



COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL
TO THE INUIT OF NUNAVUT, CANADA

A Research Paper

Presented to

Dr. David Sills

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for 30960

By

Chad Bragg

November 7, 2008

COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL TO THE INUIT OF NUNAVUT, CANADA

Introduction

The Inuit people live in the circumpolar region of Greenland, Canada, Alaska and Siberia. It is in this vast and hard area, “based on [their] ability to utilize the physical environment and living resources of this geographic region known as the Arctic, where [their] culture developed and [their] history unfolded.”¹ Considering the vast amount of space that the Inuit people occupy, there are little cultural differences between them from Greenland to Siberia. Of the over one million people that identified themselves as an aboriginal persons in the 2006 Canadian census, 50,585 considered themselves Inuit. The Inuit people have been called “Eskimos” in the past but prefer to be called Inuit because of the negative connotations that the name Eskimo carries. Inuit simply means “the people” in Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit and the singular form of the word is Inuk.² Nunavut is the newest official territory of Canada and 80 percent of the population is Inuit.

According to a 2001 census, 67 percent of the people of Nunavut consider themselves Protestant (60 percent of the total population classify themselves as Anglican) while 23 percent say they are Roman Catholic. A group classified as “Christian, not included elsewhere” only

¹“5000 Years of Inuit History and Heritage.” [on-line]. Accessed 7 November 2008, Available from <http://www.itk.ca/sites/default/files/5000YearHeritage.pdf>; Internet.

² “The Hunters of the Arctic.” [on-line]. Accessed 7 November 2008, Available from http://www.bambusspiele.de/spiele/nanuuk/e_nunavut.htm; Internet.

made up 3.1 percent and contained an unnumbered sub-group called Evangelical.³ In order for the Inuit of Nunavut to be reached with the gospel, a missionary must understand how to communicate effectively with them. The missionary should understand the culture of the Inuit in the territory as well as the history of the people and their current status and the issues they are facing today.

History

The Inuit people have been residents of the land of Canada for thousands of years. It is said that the ancestors of the Inuit, the Thule and the Sivullirmiut, traveled across a land bridge that connected current day Russia with current day Alaska some 8,500 years ago.⁴ These ancestors of the Inuit were able to adapt to the climate and depended strongly on hunting for survival in the harsh polar environment. Archaeologists can tell from bones left behind that they “hunted seals, walrus, and caribou; they fished, hunted birds and water fowl, and depending on the season of the year, they collected clams and mussels, sea weed, bird eggs and berries.”⁵ The way of life of the Inuit remained mostly unchanged over the next 5,000 years until the Europeans began to explore and settle in the region. In the late sixteenth century European explorers began to enter the region and their influence grew slowly over the next 300 years. The Europeans began whaling in the region in the 18th century. This industry became so profitable for the Europeans that they eventually over-hunted the area which had a very negative impact on one major way of making a living for the Inuit. The impact on the health of the Inuit was so great that their population saw a major decrease during this time period. In the early 1860s, one

³ Stats Canada. “Religions in Canada.” In *2001 Census: Analysis Series*. (2003): 14.

⁴“ 5000 Years of Inuit History and Heritage.” [on-line]. Accessed 7 November 2008, Available from <http://www.itk.ca/sites/default/files/5000YearHeritage.pdf>; Internet.

⁵Ibid.

explorer made the comment that “The days of the Inuit are numbered. There are very few of them left now. Fifty years may find them all passed away, without leaving one to tell that such a people ever lived.”⁶ Thankfully, this was not to be the case and Christian missionaries were able to begin to reach out to the Inuit in the late 19th century.

Anglicanism was the earliest form of Christianity to reach the Inuit of eastern portion of Canada’s arctic region when Anglican missionaries came in the 1880s and 1890s. The old Anglican traditions introduced by the missionaries produced believers that tended to be on the more charismatic side as the traditions were met with the animistic religious worldview of the Inuit.⁷ As the high percent of Anglican in the region would indicate, there has been little other missionary work among the Inuit of Nunavut. There has been, over the years since the missionaries introduced Christianity, some mingling of the aboriginal religious practices with the Anglicanism introduced by the missionaries. Because of this, the current Anglicanism among the Inuit in Nunavut has been described as leaning towards Pentecostalism.⁸ To understand other topics that influence the faith of Inuit living in Canada it is important to recognize the current status and issues that the Inuit face.

