

Script for La Ronge Alliance Church revisioning video

Reporter (Dave Sims): The Woodland Cree, who make up much of the population of north-central Saskatchewan, have their own name for the shimmering, awe-inspiring phenomenon known elsewhere as the “Northern Lights” – they call it “Dance of the Spirits”.

More recently, however, some Cree people have adapted that name for a local church that's having a powerful impact in their community: they have re-christened the La Ronge Alliance Church “Where the Spirit Dances”.

While the La Ronge Alliance church has been around since the 1950s, over the last 10 years, the church has seen a remarkable amount of growth in terms of its impact on – and reputation with – the surrounding community.

People within the church – the “body of believers”, as they call it – point to a three-month period at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 as the starting point for the church's current approach to worship and ministry within the community of La Ronge. After the board of elders – a group elected from within the church to provide both practical and spiritual leadership – became convinced that God was calling them to seek a new direction, the church as a “body” began a three-month period of focused, intentional prayer. Out of that process came a new vision for how the church was to relate to God, to one another and to their neighbours – whoever those neighbours might be.

One of the most striking aspects of the church's ministry work is its whole-hearted embrace of anyone who walks through the church's doors – especially those caught in the vicious cycle of addictions. Both church leaders and members say they refuse to reject anyone who needs either a hand, or a shoulder to lean on.

Roger Linklater has experienced that attitude – which he calls “grace in action” – first-hand. Linklater, a member of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation, relocated from his home reserve at Pelican Narrows to La Ronge in 2012, to study at the local teacher training college, NORTEP/NORPAC. Less than two years later, his relationship with Lorena Charles, a woman who belongs to the Lac La Ronge Indian Band, was fracturing under the strain of her family's hostility toward him, and Linklater was spending far less time in his classes than at a local bar.

Linklater says he reached a breaking point – both emotionally and spiritually – a few months after losing his full scholarship to NORTEP, when he and several “buddies” were caught spray-painting graffiti in the Alliance church sanctuary after a late-night break-in, and he had to watch from the prisoner's box as the church's pastor gave a victim impact statement.

Linklater (Maurice Ratt): What shocked me most was when Pastor said that while he was deeply upset by the damage I'd caused, his real grief was for me, because of the pain that had caused me to lash out against the church. He said the church was just a physical structure – and I remember he called it “a hospital for sinners, not a hotel for perfect people”, and said that “Christ is the only doctor who can make any of us truly well.”

Later on, while I was serving my community sentence and just starting to attend services at the church, I asked him about what he said that day in court, and he said that when someone asks him how he could be comfortable having an adulterer, or a thief, or a drunk sitting in his pews, he tells them it's "because we have each been shown grace, and we are all sinners condemned but for Christ's sacrificial love for us." That just cut through me – all those layers of hurt – and I started to feel like I had found someone who truly cared about me.

Reporter: Over the last 10 years, the La Ronge Alliance Church has come to be known as "the little church with the big heart", for its efforts to reach out to people who are hurting or struggling in some way.

Roger Linklater, who is now a physics teacher at the La Ronge band's Senator Myles Venne School, serves on the church's board of elders as head of their "practical compassion" ministry team, which helps with the logistics of linking people in need with church members who can help – such as with car repairs, yard work or home maintenance.

Church members have worked with the provincial correctional system to provide clean, professional-looking clothes and grooming kits for recently-released prisoners who want to apply for jobs in town, and have provided La Ronge Chamber of Commerce members with both materials and labour to build access ramps to make it easier for the frail, the physically disabled, and mothers with children in strollers to access commercial buildings. A homeless shelter in La Ronge owes its existence in part to advocacy and practical assistance from the church, as does a van-based public transit service.

One of the first major projects the church took on after its revisioning process was the creation of the "Fire Escape". In late 2012, the year after La Ronge Alliance's "revisioning" process began, the church acquired a provincial grant to purchase and convert the Town of La Ronge's old firehall into a youth outreach centre.

