

As Moderator of the 143rd General Assembly I am visiting the Cariboo House Church Ministry in British Columbia.
Peter Bush



Day 1 -- Saturday

As the 19-passenger Beechcraft made its final approach into Williams Lake the impact of last year's forest fires was evident out the windows of the plane. Replacing the lush green of the forest, were large swaths of charred tree trunks lying on what had once been the forest floor, the occasional tree still stood upright although it too was charred. The forest at the edge of the airport is intact though some trees showed signs of having been scorched by the fire. A large water bomber stands at the ready on the tarmac.

But this year, at least so far, the challenge is not fire, rather it is water. Strange to say, in the swaths of burnt land are numerous pools of water, some with charred trees standing upright in the middle of the water.

We were met by Bruce and Jackie Wilcox. Bruce is a lay missionary with the Cariboo Ministry, responsible for the southern part of the territory. Bruce leads five services a week. Sundays start at Lac la Hache where the Presbyterian church is the only Christian witness in the community. Here on a good Sunday 40 people gather for worship. The congregation is growing, in part due to the coffee house Bruce organizes every two months where the community gathers and local artists sing. Sunday afternoon Bruce leads worship at a nursing home in 100 Mile House, and then in the evening he is in Forest Grove. Here the church meets in the local legion hall (the bar is closed at the time of worship), and at times individuals have come into the legion while church has been going on hoping to patronize the bar and have stayed for the worship gathering. Bruce grew up in Forest Grove, and as he says "drinking in and later singing in the bars in the area." He is surprised to find himself doing ministry, and especially to be doing ministry in his home town. Tuesdays Bruce leads worship at McLeese Lake, and on Wednesdays he is at Sheridan Lake.

Over supper with Bruce and Jackie, the conversation turns to the challenge of moving congregations from an institutional, consumerist mindset to a mission focussed mindset.

Bruce comments that one of the most difficult things in his ministry is helping the house churches understand that if they get too big they will divide into two. That such planned division is for the good of the kingdom of God.

Day 2 - Sunday - in the Cariboo Ministry

Jenny and Jack Alexander pick us up and take us to the Williams Lake House Church, where Jenny is the lay pastor. This week the church is meeting at the Seniors Village in Williams Lake (a seniors complex including nursing home care, assisted living, and independent living). Twice a month the church meets in “the media room” in the Village, the other Sundays worship is in people’s homes.

Jenny, a piano, voice, and speech teacher/coach, has brought her keyboard. Out come the Cariboo Ministry songbooks and the congregation sings hymns and songs suggested by the congregation. Jenny preaches on the line from Philippians 2 – “I want to know the power of Christ’s resurrection.” Which ends with a call to live life now knowing that the tomb is empty. The congregation suggests prayer requests, which Jenny skillfully weaves into the pastoral prayer/prayers of the people.

Following the service we chat with the people who have gathered. They include Phil, a long time rancher now retired, and Gerry, the first woman to be licenced as a hunting guide in the Cariboo/Chilcotin region. These and the others in the congregation are people who have lived close to the land, and there is both an awe and an untamedness to the way they talk. Gerry makes the simple statement, “The land is simple beauty.”

After lunch we drive to Quesnel, stopping to overlook the Fraser River just before it enters the Fraser Canyon. In Quesnel, Shannon Wyminga picks us up and we drive to Nazko where the Wymingas have lived for the last 18 years. About 5 kilometers out of Quesnel Shannon announces “Your cellphones no longer have reception.” We see where the 2006 fire took place, and Shannon comments that there was an even bigger fire in 2010 and then the monster fire last year. We drive by where the fire camp was evacuated at the height of last year’s fire.

We also cross a bridge that has been damaged and re-enforced by this year’s flooding. Water levels have dropped in Nazko – but are expected to rise over the next week. Shannon shows us sandbagging operations and where sandbag dykes are going up.

After supper, the church gathers in the Wymingas living room. A more careful look at the living room reveals that there is a low pulpit behind which Jon sits on a bench to speak and play his guitar. Shannon has brought out the big drum and Debbie is invited along with others to play as the congregation sings. Again, the Cariboo Ministry songbooks appear, but this time supplemented by another song book which a number of Christian Indigenous songs, a number of which we sing. Jon preaches from Isaiah 43 – vs. 2 has become significant to the Nazko people in recent weeks – “When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not

consume you.”

The prayer before communion is a communal prayer of thanks as the prayer stick is passed. The words from I Corinthians 11 are read; the elements are shared. And the service concludes a communal prayer of request as again the prayer stick is passed.