Current Status and Issues

The Inuit have been in the polar regions of Canada for thousands of years and are considered one of the aboriginal peoples of the country. To understand how best to communicate the gospel to the Inuit, it is vital that the missionary have a grasp on the demographic data of the people. This people group has seen more than a 26 percent growth in its

⁶Ibid.

⁷ Frederic Laugrand and Jarich Oosteen, “Reconnecting People and Healing the Land: Inuit Pentecostal and Evangelical Movements in the Canadian Easter Arctic,” *Numen* 54:3 (2007): 231

⁸Ibid., 230.

population in Canada since 2001 and it is significantly different, in terms of demographics, than the rest of the population of Canada. The missionary must also understand the issues that are in the forefront of the people group he or she is attempting to reach for the gospel. Some of the issues that the Inuit find important today have to do with reaching back to their roots as a people, language, as well as issues of land and government. The missionary must appreciate these issues and become familiar with the layout of the people group demographically in order to reach them.

Statistical Profile

There are over 50,000 Inuit living in Canada today. Of these, approximately half are living in Nunavut, while others are spread out throughout the other Canadian territories (mostly in the northern territories). One important aspect of the population to note is that they are significantly younger than the rest of the Canadian population. According to information from 2006, thirty-five percent of the Inuit in Canada is under the age of fifteen; the rest of the population of Canada has only eighteen percent under the age of fifteen.⁹ The 2006 census data also showed that an important issue with the Inuit in Canada is housing. Inuit in the “homeland” are “eight times more likely than Non-Aboriginal people to live in crowded homes;” they are also more than twice as likely to live in homes that are in need of major repair.¹⁰ The health of the Inuit is another major issue. For example, the rate of tuberculosis for the “Inuit is almost 23 times higher than the rate for all Canadians.”¹¹ Another important issue to keep in mind concerning the Inuit is education. Over half (of both men and women) did not complete high school. From the census questionnaire, several reasons were given for not finishing high school;

⁹“Inuit Statistical Profile.” [on-line]. Accessed 7 November 2008, Available from <http://www.itk.ca/sites/default/files/InuitStatisticalProfile2008.pdf>; Internet.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

the two highest reasons in the territory of Nunavut were “Pregnancy or taking care of children” and “bored with school.” The unemployment rate of Inuit in Canada is 23 percent for males and 15 percent for females.¹² According to 2001 census data, “the median income for Inuit adults was much lower than that for all Canadians: \$13,699 compared to \$22,120. Considering the much higher cost of living in the north, these lower incomes have to go along way.”¹³

Language – Inuktitut

Author and missionary David Hesselgrave points out the importance of language to the missionary when he says, “If one wants to communicate Christ to a people, he must know them. The key to that knowledge always has been, and always will be, language.”¹⁴ There has been growing interest by the Inuit people in recent years to preserve their language. Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit, had been threatened by the policies that came about in Canada within the last sixty years. However, the Inuit have begun to aggressively take on this issue. Nadine Fabbi of the Canadian Studies Center says:

The Inuit across the circumpolar world are actively addressing language issues today. Unlike other aboriginal cultures in North America, it is only recently – since about the mid-20th century – that Inuit language has become threatened due to English-only residential schools. Fortunately, and within a generation, the Inuit began to address the need for language education and protection and are successfully influencing the survival of the Inuit language. The Inuit Circumpolar Conference, an international association of Inuit, has a Language Commission for the specific purpose of preserving the Inuit language and to develop a common writing system across the North.¹⁵

¹²Ibid., 9

¹³ Ibid., 10

¹⁴David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 355.

