From Bloodvein to Cross Lake: A 25 year Synthesis

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There we were huddled around a woodstove in Chief Alfred Cooks log house. Back there in the winter of 1959, a Bombardier full of students from Canadian Mennonite Bible College from Winnipeg had crossed the frozen narrows of Lake Winnipeg to visit the Bloodvein River Reserve. This Ojibwa community is one of several Native communities clustered around the narrows in which Mennonite mission ventures have been established.

While warming our bodies chilled from the cold trek across the lake, Bella, the chief's wife, served hot tea. The tea limbered up the voices in preparation for rendering a little program in word and song.

Although we had come to sing and preach, we discovered right there that we should have come to listen. After all, we were guests in the chief's house, having come at his invitation. Mennonites were being hosted on his turf. So, with the cups of tea in our hands, the chief began with a story.

> There is this story of Indian chiefs going to Washington, D.C. They had come for treaty talks pertaining to land negotiations and English schools. Hosted at an elaborate banquet by U.S. senators, the chiefs enjoyed the sumptuous meal, one serving after another. The senators, pre-occupied with outcomes of the negotiations, took note. One of them, sitting next to a chief, remarked, "My, how I wish I had your appetite." To which the chief replied, "First, you take my land, then you take our language, and now you want my appetite.[1]

And so the mission-minded Bible college students were introduced to the aboriginal people of Bloodvein River. Although neither song nor sermon text we were prepared to render included reference to the injustices of land conquests, subverting of language and economic disparity symbolized by the banquet table, the chief's humorous story did. An authentic message, the chief's story conveyed, better include reference to the colonial take-over of lands, obliteration of cultures and of the people themselves. If the students had come to preach, they now needed to listen. Beyond lessons learned in the havens of a classroom, they also discovered the semantic strength of the oral tradition. Yes, the story told on "Indian turf, by an elder was endowed with immense unschooled wisdom.

The chief's subsequent invitation to the Mennonites to take up residence in the Bloodvein community resulted, beyond a mission establishment, in an intersection of two peoples. Although the chief initially requested only the establishment of a school and a chapel, the subsequent interaction was manifold in nature, including pastoral work, the formation of an instrumental and singing group, mechanics courses, gardening ventures, recreational programs, pulp cutting, medical care, cultural research, participation in hunting, trapping and fishing ventures and advocacy regarding the regulation of Lake Winnipeg and its alteration of water levels.

Prompted by horizontal social relationships observed among the Ojibwa, the Mennonites left behind some of their own tendencies towards religious specialization in favour of the more egalitarian social order of the Ojibwa. Seeking a socially horizontal relationship rather than a hierarchical one was likely the result of two factors. The first was prompted by observing mission patterns elsewhere, namely, externally oriented dominance reflected in special religious vocation, specialized attire, elevated pulpits, steeples, and social status. Secondly, Mennonites themselves were at least theoretically committed to a socially level, priesthood of all believers concept. Reflecting, if somewhat critically, on this theme prompted the formulation of the following portrait:

alien ecclesiasts

for centuries
they stood erect
enshrined in cloth
preaching a gospel of European truth

from the elevated colonial stage
they spoke words of God
and mimicked divinity up front
a portrayal of ecclesiastical prestige
by the inaccessible elite
a ritual designed
for another people
at another place
in another day

it broke my heart
to see a people's nonconfrontive ways

become the powerholder's prey
and dressed up powermen
raise the chalice
beyond the peoples' reach

I saw it clearly
that the whiteness of our God
is being carefully
and rightfully sifted out from native faith
until the Maker
comes full view
unobstructed by alien screens of thought

dawning across the people's land
a search goes on
a quest for an
uncluttered
unprestigious
non-partisan
non-specialized
non-institutional
non-violent
but accessible Jesus

who will clear the sky
the water
the land
and the thoughts
to see the Creator
of a people meant to live
by a bigger truth
in a world
left in His peoples' care.[2]

Formulation of *Alien Ecclesiasts* took place at Bloodvein River following a long evening playing crokinole with neighbours. It was the time in 1969 when the federal "New Indian Policy" had been tabled, otherwise known as the '69 White Paper. It was a time also when reports regarding regulation of Lake Winnipeg had been exposed. Chief Harry Cook had come to discuss these documents wondering whether the issues were of concern to Christians.

