

**Bishop John Sperry's 750,000-square mile diocese**

# A ministry in the Arctic

By ANI FEDERIAN  
Herald Staff Writer

Missionary: the word conjures up the picture of a man of God holding a wooden cross against a background of palm trees. Gazing wide-eyed about him are dark-skinned "pagans".

Bishop John Sperry of the Anglican Church is a missionary, but he doesn't sport a golden tan.

He's a Canadian missionary who has spent 30 years in the Arctic among the Eskimos and Indians.

Bishop Sperry was at St. George's Anglican Church Feb. 19 speaking to a crowd of 40, including local Anglican ministers, about life and work in the Arctic.

Bishop of the largest Anglican diocese in Canada by virtue of its physical size, Rev. Sperry said his diocese is two and three-quarter million square miles in area. However in all that grand spread of space there are only 50,000 inhabitants.

The Arctic diocese extends east into the Yukon, runs across the 60th parallel, through Labrador and northern Quebec.

**OLD WAY**  
Now living in Yellowknife, Bishop Sperry spent 19 years living in nearby Coppermine.

"The Coppermine people have the unique experience of being the last to be reached by civilization and religion," he said. "In our congregation were people who grew up without any knowledge of the southern culture. They grew up with bows and arrows and knew the old way of life."

Bishop Sperry said there's a lot of negative talk about what the church and modern civilization has done to the native people. He admitted everything hasn't been lilywhite and some bad mistakes have been made, but he protested against the belief that before missionaries came to the north the life of the natives was wonderful and some kind of paradise.

"It's a big mistake," Bishop Sperry said. "Before the Europeans arrived, starvation was the lot of every tribal group in Canada except for the salmon fishers of the west coast."

**BACK UP**  
The Eskimo names of places in the north back up his point. He translated some of them: "the island where everybody starved to death", "the place of pinched cheeks". To these names, the Quebec government for one added religious titles without asking what the Eskimo place names meant, Bishop Sperry said. "So we have 'Our Lady of starvation', 'Our Lady of the intestinal worm', and 'Our

Lady of the place we had to eat human flesh," he said.

The life of the natives of the north is based on an uncertainty which permeates their language, said the bishop, who speaks one Eskimo dialect fluently and is familiar with many others. The uncertainty is expressed in individual words, like "if I am alive," "if we eat," "if we do not die."

As a missionary, Bishop Sperry has experienced many difficulties in transferring the values and beliefs of the Christian community to the Eskimos.

He said the biblical story of Genesis doesn't go down too easily with the Eskimos because they believe animals have guardian spirits who rule the world, who have to be appeased by their "shaman".

In their thinking, mankind is the lowest level of life and animals have dominion over man, the reverse of Genesis.

**ALL ACCEPTED**  
Bishop Sperry said it was incredible how the Gospel was accepted at all by them.

"They hear, 'There's a man who has a son who has sheep,'" he said. "What's a sheep?" they ask. We tried it with a baby seal, but that didn't work because you can't harvest them."

The bishop said agricultural symbols in the New Testament didn't mean a thing to the Eskimos. They didn't know what wheat or mustard seeds were.

Telling the Eskimos they needed to approach God through sacrifice meant nothing to them either. There's no suggestion of sacrifice in their culture, Bishop Sperry said.

"Then, when you say 'This man died tied to a cross', that doesn't mean a thing either, because they don't have any trees," he said. "All of it is

incomprehensible." There's no word for love in any of the Eskimo dialects, and no word gets anywhere near it, he said, posing a greater challenge to spreading the Christian faith. The missionaries had to invent the word. The word means "pity" in one dialect and "a thing of pleasure" in another.

**FIRST WENT**  
"The missionaries who first went showed something of God's love and I believe that's the element that led the Eskimos to accept the gospel, he said.

Bishop Sperry told the tale of an early missionary who was having a hard time learning the Eskimo language. He asked what was going on when a team of dogs was being fed, hoping to learn the word for joy and pleasure, explained the bishop.

"When he came to use the word, he discovered he was relating how, when the disciples first saw the Lord, they all wagged their tails," laughed the bishop. "You have to get the feel for dynamic equivalents."

Another example of difficulties in communicating occurred when preaching about the Roman King Herod.

"What did Jesus mean when he said 'tell that fox Herod...'" Bishop Sperry said. "Was it a red fox, a silver fox, or a blue fox?" And furthermore, foxes are considered cute by some Eskimos, totally distorting the meaning intended in the Bible. The wolverine was soon chosen to replace the fox for that line, because it meant viciousness and cunning to the people who would be hearing the story.

**LAY PEOPLE**  
There is a great reliance on lay people in the north, which pleases the bishop. He said

that in 1950 he was the only priest and he travelled by 16-dog team to the little camps. "They were tough, idyllic conditions. Nobody had any problem with alcohol then. They didn't know what drugs were. There was no delinquency. All the boys knew as they were growing up they were going to be hunters, and all the girls knew they'd be housewives. It was an ordered life with the RCMP rarely having anything to do with the natives," remembered Bishop Sperry.

Two factors changed that life, he said. One was the novel "People of the Deer" written by Canadian author Farley Mowat, which brought lots of attention to the Arctic, and the second one was the Dew Line — Distance Early Warning Line — set up by North American military defence agencies because the Russians were felt to be threatening.

The bishop said criticism of the government by Mr. Mowat brought nursing stations and English schools to the Arctic in the late 1950s. Welfare checks took away from the native people's dependence on providence.

"The church has gradually lost its influence in the paramedical field. It no longer runs the schools, and it's losing its paternalistic mission," he said. However, the church has not been crushed.

He said 13 natives have taken a three-year course and become ordained ministers of the church, with four others

studying to do so.

The greatest need of the Arctic diocese however, is personnel, followed closely by money, said the bishop.

There are 51 settlements served by the Anglican missionaries with 30 active parishes, seven of which are fully self supporting, Bishop Sperry said.

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