

## **Gospel Based Discipleship: A Way of Life Leading Us In Our Daily Walk with Jesus**

*The Rev. Canon Ginny Doctor (Mohawk)*

*The Rev. Canon Ginny Doctor recently began a new life living in the homeland of her Mohawk mother on the Six Nation Reserve in Ontario, Canada. She is the new Coordinator of Indigenous Ministries, Anglican Church of Canada. She went to Alaska as a missionary 18 years ago and lived in the village of Tanana on the Yukon River. Eventually she was called to become Canon to the Ordinary for the Diocese of Alaska during the tenure of the Rt. Rev. Mark MacDonald who is now the National Indigenous Anglican Bishop of Canada. Reared on the Onondaga Reservation of New York State, she holds dual citizenship of the U.S. and Canada.*

When I went to work with Mark MacDonald at the Bishop's Office of the Diocese of Alaska, he insisted that we use Gospel Based Discipleship as our means for staff Daily Prayer. We thought he was crazy and that it wouldn't last very long. So, we humored him. When he wasn't there, we didn't do it. The first thing he did upon his return to the office was check our Service Book to see if we engaging the Gospel. We weren't. He would sigh and say "let's pray." His persistence paid off because when I wasn't in the office, I found myself missing our prayer time and engaging the Gospel. I could do it by myself but it wasn't the same. I found myself going to New York to be the Interim Director of Native American Ministry, and there it was difficult to find others to pray with me on a regular basis. It was there that I really missed Gospel Based Discipleship. When difficult matters came to my desk I would read the Gospel of the Day and ask myself, "What is Jesus calling me to do about this?" Believe it or not, the Gospel led me through many difficult times.

So, what is Gospel Based Discipleship (GBD)? First, let me tell you what it is not. It is not a bible study and it is not meant to replace the Daily Office. It is not a theological debate. GBD is not the only way to engage the Gospel.

Now, let me tell you what it is. GBD is a way of life and it leads us in our daily walk with Jesus. When you think about it, it is the same technique that Jesus used with his disciples. Think about the parables Jesus told; he seldom really explained them, he left it the disciples to figure out and use. We are still figuring and using today.

The Gospel comes alive for me when I am faithful to the questions: What stands out for me; what is Jesus saying to me; what is Jesus calling me to do? Jesus promised us that whenever two or more are gathered in his name, he is there. We have many small communities but if those small communities gathered, two or three in the name of Jesus, and did GBD, they are a church. In places where we cannot depend on clergy to come and lead prayer, GBD can take us into the heart of Jesus. We are asked to respond to the questions with



our hearts, not with our minds. It also amazes me how the Gospel changes depending on where I am, what I am doing and what is going on around me.

On September 11, 2001, I was awakened by several phone calls before 6:00 A.M. Each call was similar: "You're there, good, go back to sleep." I was scheduled to travel later that day. The last call was my friend Mary who told me to turn on my television. I lay there and thought, no, I need to sleep more. But, that combined with the other calls prompted me get up and turn on my television. I was in time to see the South Tower of World Trade Center collapse. I thought I was dreaming and needed a reality check. So, I called Mark to tell him to turn on his television and tell me what was on. He did and what I saw was confirmed. All I could do was pray. Later, at the office when we prayed, the Gospel was about one of those times "Jesus withdrew to quiet place to pray." Normally I would have answered that the Gospel is calling me to go to Tanana, a quiet and favorite place to pray.

My call for that day was to organize a prayer vigil at St. Matthew's. To me, it was the only thing we could do. It took some work but it all came together. We put the word out, contacted many to lead prayers in hour-blocks of time. I signed up for the early morning because I am usually up at that time. Again, I was amazed that folks came, not lots, but faithful prayer warriors. People thanked me for being there. One said she tried to get her Pastor to do something but he didn't. We were connected to everyone in the world that was praying and when you think about it, that is powerful. In the days following, I drew strength from that vigil even though I knew the United States was going to war.

Before I left the Interim position in New York I launched a pilot project to expose young adults to mission work. It came about this way. One of my tasks as the interim was to coordinate a National Native Youth Event in Oklahoma. I wasn't terribly excited about going because I had a negative experience at one of the previous events. I had vowed to not do one again. But, God does work in mysterious ways. During the event I truly felt the presence of the Holy Spirit as the youth design team was guided and enlightened. My heart was touched and that was all that needed to happen.