In July of that year, 1970, the Conference of Mennonites conducted a litany of penitence at their annual sessions in Winkler, Manitoba. Included in the confessional were requests for forgiveness. In unison, the assembly spoke:

> We have tried to be helpers without first becoming acquainted with you, the native people of Canada. We have wanted you as converts but we werent sure that we wanted you as brothers. We have, by our silence, sided with the powerful forces of government and industry when they invaded your rights, discounted your modest protest, and exploited your resources. Forgive us Lord![3]

For Mennonites the encounter has resulted in a mirroring back of themselves. Mennonite identity, history and beliefs, take on a greater clarity when seen in the mirror of another people. Since no culture is either born or sustained in a vacuum, Mennonites who seriously interacted with Native people were prompted to learn of Aboriginal spiritual pathways. Respect for the dream was among the insights gained. The account of Jeremiah Ross call to spiritual leadership is one striking example.

The Dream of Jeremiah Ross

The story was first told at the end of a long, hard day of trapping and hunting in the late 60s. The four men had rebuilt the fire in a small log cabin, cooked some of the meat of their kill, then settled around the crackling fire to relax for the evening.

Ernie Sawatsky, the Mennonite missionary, had joined the men on this trapping trip. As a student of the Scriptures and a student of people's cultures, Ernie was convinced that he must be in the domain of the men, namely on the hunting trek. So he left his family in the mission house in the northern Cree community of Cross Lake in order to enter fully into the world of the hunters.

Winter evenings, in the Cree tradition, are times for stories. And the winter evenings are long in northern Canada. The crackling of the fire, the warming room, and the intimate circle enclosed within the very small one-room cabin generates stories-legends that date back many thousands of years along with more current, factual stories, coming to life as the fire flickers and each man rests on one elbow as he faces the centre.

For four weeks Ernie had heard the stories told in Cree as he was learning the language, searching for the significance of story telling. It was Jeremiah's turn. Jeremiah was known as a good man, an excellent trapper and hunter, greatly committed to maintaining his dog team. He was a reader of the Bible, usually by coal oil lamp. So he began that evening as follows:

> A long time ago my wife and I were on our hunting trip. For four days we did not kill anything. We were very tired and began growing sick. Then we lay down in our tent. I had a dream. There was a ladder ascending upwards. I climbed the ladder right to the very top. When I reached the end, there was the great Katabindgiget (the Cree name for God), the one who created all things. The great Katabindgiget looked down at me and said, "Jeremiah, what do you want? It is not your time yet. Jeremiah, go down and be a minister to your people." So I climbed down the ladder. When I entered the tent below, I was wakened by my wife. She said, "Look, Jeremiah Ross, it is swimming across the lake." I looked and there was a moose trying to cross over. I grabbed by rifle and shot the moose. We dragged the moose ashore, slaughtered it and began cooking the meat. We felt better again after we had eaten. And that is what happened to me in a dream.[4]

Jeremiah waited. The men said to him, "so, why aren't you a minister then? Jeremiah looked around but said nothing.

Thereafter, Ernie Sawatsky asked him the same question, "Why aren't you a minister then?" to which Jeremiah replied, "I was scared to tell anyone this story. For 25 years I kept

it in my heart. Until now I did not dare to tell it to anyone, especially not to white people."