¹⁵Nadine Fabbi, “Inuktitut – The Inuit Language,” Henry F. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, 1.

This Language Commission has gained some ground and Inuktitut is now one of the official languages of Nunavut (along with English and French). While Inuktitut is the official language of the Inuit, not all of the Inuit are fluent in the language and some cannot speak it at all. The 2006 census data shows that “while 69 percent of Inuit could have a conversation in the Inuit language, 50 percent used it as the language spoken most often at home.”¹⁶ Inuktitut was an oral only language until the mid-1700s when Lutheran missionaries in Greenland first began to develop a written form of the language. The Lutheran missionaries used the Roman alphabet to reduce the language to writing and this version of written Inuktitut moved into Canada from the east. Another version of written Inuktitut was developed in the western and central regions. This version, also developed by missionaries, used a “syllabic system” instead of the Roman alphabet.¹⁷ This syllabic system uses symbols to represents sounds from the Inuit language. While both types of Inuktitut are being used today, the popular trend is to use the syllabic version of written Inuktitut only. Nadine Fabbi quotes Professor Bob Williamson: “Obviously the syllabics, in this era when the Inuit feel their culture to be so deeply threatened, have assumed a symbolic significance over-riding any considerations of ‘efficiency’ ... [the majority of the Inuit feel] that the syllabics are their own culturally distinctive form of writing, and worth retaining for cultural identity reasons alone.”¹⁸ The Inuit see Inuktitut as an important part of their heritage and they are making great efforts to bring the language back to a place of prominence in their culture.

¹⁶ “Inuit Statistical Profile” [on-line]

¹⁷ Fabbi, “Inuktitut – the Inuit Language,” 3

¹⁸ Ibid., 5

One major problem among the Inuit of Nunavut in regard to language is the low level of literacy. Since the Inuit have a high number youth that are not continuing their education through high school this situation does not come as a surprise. According to a study conducted by Stats Canada in 2005, “more than half of Nunavut’s working-age population struggles with serious literacy challenges. Many Nunavummiut don’t have the literacy skills needed to thrive in today’s society.”¹⁹

Cultural Context

Like many of the First Nation people groups, the Inuit have made considerable efforts to retain or revive their historical culture. There was little change to the culture of the Inuit from very on until the early 20th century. The Inuit spent most of their time hunting and whaling and used the same kind of tools to do this hunting up until the arrival of the Europeans. The Europeans began to influence the Inuit not only because they brought new tools that would assist the Inuit in their hunting, they also influenced Inuit culture with Christian missionaries. The worldview of the Inuit prior to the arrival of missionaries was animistic and the religion of the people was described as “shamanism.”²⁰ The missionaries proved to produce significant changes in the worldview of the Inuit.

An article in *Inuktitut* magazine states that “the introduction of Christian teaching by the missionaries resulted in significant changes in the way in which we viewed and explained the world and new meanings were assigned to living and dying.”²¹ Gailyn Van Rheenen’s definition of animism as a belief system serves as a good description of the religious practices and

¹⁹“Literacy in Nunavut.” [on-line]. Access 7 November 2008, Available from <http://www.nunavutliteracy.ca/english/resource/stats/stats-en.pdf>; Internet.

²⁰Laugrand, “Reconnecting People and Healing the Land,” 229.

²¹“5000 Years of Inuit History and Heritage,” [on-line].

worldview of the Inuit prior to missionary activity. Van Rheenen defines animism as follows: “The belief that personal beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and, consequently, that human beings must discover what beings and forces are influencing the in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power.”²² The early missionaries suppressed the native religious practices and taught western Christian practices to replace those of the Inuit. While some non-Inuit state that the missionaries were not good for the Inuit, most Inuit have a different opinion “and tell of their respect for their religious teachings, and for the other roles they played especially in those early days.”²³ Currently, the cultural context of the Inuit in Nunavut appears to be influenced by a mixture of the historical animistic worldview with the Christian worldview taught by the missionaries. The revitalization movement that has been going on within the Inuit culture today, reaching back to some of the traditions of their ancestors, introduces both a continuity with the Christian traditions taught by missionaries along with a discontinuity that brings back older cultural views of the past. This mixture has resulted in new religious movements. As anthropologists Frederic Laugrand and Jarich Oosten state, “Although most of the new religious movements strongly oppose shamanic traditions, some practices evoke these very traditions, especially to the elders who have witnessed shamanic practices in the past.”²⁴ The result is often a worldview that blends Animism and Christianity.

