

Perspectives on Mission

An Inuit community: in Inukjuak, the pain remains

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An Inuit community: in Inukjuak, the pain remains

Susan Winn
(Susan Winn is a parishioner of St. George's Church in Ste. Anne de Bellevue, teaches in the faculty of education at McGill University and sits on the Partners-in-Mission/Ecjustice Committee of the Anglican Church of Canada.)

Flying into Inukjuak on June 25, I knew I was heading into a community that has learned to live in peace and patience with the environment of northern Quebec. I chose to visit at the end of June when the ice would be breaking up and the sun would be shining for 22 hours each day. There would be no chance of being delayed by snow and ice. Of course, I hadn't counted on fog and wind! The pilot told me, "If we can't land, we will return to Montreal and try again tomorrow." My heart sank as I thought of the hams and strawberries in my luggage!

Inukjuak is a five-hour flight from Montreal, with two brief stops for fuel and delivery of mail and people.

I was on my way to visit Iola Metuq, an Inuit priest, who sits on the national Partners-in-Mission/Ecjustice Committee. Iola had invited our entire committee to hold a meeting in Inukjuak, but the costs of flights, food and accommodation, not to mention the uncertainty of travel and weather conditions, made this impossible. I was being sent in order to meet Iola's community, to carry the message that Iola is a most valued member of our ministry and to assure them of our prayers and support. In October of this year, at the next meeting of the committee, Iola and I will show slides and speak to the life and ministry in this place.

An Inuit poet of the 1970s wrote: "The lands around my dwelling are more beautiful from the day it is given to me to see faces I have never seen before. All is more beautiful and life is thankfulness. These guests of mine make my house grand."

One of my McGill students sent me this passage, and I knew that I would be warmly welcomed. I be-

came part of the family for the time. I was in Inukjuak. I shared the fresh vegetables, fruits and hams I had bought at a Montreal market. They shared their precious caribou meat, freshly caught arctic char, bannock and cloud berries picked last August.

At mealtime visitors appeared to share our mighty feasts and to talk and laugh in their gentle Inuktitut. I did not feel left out. Most could speak a little English, or understood and smiled widely.

The land around Inukjuak is gently rolling, with wide open spaces, a landscape of silent beauty. I was taken out onto the tundra in an all-terrain vehicle that climbs over rock and ruts where there are no roads.

The end of June is a happy time in the north. Canoes are launched and tents appear out on the land, tied to heavy rocks to keep them from blowing away in the strong winds. These tents become their summer homes. A touch of colour appears among the sedge and mosses as small purple and yellow wildflowers nudge their way towards the sun. Soon it will be time to hunt. The caribou will run, the birds and geese and small animals will provide food for families and for the community freezer to feed those who are without food. The Inuit share all they have, willingly and generously.

In Iola's church on Sunday, I spoke through an interpreter. The lessons were stories of Jesus' healing. Inuit people are deeply spiritual and tears flow readily as they pray that the Holy Spirit will be present and that their brokenness will be healed.

Many of the elders have lived through a very painful time in the history of this place. In 1953 the Inuit from Inukjuak were forced from their homes and were relocated by the Government of Canada, to the harsh landscape 2000 kilometres



THE ROCKY COAST of Hudson Bay was photographed by Susan Winn.

to the north. These relocated people represented our country's effort to occupy the uninhabited High Arctic because the Canadian government feared the expansionist activities of other nations. Families were divided and the Inuit were forced to acquire new hunting techniques in order to survive the cruel cold and much harsher climatic conditions in the far north. Eventually, survivors returned to Inukjuak, but their lives had been severely interrupted and changed. The pain remains very evident in their faces and their stories. Today, these elders are a valued source of traditional cultural skills and history. The children continue to learn in their native Inuktitut as their first language. Many seek to

preserve the old ways of survival in community. In my short stay I learned so much from these people. When I flew home over the vast expanse of desert-like treeless land dotted with many lakes and stretches of ice and snow, I understood as never before what an enormous country Canada is. Reaching my home in the West Island, I removed my shoes to dig my toes in green grass and was awed by the colours of my garden. At the same time, I missed the silence of Inukjuak. I am grateful for my new Inuit friends. I plan to stay in touch with those who can use e-mail, and I will enjoy sharing my slides and stories with all who are curious to know more about our Inuit sisters and brothers.



REV. IOLA METUQ visits the museum of elders' artifacts with its curator, Mary.



INTERPRETER EVA KASUDLUAK helps Sue Winn get her message across at St. Thomas Anglican Church in Inukjuak.