Then Ernie asked Jeremiah if he would be willing to tell the story when they got back home. After returning to the Cross Lake settlement, Ernie invited Jeremiah and other men to his house, built a fire in the Benjamin Franklin stove in the basement, and spread out a few rugs for the men to lie down. Then, as the fire began crackling and the floor warmed, Jeremiah retold his story. At the conclusion, the men looked at him and asked, "Then why are you not a minister?" It was time for a third step. Jeremiah was asked to tell the story at the evening worship service in the small community chapel. Someone built a fire, and the people gathered, men and women. Jeremiah, who had consented, told the story once more with the senior elder, Madeline, doing the interpreting. Madeline, who was known as somewhat of a local saintly elder, giving much leadership to the small Christian fellowship, heard and rendered Jeremiah's dream story in the English language. At the end, she herself faced Jeremiah with kindly but persistent eyes asking, "Then, how come you are not a minister, Jeremiah?" The story was complete. It was clear to all that Jeremiah, the hunter, the Bible scholar, the one who received the dream, should be the minister of the Cree people at Cross Lake.

Members of Ernie's mission board came to the ordination. So did Christian leaders from neighbouring communities. At the end of the service, five Cree leaders gathered in a semicircle around Jeremiah to lay their hands upon him. One elder from the congregation rose to make the observation, "One, two, three, four, five, he said. J-E-S-U-S. It is Jesus who is laying his hand upon Jeremiah to give him God's blessing."

And so Jeremiah Ross was ordained as a Mennonite minister to serve in the local chapel. He preaches about renewed life in Jesus Christ. He preaches about responsibility to his people. He worries and prays about the calamities of family breakdown, of violence, of drunkenness and especially about the deterioration of his environment through industrial development ventures. The light of his coal oil lamp is enough for him to read his Cree syllabic Bible. It is enough for him to draw resources of biblical spiritual insight in order to impart them in his sermons on Sunday morning.

Jeremiah's dream was withheld, then finally released to trusted ears. It is the Cree way of substantiating the search for self-identity. The vision quest is not a purely personal and individual phenomenon but must receive the assent and endorsation of the elders. In this case the assent of a Mennonite "elder" was also sought.

At Cross Lake the Christian church had ears to hear and minds to understand and hearts to embrace the call of Jeremiah Ross, Cree style.

The Cree people at Cross Lake have never questioned the status of their pastoral elder, Jeremiah Ross. He became a faithful Mennonite minister, a good biblical preacher, a devout Christian-all without surrendering his Cree identity.

Significantly, this story was shared by a traditional Cree elder, on his trapline away from the institutionalized reserve community, and away from the mission church. In turn, the Mennonite pastor, Ernie Sawatsky, had joined Ross and three of his kinsmen on a week-long trapping venture. The story was first shared during the long winter evenings in the hunter's cabin, not in a church. It is to the credit of the sponsoring mission board that they accepted the dream as a valid Cree affirmation of a person's calling, not insisting on college or seminary training as a prerequisite for the ministry.

Those Mennonite people who were privileged to have worked and lived in close prox-

imity with the Aboriginal people had received a very new perspective of them. That perspective was, however, not necessarily that of the sponsoring Mennonite constituency. When reporting to church communities, it became necessary to read back into the Mennonites' first encounter with Aboriginal peoples. A reflection from boyhood days illustrates:

> They camped beneath the willows growing along the small stream on Grandpa Ens's farmland. The land was known in the Mennonite villages as "Schoul-laund." Literally, translated into Low German from "school land," these were parcels of land allocated by the government for the purpose of financing local schools.
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> The Ojibwa people from neighbouring reserves hunted and trapped along streams like this one coming off the Pembina Hills. Streams, rivers and hills had marked the territory of their sustenance long before the straight lines and right angles demarcated the private fields of the farmers. From the outset of Mennonite-Aboriginal encounter the two peoples experienced two conflicting ways of designating territory, one by the natural terrain, the other by surveyed abstract lines.
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> Two peoples, the Ojibwa and the Mennonites, of substantially different heritages were living off the same land, one by way of a longstanding hunting economy, the other by tilling of the soil. Land surveys undertaken by the then recently formed government, and implemented in the interest of Mennonite settlers, served to verify official land titles. Despite allocations of these lands to settlers, the Ojibwa peoples traversed the fields of farmers since, as they explained much later, fish swimming in the streams do not know of human boundaries, the deer don't stop at customs offices and geese fly right over all the fields.

