

ST. PHILIP'S CHURCH, CHISASIBI, QUEBEC
DIOCESE OF MOOSONEE
PROFILE

The Archbishop of Moosonee is seeking a qualified priest to be appointed Incumbent of the northern-most and largest parish in the Diocese of Moosonee. St. Philip's Church would like to see a new minister appointed before the coming of winter.

COMMUNITY HISTORY

The present site upon which the community of Chisasibi is located is relatively new. The beginnings of the community, however, go back several centuries, at which time, the then nomadic Crees used a nearby island for summertime assemblies. This island, later known as Fort George, eventually became the permanent site of the Cree Nation of Chisasibi. The establishment of a trading post by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1803 reinforced the island as a permanent site. In 1852, an Anglican mission was established, followed by an Anglican school in 1907 and a Catholic mission in 1927.

The Cree word for "Great River", the current community of Chisasibi is located along the eastern coast of the James Bay in Quebec. Between 1978 & 1980, the community was relocated to the mainland's south shore by the Government of Quebec. The relocation was necessary because of possible and expected erosion of the island due to the increasing water flow of the La Grande watershed, caused by the construction of a hydro-electric dam in 1970. Today Chisasibi is a modern community boasting excellent schools, hospital, shopping centre, a new, modern, 4-star hotel and B&B's, restaurant, large residential growth with the building of new homes. The community also has a busy community airport with daily flights north and south from Montreal including regular "health flights" operated by "Air Creebec" transporting persons with health concerns to medical attention in Val d'Or and Montreal.

Chisasibi, Moosonee Diocese's northern-most parish, sits at the end of a paved highway that runs along the east coast of James Bay...some 1400 kms from Montreal and 900 kms north from Val d'Or, Quebec

The current population of the Cree Nation of Chisasibi is approximately 5,000 people most of whom are adherents of the Anglican Church.

With the relocation of the community in 1980 the Fort George Relocation Corporation assisted in the building of the present St. Philip's Church, a large, modern, sanctuary that can seat approximately 350 people comfortably.

PARISH HISTORY

The Anglican Church was established on Fort George island in the middle of the nineteenth century. As noted the mission was established and grew under the faithful ministries of committed clergy, among them such notables in Canadian Church history as Edmund Peck, William "Reindeer" Walton, Donald Ruggles under whose ministry the mission grew. In 1932 the Diocese of Moosonee established one of four Anglican Residential Schools that were located throughout Moosonee Diocese. The local Roman Catholic Jesuit community also ran a school at the opposite end of the island. Our school continued from 1932 until it finally closed in 1975. For a brief period, the School and Mission were administered by the Diocese of the Arctic from 1936 to 1960 when it was transferred back to Moosonee. St. Philip's Mission was always a busy and growing community and the resident clerics were always assisted by a large team of Catechists, a strong women's group, choir, regular Bible classes and large Sunday School.

With the community's move to the mainland our congregation moved into a beautiful new church facility that had been constructed, along with many of the other buildings in the community, by the Fort George Relocation Corporation. The spacious new church complex included a separate parish hall and a large rectory. Our ministry continued to be such that the parish was the largest and most active ministry in the Diocese, in spite of its northern location with the leadership of notable clergy such as Charlie Locke and Bill Baldwin. Under Bill Baldwin's ministry he mentored a local Layreader, Jacob Sealhunter, who was eventually ordained and when the Baldwins retired and moved south became Chisasibi's first locally-raised Incumbent. Canon Sealhunter, now in retirement, ministers faithfully at St. Philip's every week and is called upon often to baptize and marry.



St. Philip's Church, Chisasibi, exterior & interior

Around 2008 a major disruption took place in the life of St. Philip's Church. A group of faithful, after attending a deanery meeting, returned home disgruntled at the amount of money they felt the Diocese demanded from the parish, a sum they felt that did not equally match the amount of time and effort the Diocese returned to the parish. Canon Sealhunter had suffered a burn-out and had decided to take a leave-of-absence which eventually led to his decision to retire. Archbishop Caleb Lawrence replaced him with an interim ministry provided by a layman whom the Archbishop had been told had a good record of pastoral care and whom could eventually be ordained.