While there has been some fluctuation of religious views in recent years, an aspect of Inuit culture that has remained throughout is the tradition of connecting with and depending on

²²Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1991): 20.

²³“ 5000 Years of Inuit History and Heritage,” [on-line].

²⁴Laugrand, “ Reconnecting People and Healing the Land,” 230.

the land. Hunting and trapping have long been a way of life for the Inuit. In 2000, nearly 75 percent of Inuit adults participated in “harvesting activities” including hunting caribou, seals, fishing, gathering wild berries and shellfish.²⁵ Seventy-four percent of Inuit in Nunavut claim that at least half of the meat and fish they eat in the home are from these harvesting activities. The Education Canada website confirms that “many of the Inuit still live off the land following their traditional economy: hunting, trapping, gathering and fishing.”²⁶

Another feature of Inuit culture that has not changed over the centuries is the existence of close-knit families that make up the Inuit communities. When asked the question “how strong are your ties with members of your family living in your community?” nearly 75 percent answered either strong or very strong (20 percent and 53 percent respectively).²⁷ This aspect of Inuit culture will have a major impact on the reaching them with the gospel. These and the other particulars of Inuit culture should be major considerations when missionaries attempt to construct a communication strategy that will assist in communicating Christ to the Inuit of Nunavut.

Communication Strategy

When sharing Christ across cultures, the believer needs to keep several things in mind when building a strategy that will communicate Christ in an effective, culturally appropriate way. Some of these matters are the worldview, language, the preferred learning style of the

²⁵“Inuit Statistical Profile,” [on-line].

²⁶“Nunavut: Economy.” [on-line]. Accessed 7 November 2008, Available from <http://www.educationcanada.com/facts/index.phtml?sid=nu&a=4&lang=eng>; Internet.

²⁷“Inuit Statistical Profile,” [on-line].

culture, as well as the history of the Church among the people group. These things can either operate as barriers or bridges to the gospel among the people group.

Barriers and Bridges

There are many issues that can serve as either barriers or bridges when trying to communicate the gospel to the Inuit of Nunavut. One very important topic in regard to this is one that has been discussed in some detail above: the history of Christianity among the Inuit. This history could serve as both a barrier and a bridge to communicating Christ among the Inuit. Specifically, a barrier here is that many of the Inuit have already been exposed to the ideas of Christianity and may assume that they know the gospel or that they are Christians based on family ties and/or traditions kept. The fact that the gospel has been preached among the people group in the past could also be a bridge because the concepts of Christianity will not be completely foreign to them.

Another barrier to the gospel could be something that has happened in the past among the Inuit and something that has seen more prominence lately, namely syncretism. One can see from this history discussed above that there has been some degree of syncretism among the Inuit. Christopher Trott notes that some of the early missionary work among the Inuit merely caused the shamanism of the Inuit to be transformed into “a *new* theological context... retaining some of its own practice” (emphasis added).²⁸ Syncretism is also a real threat to the gospel today. Some hold that the animistic rituals practiced by Inuit in the past “...fit perfectly into the modern ideology of the Canadian state and can thus easily be perceived as a bridge from the present state of suffering of the aboriginal people to a new political religious order that harmoniously unifies

²⁸Christopher G. Trott, “The Rapture and the Rupture: Religious Change amongst the Inuit of North Baffin Island” *Etudes/Inuit/Studies*, 21 (1997): 214.

modern Christian and political ideas.”²⁹ Missionaries must critically look at the practices of Inuit religious customs to see if they run counter to and therefore become barriers to the gospel. At the same time the missionary must not put up barriers to the gospel by completely rejecting aspects of Inuit culture without careful analysis. In regard to dealing with cultural heritage of the Inuit, Paul Hiebert suggests an approach to sharing the gospel that prevents unnecessary barriers yet guards against syncretism. Hiebert says,

A third approach may be called critical contextualization, whereby old beliefs and customs are neither rejected nor accepted without examination. They are first studied with regard to the meanings and places they have within their cultural setting and then evaluated in the light of biblical norms.