As an eight-year Mennonite farm boy of Reinland, Manitoba, the Ojibwa camp by the stream remains etched in my memory. Our elders gently reminded us that the "Indiauna" (Indians) were, however, not to be regarded as intruders on their land. How I wish, in retrospect, that we would have conversed with the Ojibwa campers, there on the land given for purposes of education.

Then there was conversation, this time at a later date, in another place, namely the Fraser Valley of British Columbia, new home of the Wiebe family. Another elder, my mother, was observed conversing with a Salish fisherman who had made his way to our farm in a Model-A Ford. Mother was trading freshly butchered chicken with equally fresh salmon brought by the Salish man who lived along the Fraser River a few miles upstream from our place. But isn't it against the law to buy fish from Indians? we asked mother later. But Mother who was otherwise meticulous about things legal, replied, "We only traded. They have fish and we have chickens. So why shouldn't we exchange."

Proximity of Mennonites and Aboriginal people, be it in the Fraser or the Red River Valley, became more apparent later following acquaintance with settlements of both. This residential proximity can be observed not only across Canada but elsewhere in the Americas. Geographically, we as Mennonites intersected first in rural and now increasingly in urban areas of Canada, the United States, Mexico, Belize, Honduras, Brazil, Paraguay, and Bolivia. It is the quality of that intersection that is the focus of this symposium. While pondering this encounter some time ago, I formulated the following lines.

The Intersection

two peoples
of hiawathan and simonian origin
now
are touching one another

they have met
by the circumstances of histories
and
by our ecclesiastical design

now
that there is geographic co-existence
we dream about
proximity of mind and soul

Father of all peoples
give your assent
we ask
for
the building of this dream[5]

Advocacy

In 1992 Chief Ominayak in addressing the Lubicon Settlement Commission in Edomonton said the following about advocacy:

> No matter how valid our land claim is, no matter how well supported we are by constitutional mandate, our case will not be resolved as long as we alone are left to bring it forward. What needs to be demonstrated to the governments of Canada is that an honorable settlement at Lubicon is also in the interest of people elsewhere in Canada. It seems the churches are well placed to demonstrate that interest.[6]

Ominayak realized that seeking redress via elected government representatives, federal or provincial, was futile since advancing Lubicon agendas did not serve their political interests. Neither did the route via the courts prove helpful. The Department of Indian and Northern Development (DIAND), as a federal vehicle, with a constitutional mandate to advance justice, however, was hampered by the dual, often paradoxical portfolio, consisting of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, the latter consistently the winner.

> Two years after our people signed treaty #1 in 1871, you Mennonites signed yours. A year after that, all lands designated for Mennonites were surveyed and allocated for their settlement in the Red River Valley. And we have waited 116 years and still have our full allotment promised in sovereign treaty. Could the Mennonites, from their position of privilege, put in a good word for fulfillment of government obligation to us?[7]

Such was the appeal of Carl Roberts, chief of Roseau River First Nations. Roberts' appeal came to MCC at the point where the Treaty Land Entitlement (TLE) process was at its still dubious, initial stages. Roseau's outstanding land allotments had been verified, in part, by researcher Townshend who worked with the band in digging out early government documents pertaining to allocations of reserve lands. A current report by TLE legal counsel, Brad Regehr, 28 of the 30 reserves in Manitoba with unfulfilled land allocations have had their claims validated. Of these, 26 have been executed.

It should be noted that the initiative for Mennonite advocacy came on request from Roseau leadership. It was based on longstanding injustices regarding non-fulfillment of treatied lands, a process that was easily implemented for new immigrant peoples but greatly prolonged for Canada's First People.