I was amazed at the ministry that they could do even though it was a smaller event than in years past. The strength and courage of the design team particularly struck me. After reflection and prayer, I knew that I needed to find a way to keep them connected. I managed to find some money to bring them together for a planning meeting to develop a national Native youth council. To make a long story short, "Strong Heart Ministries" was born around Thanksgiving that year. One of the things they said at that meeting was they wanted to do meaningful mission. I was reminded of my niece who said the same thing to me and that it wasn't all about going to church, it was more about action, a cause, a passion.



Shortly after that Kelly Fayard (now DOCTOR Fayard, Poarch Creek from Alabama) telephoned to tell me that she was feeling a call to do some kind of ministry with youth and wanted my help. We talked a bit about this and I told her that we should both pray on this call and see where the Spirit would lead us. About a month later I put together a plan to bring several young people to Alaska to do Gospel Based Discipleship Mission and Ministry with youth in several Alaska Native Villages. I picked Alaska but that was because I knew Alaska best and I would have to serve as their “guide.” Both the Youth Ministries Office and the Office of Native American Ministries committed the dollars to make this project happen. Each office agreed to sponsor two young people to travel to Alaska for eight weeks beginning on June 1.

Upon arrival the Young Missioners immediately began training and orientation to ready themselves to serve in the Alaska Native Villages. The missioners included Kelly Fayard (Diocese of Central Gulf Coast), Jessica Osaki (Diocese of Los Angeles), David Ferretti (Diocese of Dallas) and Angie Oven (Diocese of Minnesota). A couple weeks later, Robbie McGhee (Diocese of Central Gulf Coast) joined us. The training lasted five days and included Gospel Based Discipleship, Village Life, Crossing Over (into another culture), Alaska Church History and Missiology, Fears and Expectations, Basic Planning, Safe Church and a one day field trip to Old Minto, a family recovery camp. One of the things I told them was not to concentrate on numbers but if they could touch one heart their presence in Alaska would mean something. When training and orientation was completed it was time to leave for the first assignment. Villages that Missioners would go to were pre-determined at the Interior Deanery meeting held in April. However, due to schedule conflicts and the Holy Spirit, these were negotiated as we went forth.

There was not a plan made in advance as to what we would do when we arrived in the villages. We relied on the Gospel to give us direction. Each day before activities began the team would sit in prayer and reflect on the Gospel to see what we were being called to do for that day. Realizing that we needed to have some craft type activities, we tried to anticipate our needs and brought things that we could use.

The first assignment was the Native village of Beaver. We arrived at a time when most of the adults were busy with other things. It didn't take long for the team to become established. The hours were late but the mornings were quite long. The Missioners showed the young people of Beaver how to have fun without alcohol and drugs. Every night we had visitors well into the wee hours of the morning. After two days of rest and relaxation we moved on to Tanana. Tanana was a bit different from Beaver because it is a larger village with a curfew for youth. The team concentrated on providing activities for the young people in the afternoon and early evening. While we were in Tanana the team began to reflect on their experience in Beaver. They asked me if they could have a “check in” and because they asked, I knew that something was moving. Previously we had check-ins when I said they would happen! One of them asked me how to discern a call. I told them that they had to pray about it and seek advice from those they trust and know about what they are being called



to do. They were sad because they left Beaver just when they were really beginning to do some things with the teens there. I was quite relieved because I thought they were going to fire or quit on me! But, what they really wanted to know was if they could return to Beaver to do some more ministry with the young people there. I told them that if that was what they were called to do, I would find a way to make it happen.

From Tanana we returned to the Old Minto Recovery Camp. The director of the camp had requested a Vacation Bible School team to go there and none were able to heed the call. Old Minto is a very rustic place; no inside running water, no electricity, and no telephones. But the Missioners were eager to return and quickly put together a VBS for the young people based on the Gospel of the day. We spent five days there not only doing a Vacation Bible School for the seven young people in camp but also pitching in with the camp chores. They hauled water, cut wood and helped out in the kitchen. There was no whining whatsoever!

We were supposed to go to Anvik but because of logistics and expense we went back to Beaver instead. All were amazed to see us return and many asked why we came back. Some said that they thought they would never see us again. But, the Holy Spirit worked in us and made us get back to Beaver. Even though it was not easy, we had to go back to see if we would further build the relationships with the youth of Beaver. There were some hearts touched there—I know that because one young person there drew some pictures for all of us on the day we left (he is now in the military). I still have the picture and will always treasure it.