Language

The language of the Inuit is something that also can either serve as a barrier or bridge to sharing Christ with Inuit. The subject of language will be central to a missionary communicating Christ among this people group. While not all of the Inuit speak Inuktitut, over ninety percent of Inuit in Nunavut can converse in Inuktitut and sixty-four percent speak that language the most in their homes.³⁰ Not only is it safe to say that Inuktitut is the heart language of the Inuit, it also important to them culturally considering the revitalization movement present today. With this in mind, the gospel will most effectively be communicated when it is communicated to the Inuit in the Inuit language. Hasselgrave’s quote from above which states that knowing a people group means knowing their language is right on target. The missionary must put substantial time into learning the Inuit language; this will give him or her the ability to both communicate Christ effectively and to connect to the Inuit in a way that he or she would not

²⁹Laugrand, “Reconnecting People and Healing the Land,” 266.

³⁰“Inuit Statistical Profile,” [on-line]

otherwise be able to. This will portray to the Inuit that the Christian God is not for western, English-speakers only but for all people and cultures.

Preferred Learning Style

Another facet of Inuit culture to keep in mind when constructing a communication strategy, is the preferred learning style of the Inuit. The fact that such a great number of Inuit are not able to, or do not desire to complete high school is an indication that a classroom setting is not the best way to disciple them. Twenty-four percent of those that dropped out of school did so because they were “bored with school.”³¹ An area of Inuit culture that gives a clue for a preferred learning style of the Inuit is the close relationships they have with family.

Relationships are extremely important to the Inuit and it is in the context of relationships that Christ will be communicated the best. The book of Acts gives several examples of whole households becoming followers of Christ (Acts 10:2; 11:14; 16:15, 31; 18:8); and because of the close family ties, this would indeed be the case with the Inuit. The missionary must take advantage of this natural bridge and as David Hasselgrave says “preach to those who [are] prepared to listen by virtue of the fact that they [are] related t those who [have] already become Christians.”³² The Inuit prefer to learn within the relationships that they have instead of formal classroom-like settings.

Because much of the Inuit culture in Nunavut is an oral culture, typical literate learning would be difficult to say the least. A learning method that would be preferred over literate methods would be chronological Bible storying. This type of learning would be especially effective because it possesses “the power to actually change how we think, feel, and

³¹ Ibid.,10

³²Hasselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 475.

behave, and to change the way we see the world, it is important to have a sequential, step-by-step process that leads them to a new, biblical worldview.”³³

Indigenous Leaders – Persons of Peace

Along these same lines is the principle of installing indigenous leadership within the community. This philosophy is a critical part of a communication strategy that effectively preaches the gospel. Because family and relationships are so strong in the Inuit culture, the most influential leaders among the Inuit would be the Inuit themselves. A critical aspect of the communication strategy would be to develop indigenous leadership within the Inuit church as soon as possible. In order to do this the missionary should attempt to build strong relationships with the Inuit he or she comes in contact with. Pertaining to raising up indigenous leadership, church planter Tom Steffen points out that “Jesus spent significant time getting to know his disciples. They lived, ate, prayed, learned, laughed, traveled, and ministered together. Jesus built solid ongoing relationships with his disciples.”³⁴ We must do the same in order to effectively communicate Christ in a cross-cultural setting.

The Land

Because the Inuit have a close relationship with the Land, missionaries should seek understand this and thereby build bridges to the Inuit he or she is attempting to communicate with. Inuit leader Mike Bell sees the Inuit culture flowing from four different relationships: relationship with the land, relationship to one’s family, relationship to one’s own inner spirit, and relationship to one’s own social grouping. Bell claims that one’s relationship to the land is

³³Lusanne Committee for World Evangelization and International Orality Network, *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, (Bangalore, India: International Orality Network, 2005): 28.