Perhaps the most credible and perhaps the most effective Mennonite program efforts directed at Aboriginal peoples emanate from the corporate stance of the Mennonites as these intersect with the corporateness of the Aboriginal peoples. As a people-to-people encounter, the Mennonite response to Aboriginal peoples uniquely varies from that of most denominational or non-denominational efforts. Examples of this Mennonite-Aboriginal exchange may illustrate the point:

> 1. The earlier Mennonite status as a cultural minority provided a theme common to both groups. Both identified with their respective languages, occupations, territorialities, kinship-based organizational structures and theological concepts. By their very existence, both demonstrated that it takes a people, that is, an "assenting body" to sustain a viable identity.
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> 2. A corporate rather than an individualized identity of Aboriginal peoples furnishes the basis for cultural respect. If prevailing government and mission programs directed at Aboriginal peoples regarded Native cultures as terminable, en route to inevitable assimilation, then the Mennonite people were in a position to offer an alternative stance of cultural co-existence.

From a stance of complete marginalization two decades ago the Aboriginal people of Canada have found their way to the middle of Canada's cultural make up. Very evident is the rebirth of Native art, prominence of aboriginal dances, renaissance of Aboriginal rituals, an almost dominating display of publications, prominence in the media and the popularity of Native Studies departments in many universities. Equally prominent is the Aboriginal role within government related activities. Whether it was the James Bay hydro project, the proposed Mackenzie Valley pipeline, the NATO proposal for Labrador, the Meech Lake Accord, the Oka confrontation or the Charlottetown referendum, it was the Aboriginal people who found their way to Canada's centre stage.

The once ignored First Peoples have made it clear to the nation that they are to be reckoned with. They have made it clear that succumbing to assimilation is not their path. With each new step of self-assertion, they have regrouped as culturally tenable bodies of people within Canada's nationhood.

As historically maligned and often displaced minorities, the Aboriginal people have some cultural commonness with that of the Mennonites. Each has a cultivated concept of corporateness. In ongoing search for spiritual and cultural identity both seek to relate to the

encompassing society. Both seek for ways to exercise what they believe, assert who they are in search for a place within the national spectrum.

A major difference between the two peoples, however, lies in the history of Mennonites as immigrants to this land contrasted with the indigenous character of Aboriginal peoples. Typical of immigrant populations, the Mennonites largely find themselves meshing with the cultural mainstream whereas Aboriginal peoples, opposed to assimilation pressures, are on a quest for their cultural roots, regrouping, technically and socially revising their identity as nations. This search is premised on inherent Aboriginal rights.

Mennonite corporateness premised on theological and sociological distinctiveness was expressed in organized immigration ventures, corporate land acquisitions and collaborative efforts for negotiating military exemptions.

The Aboriginal search for rebirth as nations and for corporate, rather than individual, identity within Canada has at least some parallels with the earlier Mennonite self-concept. The current influences of individualization, both theological and social in nature, creates a new kind of distance between the two.

Even so, the two peoples find themselves living side-by-side in rural communities and within the cities. Substantial intersection occurs in the vocations, in business, shared neighbourhoods, mission and service ventures and within families through adoptions and intermarriages.

As co-residents and as co-citizens there arise valid questions regarding the nature of the Aboriginal-Mennonite intersection. Their cross-cultural relationship, for instance, is qualitatively different from that of the Mennonite encounter with other peoples overseas. Unlike the delegated service and mission programs abroad there is a people-to-people exchange within Canada. Supporters of service or mission programs have direct, two-way surveillance of the inter-cultural exchange and are therefore less dependent on interpretive reports of the delegated "sent ones." Hence the Mennonite relationship to Canada's own "third world" is more critically regarded by the supportive constituency than the relationships to "third world" peoples abroad.

The Venture of Joint Discovery

The intersection of two peoples results in the birth of something new. To the extent that Mennonites represent the dominant, encompassing Euro-Canadian culture, they have found it necessary to do some cultural backtracking. An honourable encounter of two peoples, it was learned, requires more than delivery of wisdoms from one people to another. Where communications have been mutual, they resulted in a two-way, horizontal relationship. That relationship, if it occurs, takes on the shape of a new body of discernment. In effect, a new community comes into being premised on shared belief. The new community furnishes a forum for coming to terms with each other's cultural dynamics.