The group of angry parishioners along with the input of the Interim decided that the best plan forward was to formally leave the Diocese of Moosonee and form a new church. They formed a new Church Board for what became known as "The Church of Eeyou Istchee". In their angry decision they convinced the Band Council to refuse Archbishop Lawrence even to come into the community. That move forced the Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada to appoint the National Indigenous Anglican Bishop, Mark MacDonald, to provide "alternate Episcopal oversight". The new entity was delighted with the change and Bishop MacDonald immediately took a leadership role in the new church, conducting confirmation services and meeting with the Church Board planning a new future. One major event that he led was in the ordination of the local Catechists to the priesthood. These four priests and two deacons served together with the Lay Incumbent who managed a large following in the community. For the Diocese of Moosonee the whole situation was quite disruptive. This situation continued for a few years until a new Bishop was elected for the Diocese of Moosonee and Bishop MacDonald stepped down from his ministry. Not long afterward the Lay Incumbent also left the community.

Bishop Thomas Corston was able to meet a number of times with the community and with the Church Board of the Church of Eeyou Istchee. Many people expressed anger to the new Bishop in his visits to the community. He came to understand that people lacked the understanding on how the Church actually worked. He tried, with some success, to steer a middle ground to bring agreement to the divided factions. As there was a portion of the parish who disagreed with the decisions of the Eeyou Istchee Church Board, Jacob Sealhunter came out of retirement and the Bishop established a separate congregation. Ever since, to the present day, two Sunday services are held each week with Church of Eeyou Istchee being responsible for the morning service led by the “Elder Clergy” and an afternoon service sponsored by the Diocese of Moosonee and led by Jacob Sealhunter

It has been an unfortunate division for some time now and, at a Diocesan level. Today the congregation has begun to struggle and is experiencing dwindling numbers, very little ongoing administration, and little pastoral care of the sick and shut in. The clergy on both sides of the issue have ministered faithfully and well and are all highly respected but are reaching ages where it is becoming increasingly more difficult for them to minister as actively as they once did. Recently, the two groups have decided to work together and the community and the congregation is looking forward to hiring someone to minister in the community in spite of the years of division within the church.



*Chisasibi elder clergy, (L) Clifford Bearskin, Layreader
Phyllis Chemanis, Abraham Cox & Samuel Bearskin*



*Abraham Cox, Samuel Bearskin &
Canon Jacob Sealhunter*

In late 2018 members of the Cree Nation of Chisasibi Council contacted Bishop Corston to begin the process toward the possible appointment of new ministry to the community. Any clergyperson who might be interested in the position will be required to work in partnership with the “elder clergy” who are still involved, will be required to learn the language of the Cree people, and will begin work in “primary evangelism” as the present congregation is at its lowest point in its ministry and enthusiasm, which will include the restarting of a Sunday School and other former church groups. The person appointed will also need to review and renew the administration of the parish, especially in the booking of property for weddings and funerals. The administration of the church sponsored cemetery will also need to be renewed. A cleric appointed to this parish will also work in partnership with the other clergy in the James Bay Deanery and the Diocese of Moosonee.

As mentioned, the parish includes a large, modern church facility, a separate parish hall, requiring some renovation, and a large, spacious rectory, all clean and modern but requiring new exterior siding.

The stipend provided for this position is that which is determined by the Council of the North grant and the Diocese of Moosonee. For details on the stipend package, please contact The Rev. Patricia Dorland, Diocesan Finance Officer at pdorland@dorlandaccountants.com or at 705-272-4310.

If interested in applying for this position please contact the Most Rev. Anne Germond, Archbishop of Moosonee at bishop@dioceseofalgoma.com or at 705-256-5061

For further information go to www.chisasibi.org