³⁴Tom A. Steffen, *Passing the Baton: Church Planting that Empowers*, (La Habra, California: Center for Organizational & Ministry Development, 1997): 217.

“primordial...first relationship and the one from which the other [relationships] flow.”³⁵

According to Bell, “The human community is part of the greater earth community. Inuit Concept of the relationships of people to the land and its species seems to closely parallel the belief of other aboriginal peoples that the people and the animals form a single community.”³⁶ While these ideas seem to go against the Christian worldview, they do not need to be rejected without critical thought. The land is very important among the Inuit and should also be important to those that are trying to effectively communicate Christ in the Inuit culture.

Conclusion

The Inuit culture is a very complex culture that has a long history. There has been a great deal of influence from Europeans in the last few centuries but the Inuit have held onto and are seeking to revitalize much of their old culture. In order for a missionary to communicate Christ to the Inuit in an effective way, the missionary must seek understand the worldview and culture of the Inuit. As Hesselgrave notes, “It may seem to be a difficult assignment, but for the missionary to this type of people there is no alternative to learning the various components of their overall worldview and communicating Christ accordingly.” He concludes that “understanding must precede effective communication.”³⁷ The missionary must make it a primary goal to establish strong relationships among the Inuit. He or she must become familiar with the history and the future hopes of those that the Lord has sent him or her.

³⁵Mike Bell, “Nunavut Literacy Development in the Context of Inuit Quajimajatuqanginnut (IQ)” Inukshuk Management Consultants. (2003): 4

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 284.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

- Hesselgrave, David J. *Communicating Christ Cross-culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991.
- Hiebert, Paul G. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1985.
- Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*. Bangalore, India: International Orality Network, 2005.
- Steffen, Tom A. *Passing the Baton: Church Planting that Empowers*. La Habra, California: Center for Organizational & Ministry Development, 1997.
- Van Rheezen, Gailyn. *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*. Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1991.

Articles

- Bell, Mike “Nunavut Literacy Development in the Context of Inuit Quajimajatuqanginnut (IQ)” Inukshuk Management Consultants. (2003): 1-14.
- Laugrand, Frederic and Jarich Oosteen. “Reconnecting People and Healing the Land: Inuit Pentecostal and Evangelical Movements in the Canadian Eastern Arctic.” *Numen* 54:3 (2007): 229-269.
- Fabbi, Nadine. “Inuktitut – The Inuit Language.” Henry F. Jackson School of International Studies. (2003):1-7.
- Stats Canada. “Religions in Canada.” In *2001 Census: Analysis Series*. 1-32. Ottawa, 2003.
- Trott, Christopher G. “The Rapture and the Rupture: Religious Change Amongst the Inuit of North Baffin Island.” *Etudes/Inuit/Studies*. 21:1-2 (1997): 209-228

Internet

- “5000 Years of Inuit History and Heritage.” [on-line]. Accessed 7 November 2008, Available

from <http://www.itk.ca/sites/default/files/5000YearHeritage.pdf>; Internet.

“Inuit Statistical Profile.” [on-line]. Accessed 7 November 2008, Available from <http://www.itk.ca/sites/default/files/InuitStatisticalProfile2008.pdf>; Internet.

“Literacy in Nunavut.” [on-line]. Access 7 November 2008, Available from <http://www.nunavutliteracy.ca/english/resource/stats/stats-en.pdf>; Internet.

“Nunavut: Economy.” [on-line]. Accessed 7 November 2008, Available from <http://www.educationcanada.com/facts/index.phtml?sid=nu&a=4&lang=eng>; Internet.

“The Hunters of the Arctic.” [on-line]. Accessed 7 November 2008, Available from http://www.bambusspiele.de/spiele/nanuuk/e_nunavut.htm; Internet.