When my colleague, Henry Neufeld, preached his sermon on the John 15 text, "You are my friends," several elders remained after the service wanting to know more about "my friends," a phrase translated in the Ojibwa/Cree text as *nin totemak*, or "my totem," similar to "my clan," or "my kinship." With amazement, the Ojibwa elders expressed delight over

Jesus' inclusion of his hearers into his kinship circle. John 15, to them, meant Christ's identification with their clan. Jesus, a la this declaration, became a kinsman. The elders made a point of welcoming Jesus, not as one who was above them, not a supervisor, but as one who had become one of them. He had entered their totem.

This kinship oriented egalitarian social order of the Ojibwa conveyed in their biblical interpretation stands in stark contrast to the pervasive hierarchical relationship of non-Native persons, i.e. government and industry.

The Neufelds' fluency in the Ojibwa language made possible the deeper reading of Ojibwa world views. Accessibility of their family's lifestyle was congruent with Ojibwa interpretations of Jesus as a kinsman. The Ojibwa elders had provided a culturally relevant hermeneutic, resulting in conveyance of Christian belief without cultural abdication.

Religiously, the newly formed community also provides a new forum for hermeneutics, creating contents and procedures for biblical interpretation, representatives of each body contributing insights from their respective vantage points. It is at this point of intersection that such current and largely unprecedented issues as ecological matters can be theologically addressed. Mega industries such as the flooding of vast northern territories for the production of electricity is but one example. The case of Manitoba's Churchill-Nelson River project of the 1970s demonstrated a deep Cree concern for alteration of river systems as a spiritual affront to the environment. That view stood in stark contrast to the primarily economic and technological considerations of the dominant society. The fact that churches in Manitoba were sought out by the impacted Cree communities was in effect an appeal for theological considerations regarding defiance of the natural order.

Although several church bodies collaborated to respond to the Cree appeal by conducting a public inquiry, they did so facing substantial internal obstacles. First, the Inter-church Task Force on Northern Flooding as the churches' mechanism for undertaking this venture was criticized for its involvement in an issue considered to be too political. First, it was deemed to be outside of the mission mandate and, secondly, the effort needed to be processed with the established missions even though Catholic, Anglican, United, Pentecostal and Mennonite churches had mission staff, facilities and programs in the five communities implicated by the project.

The church sponsored inquiry became the forum for the Cree people to state their position, often in the Cree language and on Cree turf. Apart from major concerns over human tampering with the environment and encroachment upon their hunting and trapping territories, the Cree elders lamented the breech of Treaty No. 5.

By staging this inquiry, unprecedented as a church action, the churches, in effect, coalesced with the Cree communities who brought this, for them, a theological issue to the churches' attention, this intersection creating a new body of discernment.

It is contended here that Mennonitism as a community oriented faith, along with cultural consciousness, provides an ideological condition somewhat unique in relating cross-culturally. With the creation of a cross-cultural forum, a refreshing flow of Cree theological insight came forward. The following notes of a sermon preached by a Cree elder given during the construction demonstrates an amazing coming together of Cree philosophy, biblical text and current social issues.

Lake of Fire: A Cree Elder's Response to a Mega Project

At a church symposium in Riverton, Manitoba, in 1977, it was the Cree leaders' turn to speak. Jeremiah Ross of Cross Lake recounted the dream he'd received during a hunting trip. What followed was Jeremiah's amazing, prophetic sermon as approximately 50 Native and non-Native church workers heard his Cree response to the massive Churchill-Nelson Hydro project and its devastating effects on the Cross Lake environment. Jeremiah's sermon, AThe Lake of Fire," emanates from a hermeneutical forum embracing both Cree and Mennonite spiritualities.

