One Indian settlement had been chosen for extensive experimentation of vocational training. A steady succession of "whites" were coming and going to make all the necessary feasibility studies. Mobile units were brought in. Wells were dug. A power plant was installed. Instructors and administrators arrived. Then came the problems. There were endless changes in leadership and staff. After about two years of this, I found myself standing in the middle of the airstrip with an elderly Indian man. Curious of what he made of all this, I asked, "What do you think of this school?" "Well," he replied, "I really don't know yet." Think slow.

5. *Think long.* We've already talked about mobility. To many, long is one year. To others, a year is too long. In some communities after two years you've lived there longer than half of the people. Preaching to a parade is a fact of northern life, but if those doing the preaching could stay in one spot, that would help.

When I asked Rev. Jon Gilberts, Lutheran pastor and pilot in Yellowknife, what he thought I should tell you, he replied with deep feeling, "Send us people who will stay." "But, John," I replied, "only one in a thousand wants to retire here." "Then just send us one in a thousand," he said. I believe his point is valid even though it is true that a Christian is valuable for a shorter time, too.

Ministry in the north demands commitment. Before I made my first visit to Sandy Lake, Alberta, I wanted to be sure that I could carry through with future visits. On my first trip I met Thomas Auger, the leader of the community. He was cleaning whitefish while we talked. "You're not going to keep coming here," he challenged. "If you're not going to keep coming, we don't want you here at all." I kept coming after that. There were worship services and once a week-long Vacation Bible School. Then circumstances changed. I could give you some good reasons why I haven't been there for three years. But they don't matter. The fact is it would be better that I hadn't gone at all.

Others have stayed for a long time. Names like Father Adams, Father Vandersteen, Phil Howard and Irvin Schantz add up to well over a century. Think long.

What are the practical aspects of our Christian responsibility in the north? Perhaps these have been vague answers to a vague question. Whatever we do to fulfill our responsibility in the north, let's be practical.