

Hopelines



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A Weagamow Spring

Story and Photos by LaMar Weaver, LHNM

Spring had truly sprung by mid-May in Weagamow First Nation, even though a bit of ice lingered on the western shore of the lake and the wind was cool. Vehicles kicked up dust on the roads, and many people were out and about enjoying the sunshine.

Weagamow, Oji-Cree for Round Lake, is also known as North Caribou Lake First Nation. This is a reserve of nearly a thousand people located 320 kilometres north of Sioux Lookout. It was approximately a one-hour flight from Red Lake.

Dave and Laverna Brenneman, from the Cherry Glade Mennonite Church in Accident, Maryland, arrived last fall for a three-year term as youth workers. Dave sold a white-washing business in preparation for the move. The Brennemans are the first resident workers that Living Hope Native Ministries has placed in the community.

Laverna picked us up at the airport and apologized for the dirty car. She then took us to their home where we met their son and his wife, who were visiting from Maryland. Their house is situated with the lake and several jack-pine trees in front, and the Native Evangelical Fellowship (NEF) Church building behind.

Their home is centrally located, so it's a convenient gathering place for kids in the afternoon. On a typical day, from 6 to 15 younger children show up for games and just hanging out. On that particular evening, plans are for the junior



Dave & Laverna return home to find sisters Latisha and Brenda waiting for kid's club.

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youth to come for a "human Dutch Blitz" game-using huge cards. On other evenings, as many as 16 older youth come to play games, sometimes staying as late as 10:30.

"We love the kids," Laverna said, "we feel very accepted." When asked for other reasons she's living there, Laverna responded with a smile, "the fact that Dave's here!"

"I love being useful," Dave said about his activities, which include fixing bicycles and other handyman repairs. "It's good connections in the community." Even while we toured the reserve, Dave bent over a kid's bike to check the seat. Dave is also thoroughly enjoying photographing birds and adding them to his life-list of 36, thus far.

The Brennemens have many occasions to be involved in the spiritual life of the community as well. The morning we visited, Dave was at the band office, leading in a prayer meeting focused on

another community dealing with a young girl's death. There's a solidarity amongst First Nations communities: they both celebrate and mourn with each other.

The Weagamow community deals with some ongoing problems: alcohol and prescription drug abuse, illegal drugs, and gas sniffing. There are programs in place to help. Just down the street from the Brennemens is the New Horizons, and close by is a youth drop-in centre with couches and TVs. The Brennemens and the NEFC church strive to present Jesus as the ultimate answer to the community's challenges.

Dave and Laverna were not totally unfamiliar to Weagamow when they moved to the community. The Brennemens had visited four times before with mission teams from their church. The teams conducted boys and girls camps and vacation Bible schools. Another such team is planning on ministry in Weagamow this summer. "We felt the Lord's call to return to live here, and connect with the youth," Dave said.

A local Christian school offers an alternative to the public school. Nearly 50 students attend, and it is staffed with five teachers. "Sometimes we play Bible trivia," said Laverna, "and the kids from the Christian school definitely know more of the Bible."

When asked about the challenges and frustrations, Dave offered, "I struggle with understanding exactly what the kids are saying, what they're dealing with- although part of the problem is my old ears!"



Maggie cleaning fish



Suri and her bike on a dusty street of Weagamow.



Dave checks McKayla's bike seat.

Dave continues, "I see the need for counseling, but I'm not trained. Laverna is better at it."

The Brennemens connect with the adults as well, building relationships. "We want them to call anytime, not only when there's a tragedy," said Dave. "We want to hear what God want us to say to them. We pray that God gives us the words."

There are also many positive things. "We see God leading in many ways," said Laverna. "It gives us encouragement to continue." Of course, a perk of living on a lake in northern Ontario is the fishing. The Brennemens had been out on the boat the evening before, caught some fish, but also hit a rock with the prop.

A tour of the community highlights the stores, school, band office, and community celebration grounds. Dave and Laverna visited their friend Maggie, who was cleaning fish-lot of fish, in her outdoor kitchen. Children are playing on their bikes, youth are enjoying the lakeshore, and many folks go by on quads and in trucks.

The return to the Brenneman's house finds sisters Latisha and Brenda waiting for another afternoon of fun and games. Indeed, the Brennemens have opened not only their house but their hearts to the people of Weagamow.



Laverna chats with Charity.



Jo Jo (R) and friend riding on the back of a truck-just one way of getting around town.

LHNM Stories of Grace

Yvonne: A Woman of Prayer

by Janelle Williams

Grace Yvonne Nafziger Miller was just a "quiet girl from Lancaster County" when he met her, my dad remembered. Second from the youngest in a line of 15 children, my mom grew up as the daughter of a Mennonite pastor/farmer.