Based on the biblical reference to the "lake of fire" (Revelation Ch. 20), Jeremiah Ross proceeded with a three point interpretation of that text set in the context of the mega development which was just getting underway in Ross' own community. The "lake of fire" was portrayed as God's judgement for the human violation of the created order. With the help of a Cree translator, I recorded the highlights of this sermon.

"Fire" in Cree is *shkote'o*. Electricity, flowing from the flooded lake reservoir, is called *pineshishkote'o* - the "fire that flies." Jeremiah's sermon focused on the once tranquil and resource-rich Nelson River which flows in an ever-widening delta to Cross Lake. This now serves as a large reservoir for the generation of electricity downstream. The enormous loss to the habitat there, including the devastation of wildlife and spawning grounds for fish, was, for Jeremiah, a violation of the spiritual order. He was a lifelong trapper. He could speak very knowledgeably about the shoreline dwelling furbearers. The beavers, for instance, who built their lodges on otherwise stable waters were now either drowned or left high and dry with fluctuating waters in the middle of winter. There were also perils for anyone traveling across what the trappers called "hanging ice."

While *pineshishkote'o* or hydro power" has modernized life for the people of Cross Lake, it has exacted an exorbitant toll on their way of life. *Pineshishkote'o* ("flies from the lake") Jeremiah emphasized, "to benefit someone else."

Jeremiah used the term *shkote'o* again, this time in the context of social impact. *Shkote'owaape*, meaning "fire water" or alcohol, was also linked to the hydro project. The construction of the hydro dams brought about employment for the Cree people - well paying but temporary jobs were offered at the Jenpeg site located on the outskirts of the community. Especially enticed were young men, the cream of the labour crop, who abandoned their longstanding economy of hunting and trapping in favour of lucrative wage opportunities.

The fast cash, explained Jeremiah, contributed to heavy drinking. The "flying fire from the lake," therefore, had an additional meaning that implied socially disastrous results. The completion of the dam project, and the termination of the resulting employment, left workers addicted and broke. These men didn't return to their previous economy of hunting and trapping, Jeremiah lamented. The *shkote'owaape* (firewater) came down as a judgement upon them and their families. (Later observations attest to Jeremiah's analysis-the occurrences of self-destruction within the community reached unprecedented rates.)

Jeremiah concluded his sermon with a return to his earlier biblical reference. The "Lake of Fire," (*shkote'o-saakaigon*) was interpreted as God's eventual but certain judgement on the dam project itself. Taking the long view of the environmental, social and spiritual accountability of the situation, Jeremiah responded in Cree fashion to the industry imposed

upon his people. He said, "in the end, *shkote 'o-saakaigon* (lake of fire) will be stronger than electricity."

As I shared Jeremiah's three-point fire sermon with Cree elders Walter and Doris Bonais, both helped me see an additional point to his message as follows:

> The 'Lake of Fire' (shkote'o-saakaigon) reference from the Book of Revelation, seen as punishment for evil deeds, could be interpreted as the lake itself responding to tampering with the created order. Nature, especially water, is a portrayer of a Divine response, not just a reservoir for mercenary purposes.

Violation of furbearers, plants, game, and the water itself was seen as a breach between humans and the Creator. The violation of the natural order, that is the recurring theme we hear when we listen to the Cree elders who call Cross Lake their home.

Notes

[1] From personal field notes.

[2] From *The Teachable Moment, A Christian Response to the Native Peoples of the Americas.* (10 lesson series). MCC Canada, 1992.

[3] Conference of Mennonites in Canada yearbook, 1970.

[4] *The Teachable Moment*, A Christian response to the Native people of the Americas, (10 lesson series) MCC Canada, 1992.

[5] Menno Wiebe, unpublished collection of poetry.

[6] Notes by Menno Wiebe of Chief Ominayak's speech.

[7] Field note recording of a meeting between Menno Wiebe and Chief Carl Roberts, Roseau River First Nations.