Day 3 in the Cariboo – Monday

The water levels have dropped on the Nazko River and anxiety has also been reduced by the amazing work two crews of firefighters (about 18 men and women in their late teens and early 20s) have done in sandbagging and building dykes. We met the crew filling sandbags in a cutting just off the main road, and then followed them as they took sandbags to a wall they were building around an elder's house.

Shannon points out the water treatment plant on the reserve where the well heads have been carefully sandbagged, and tells the story of many years of no drinkable water on the reserve. The Nazko area is on the edge of a volcano and arsenic naturally occurs in much of the water – that includes the two wells that supply the Nazko reserve. When the water treatment plant was built it lacked essential parts needed to remove the arsenic, and so was essentially useless as drinking water was still brought into the reserve. Finally, when the Nazko situation drew media attention things changed and the parts arrived. The water is tested daily and certified as drinkable. However, it took a long time for the people of the reserve to trust the water supply.

Our tour of the reserve included the new medical center with its circular gathering space where elders have a meal once a week, and moms and babies have a meal once a week. We visited the school/community center each with their own space and a shared gym and kitchen between. Shannon has an office in the community center. We visited the reserve owned store and saw the sandbagging that has been done to protect the store and surrounding cabins.

After lunch we headed out to Trout Lake and the Blackwater River. In places the water comes right up to the road, although not across it. Jon pointed out a side road covered in water and on the far side of the river a canoe ready for use to cross the overflowing river. We passed through a large area where fire burned in 2010. Pine are starting to come up among the charred logs to replace the forest that once was.

After a quick stop to check in on a family where sandbagging has been done, we dropped in on another family and as the river rushes by we stood by the sandbagged barrier and they described what the water has been doing in the last week and what normal conditions are like. The comment is, “We are going to get a little wet, that's okay. I just hope the river doesn't change course so the force of the water's flow washes our house away.”

Our final stop of the day was with a family that has run a hunting guide operation for over 40 years. They are licenced to use 2 million hectares of the land for their guiding

hunters, 900,000 hectares of that territory together with their house burned in last year's fire. Their business has been cut in half, raising questions about the viability of the operation. Through the generosity of Presbyterians, PWS&D was able to help the family in a small way. As they said more than once, "The funds came at just the right time when the money was needed. Please thank the church for their help."

The flooding is linked to the fire. The fire removed the trees which would have absorbed a significant amount of moisture out of the melting snow, the trees held the soil in place which also would have held moisture. With no tree or soil cover the snow melted fast creating increased water flows, flooding. This problem will remain for many years, until there is a new forest.

Day 4 (Tuesday)

I learned there are four ways a forest can look after a fire has been through.

1. Charred trees standing upright, all the green from trees and forest floor has been burned away.

2. Most if not all the trees down, charred logs lying on the scorched ground.

3. Third, trees (usually aspen and poplar) with trunks 15 to 20 cm (6 to 8 in) in diameter and 10 meters (30-40 feet) tall bent over completely with the tree tops touching the ground. A few of them snapped off, but most bent over. On Aug. 12 a fire storm went through the Nazko area. The heat, which is the front edge of the fire-storm, so heated the sap in the trees that the wood became pliable, then the 300 km/hr winds (180 miles/hr) bent the trees over, and when the wind was done the trees were permanently bent. Shannon told us the fire fighting leadership, people who have been fighting fires for 30 years, had never seen anything like this before.

4. The trees are gone, the trunks and everything but the roots vapourized. It is hard to imagine how hot a fire needs to be to completely burn a tree, hundreds of trees, so that nothing on a hillside remains.

Each of these impacts can be seen for kilometer after kilometer.

Some of the area we drove through had been burned 8 years ago, young pine trees which are the first trees to grow after a fire had grown to be 4 or 5 feet tall, and now they were burnt. This for Debbie was so discouraging.

The land is hurting, and as people talk about the fire and the impact, they express the hurt the land is feeling.

We visited a resort on the edge of a small lake that was saved from the firestorm. This was once a beautiful spot and while the cabins remain they remain in the midst of burnt forest. The owners and fire crews worked hard setting up sprinklers on the buildings and

fence lines. The wind of the fire storm also picked up the water in the lake, dock, boats, and all and drenched the resort. These combined to protect the resort when the fire storm went through. The fire burned to the fence line, sometimes taking the fence, but the cabins remain. A significant clean up operation will be needed for this family business to get back on its feet. A contribution from PWS&D is helping them do exactly that.