In all the time we spent in all of those places, I know that we made impact on the lives we touched. The Young Missioners were in some very difficult situations and very difficult conditions but their dedication to the Gospel held them together. They were from different races, different backgrounds but when they came together in the circle of the Gospel they became one. They never had a disagreement that they couldn't work through; they weren't at all like us adults. They depended on each other, recognized the gifts each brought and then they just did it! My heart was touched by what they did and somewhere in the wilderness of Alaska, other hearts were touched. When they left I missed them. I remember sitting and watching the morning arrive. My heart begins to move, I look to the dawn—that place between sleep and awake, where dreams are made (Tinkerbell). My heart still stirs when I think about those weeks and I still would like to find a way to do it again.

The Gospel builds relationships. Traditionally speaking, relations are one of our core values. When we sit in circle of prayer and love, we build a community of faith. Do you think the disciples sat in a circle with Jesus? I do. I know one thing fairly certain, the table at the Last Supper (DaVinci) was not straight, it was more u-shaped. When we are able to see everyone in the circle, we connect through their bodies, not necessarily eyes (for most Indians it is disrespectful to make eye contact). But, the better we get to know each other, the more eye contact we make. When you think about it, everything we do is



in a circle (or should be). Circles are strong because they connect everyone. Seems rather peculiar that most of our churches use theater style pews or chairs but that for sure is the influence of western civilization. But in the circle and if we put Jesus (or the Gospel) in the center, think of the strength it can give and the relationships it can make.

The Young Missioner's Exposure Project occurred in the summer of 1999 – thirteen years ago! All but one of those missionaries are still in contact with each other and with me. All have become productive workers in their chosen professions. And, they still have contact with what were once the “teens” of Beaver. Relationships made by the Gospel last forever.

### ***The Rest of the Story***

It is exciting but challenging to be in Canada working with the People of the Land. They have been on a self determination and healing journey for many years. Some of the faithful elders now journey with the Creator but their spirit lives on and through the hearts of the people who continue the ministry. Since I have been a partner on this journey, I knew them and I am now in the midst of the journey. Self determination was talked about in the Episcopal Church of the United States many years ago as well. Many of us were ready for it but others weren't. Folks are afraid of the term and think that being self determined means that we will never have to see or work with each other again. But, it's about seeing each other in a new way, it's about peeling away the layers of colonialism that have impacted many of the First Nations in both North and South America. At one time we were the only people of these lands – doesn't it make sense for us to be able to decide how we want to do our ministry? People forget that we survived many years before colonization. It is a healing journey first because in order to be effective leaders, we have to be whole and healthy as the oppressed and as the oppressor.

The First Nations people in the Anglican Church of Canada are moving with the Holy Spirit leading. Many say that the self determination movement began in 1967 when Charles Hendry wrote “Beyond Traplins,” an examination of the relationship between the Aboriginal People and the Anglican Church of Canada. For me, it began in earnest August of 1993 the Primate Michael Peers offered an apology on the behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada for the treatment of students in their residential schools. It was a moving experience, filled with many stories of atrocities and tears. Once the apology was offered, the work took off. The Anglican Church of Canada for the most part recognized that it needed to be in partnership with the Anglican Council of Indigenous People (ACIP). In 1994 ACIP issued “A Covenant” – “Under the guidance of God's spirit we agree to do all we can to call our people into unity in a new self-determining community within the Anglican Church of Canada. To this end, we extend the hand of partnership to all those who will help us build a truly Anglican Indigenous Church in Canada.” The true healing began and continues. But, there is enough strength to move the journey forward. At



the Sacred Circle in 2005 (triennial gathering of First Nations Anglicans) in Pinawa, Manitoba, there was a strong consensus call for a National Indigenous Anglican Bishop. In 2007, the Rt. Rev. Mark MacDonald was called as the first National Indigenous Anglican Bishop. Bishop Mark and staff, ACIP and other partners are working towards true self determinations and it is not without obstacles and challenges.

It continues to move because it is Gospel driven. At every meeting I have attended, first as a partner with the Office of Native American Ministries (ECUSA) and then as the Alaska partner (The Episcopal Diocese of Alaska was made a partner in 2005 and given seat, voice and vote in 2005) it begins with prayer and engaging the Gospel. The booklets developed by the Office of Native American Ministries are used not only at the meetings but in many of our Indigenous communities. At the last Sacred Circle Gospel Based Discipleship was used for the first time in that setting where we explored how the Seven Traditional Teachings (*Love, Wisdom, Courage, Respect, Humility, Truth and Generosity*) fit with the work of the new Governance Working Group. The Gospel has transformed the ministry and many of the people; the Gospel has created a spiritual movement, not political, that cannot be stopped. God has put words in the hearts of people that have been heard, but of course, there is still much work to be done. The Gospel is strong medicine for healing and calling forth the Holy Spirit, the Gospel cannot be conquered!

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