As a teenager, Yvonne moved with her sister to North Carolina, where they had gone the year before to teach Bible school at a church plant. It was there she met my dad, Marvin. They married and had us 5 daughters.

But this "quiet girl from Lancaster County" was not content to let that be her only identity. While busy raising 5 children, homeschooling, babysitting multiple children, and doing side jobs to earn extra income for the family, she began to have a Holy Discontent. As she pressed into the heart of her Father, the more she began to feel, "there must be more to life than this."

Throughout my childhood, my one constant memory is getting out of bed in the morning and finding my parents praying and reading the Bible. Their hunger for more of their Father has permeated their lives.

Marvin and Yvonne's hunger for more, and desire to follow their Father, led them to pack up my sisters and I and go on a journey that eventually led them to the Canadian bush. In 1996 they moved to Stormer Lake, a retreat centre run by Impact North Ministries.

They began their work at Stormer Lake as the "maintenance couple." They facilitated retreats for church groups, but also hosted many of their own retreats for the Native people in the reserves north of them. Pikanikum. Donlar



Yvonne Miller

Hill, and Deer Lake.

Over time, this began to shift into counseling and Bible teaching. Couples and families began to come to Stormer Lake for a week or two at a time and received ministry and counseling. Yvonne and Marvin too, began to learn more about counseling tools and techniques that they utilized in their ministry.

My mom loved life. She worked hard, but enjoyed taking breaks too. She was the first to suggest jumping in the lake to cool off after working hard in the sun. She loved being in God's creation. Almost daily, you could find her taking a walk or snowshoeing through the bush.

And my mom prayed. She interceded continually for her family, for the people that she ministered to, and for the communities around her. She had such a heart for the Native people, and prayed constantly for strongholds to be broken over their communities. She would pray over the Retreat Centre beds as she made them, praying for whoever slept in them next. Throughout my life, if I needed someone to pray, I would ask my mother. I knew she was doing it anyway.

Eventually, the decision was made to close Stormer Lake. Marvin and Yvonne moved to Red Lake for 2 years, while continuing to minister to those around them. In 2011, they joined First Nations Restoration Centre in Keijick Bay in Lac Seul. There they continued their work with the Native people-counselling, kids clubs, and building relationships.

In January 2015, Yvonne was diagnosed with end-stage stomach cancer. In April, she went home to be with her Lord. She finished her life in the same way she had lived it: full, and overflowing. Never losing faith in her Jesus, she continued to praise him. Even in her weakest moments the last week of her life, she asked us to lift up her arms while we were worshipping, because she was too weak to do it herself. She died excited to see Jesus! I know only in heaven will we fully understand the far reaches of the work that she, through her prayers and ministry, established for her family, church, and especially the First Nations people.

Read Janelle's blog posts at RestoringWholeHealth.com

Honouring and Reconciling

by Merle Nisly, LHNM

Very recently, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released its final report on the effects of Canada's history of the residential school era. This report, exceeding 380 pages, is entitled "Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future."¹ The summary report seeks to describe the general views and goals of the dominant society during this era, and the effects of these political programs and societal values on the indigenous peoples of Canada.



This topic seems to raise the heart-rates of almost everyone who considers it. For most indigenous people, it is from the pent-up feelings of long-ignored outside domination and oppression. For some Canadians it feels like an over-blown reaction to some minor mistakes. For other Canadians, it is a wake-up call to some deep, painful issues and to a level of trauma and relational tension that most didn't realize exists.

"Honouring the Truth" is a worthy ideal. Some of us supported the residential school enterprise in one way or another. Others of us were the children who lived there and now re-live the effects. The perspectives of those two groups differ. The truth is not the same, exactly, as either perspective. Honouring the truth, however, means I honour your perspective and try to understand how that "truth" impacts your life.

"Reconciling for the Future" is a pipe-dream unless we can genuinely lay aside the drive to defend our own actions and our perspectives. The Bible says

that we are given the "ministry of reconciliation." It seems to me that we are incapable of helping others be reconciled to God if we are not firstly committed to actions and attitudes that lead to a climate of empathy and understanding. That applies to all parties; but I can only change myself in this regard.

The individuals of the LHNM ministry team relate, in some way, to this story and this history every day. It is our intent to humbly follow Jesus in every occasion by honouring the truth of another's perspective, and to be agents of reconciliation by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Exec_Summary_2015_05_31_web_o.pdf

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Our Vision:

That in every First Nations context the local church would reach its full potential--worshiping in full devotion, attracting the seekers, mobilizing believers, restoring families, changing communities, affecting the world.