Further along the road we came to a party building a house. The couple lost their home in the fire, and have moved to a new location, a beautiful pasture above the river. There were already two cabins from the 1880's on the property and they have been fixed up as the house is being built by friends in the community. As our hostess says, "When you are here, everywhere you look is green, it is the only place where everything is green." And she is correct. The comment highlights just how discouraging the vast swaths of burned trees are. The burnt forest is a constant reminder of what was and what is gone. Here too a contribution from PWS&D is helping in the rebuilding.

We drove through part of the burned area to Kluskus, a Lkhooz Dene Nation. The Grease Trail passes through Kluskus, the long standing indigenous trade route that Alexander MacKenzie travelled in 1793, guided by the Carrier people, on his journey from Atlantic to Pacific Oceans by land. Here we stop in at the teacherage where the teacher is teaching school, since the school was damaged by flooding and is being repaired. The school enrollment is 3 boys, and a cozy classroom is set up by a wood stove. This is a remote community, with an oil-burning generator producing electricity, and no snowplough service to the community in the winter.

The people of Nazko have seen fire and they have seen flood and they continue to strive to live, in beauty of creation. Sometimes it is a harsh beauty. Linked to the land the people feel its pain and rejoice in what the land provides materially, psychologically, and spiritually





DAY 5 – Wednesday

Wednesday morning we left Nazko as Jon and Shannon drove us the hour and half (east) to Quesnel, we had an engaged conversation about cross-cultural ministry and the possible shape of healing and reconciliation in the future.

After lunch and dropping Shannon off in Quesnel to attend meetings and other responsibilities, Jon drove us the hour and half (south) to Williams Lake, where Bruce Wilcox picked us up to take us the hour (south) to 100 Mile House. After checking into our hotel and having supper, Bruce drove us the 30 minutes (east) to the Sheridan Lake House Church. I hope you have been paying attention to the time – we were now 4 ½ hours driving from where we started the day and still in the same congregational collection of house churches.

Last summer the fires started in the 100 Mile House area and these were the first communities impacted. At one point it looked as though all 1,100 houses in 108 Mile House were going to be lost. A retired RCMP officer turned pastor had been recruited to help with the RCMP during the crisis. When he and the officers with him were told there was nothing that could be done, he said “We can pray.” He invited the other RCMP officers with him to pray. Which they did. The wind shifted blowing the fire away from 108 Mile House. Only 2 houses were lost.

The Sheridan Lake House Church meets in 100-year-old ranch house on an active ranch. Twenty to twenty-five people overflowed the living room with some sitting in the kitchen, some having driven over an hour to get to the service. The service began with singing as congregation members suggested hymns – we sang a jazz version of “On Christ the solid rock I stand” and “Amazing Grace” to the tune of “When the lions sleep tonight.” Then someone requested we sing “Take my life and let me be” as a prayer, and with almost now instrument support the voices blended in prayerful song.

These people live close to the land, close to the vagaries of nature and farm equipment, and know that in a moment everything can. The prayer requests included the family and friends of a 12-year-old girl who was killed in an ATV accident and a rancher killed earlier in the week in a tractor rollover. The well-known words of “Solid Rock” were sung by many with closed eyes and facial expressions of trust and hope.

Bruce has been preaching his way through Colossians over the previous weeks and

had come to the passage in Colossians 3 about masters and slaves. The sermon was interrupted a couple of times as people shared insights and personal experiences related to the text. Bruce accepted the interjections and blended them into the sermon. (Bruce remained seated as he preached.) I had a chance to speak, and talked about the Indigenous Presbyterians in Taiwan and the Ngudredrakai Bible, people listened intently.

A ten-minute prayer time ended the hour and three-quarter service as people prayed about the tragedies in the community, the health needs of people in the congregation, the Indigenous people of Taiwan, flooding in Fredericton and lava in Hawaii, along with the Prime Minister and the upcoming General Assembly. A variety of voices prayed.

Over tea and coffee we met some members of the congregation. The members of a sheep raising family were there. 60 acres of their 80-acre farm burned, driving their sheep and predators (cougars and bears) into the same confined space. They face the challenge of finding adequate pasture for their sheep with the dangers of predator attack significantly increased. A small grant from PWS&D is helping this family replace fences. This family is not the only one facing the challenges of adequate food for their animals, between the fires and heavy winter snows, hay and pasture land are in short supply this spring.

We have been honoured to be with the people of the Cariboo House Church Ministry. We have been warmly welcomed. We have been moved by the quiet commitment, the strong sense of community, and the unassuming courage of the people. May this ministry be blessed by the Triune God of grace.

This is the last of my postings from this trip as Thursday (today) we fly home.