A full-time youth worker, former Junior A hockey star Corey Badham, offers Christian counselling services to northern youth of any age, and the centre is open 24 hours a day for kids to hang out on the computers, play foosball, relax on the couches, or check the "odd job" board, updated weekly with postings from church members. Sunday nights are set aside for a teen-oriented worship service, led by volunteers from the church. Because alcohol and violence are still an unfortunately real part of life in La Ronge, the centre lives up to the name "escape" in more ways than one, giving kids emergency shelter when needed, in a small loft area with two bedrooms – one for boys, one for girls.

Badham credits his commitment to this outreach effort to the role La Ronge Alliance played in his life when he played for the local Junior A hockey team, the La Ronge Ice Wolves. Eight years ago, Badham and his teammates each received a copy of the recently-developed Hockey Player's New Testament, and he began reading it whenever the team was travelling to an away game. Intrigued both by the Biblical text and by the testimonies of Christian professional hockey players, he began attending the church-supported team chaplains' weekly prayer times, and became a Christian. After a knee injury sidelined his hockey ambitions in 2013, the year he turned 19, Badham relocated to Saskatoon, where he completed his B.Ed. and then did a master's in counselling.

When he saw an ad for the “Fire Escape” counsellor position in an issue of *Christian Week* two years ago, Badham knew he wanted to come back to La Ronge – and to the church that had nurtured him.

Badham (Cole Paproski): I'm in awe – truly – at what this church has done, through the grace of God, over the last few years. They truly have servant hearts, and you can see it in the centre, of course, with the volunteers that come every day, and the very fact that the centre exists, but in other ways too, like how a bunch of guys helped with the repairs to Mrs. McKay's roof when it was leaking after all that rain last summer.

And it's so obvious where they get their passion for other people from – when you go to one of the prayer meetings, there is just this outpouring of gratitude and love directed toward the Holy Spirit, and it might sound kind of corny to say it, but you can tell that God is so present there, and that He feels the same way toward them – toward us, I should say (smiles). I've seen real healing – physical healing, but also restored relationships, freedom from emotional baggage – resulting from this church's faithfulness to God's leading, and that's been an amazing thing to see.

Reporter: Fifteen-year-old Celia Cavanaugh can attest to that healing. The daughter of a helicopter pilot and a conservation officer who relocated to La Ronge four years ago, Cavanaugh got heavily involved in after-school activities because she was so often coming home to an empty house and wanted some place where she could feel less alone. A year ago, one of Cavanaugh's friends from Churchill School's drama club brought up a winter carnival that her church was organizing for that weekend, and invited her to come. At the carnival, red-cheeked, mouth burned from a too-eager gulp of hot chocolate, but happier than she'd felt for months, Cavanaugh decided to ask what else was happening at the church – not realizing just how much the answer would affect her life.

Cavanaugh (Natasha Prokopchuk): When I was little, my mom and dad never really took us to church – on Christmas, maybe, when we were with my grandparents in Weyburn or whatever. But I never knew much about this whole Jesus thing, like what “being saved” was or even who most of the people in the Bible were. I talked to the guy who was pouring the hot chocolate, and he said that the church had this “discipleship” program for teenagers, where you could ask any questions you wanted about God and life decisions and stuff, and I thought that sounded pretty cool. So when the program was starting up again in January, me and a couple of the girls from my drama group started going, and it was totally amazing.

I felt like finally, somebody was actually listening to me, and they actually cared if I was going through a hard time or whatever, and didn't get on my case when I was mad at God or didn't really get what the Bible was saying about “turning the other cheek” or stuff like that. I feel now like I can really trust that God is real and I matter to him, and the Bible is how God talks to us, and Jesus is changing me from the inside out.

Reporter: While La Ronge Alliance's impact is most readily apparent in the immediate geographic area, it is also being felt on an international level. Over the last few years, the church has made a concerted effort to make local people more aware both of the community's multi-ethnic character, such as through an annual cultural awareness festival, and of opportunities and issues all over the world. Paula Turner, now a career missionary teaching in Haiti, remembers the inspiring testimonies she heard

via live video-conferences with Alliance workers in Bolivia, Indonesia and Mozambique, as well as first-hand from missionaries working locally with Native ministries. She says that while the church has always had something of a missions bent, and has “sent out” numerous missionaries who grew up in the church, her own passion for international work was kindled during the church's “revisioning” process, several years after she graduated from high school.

Turner (Jody Nagyl): Having already done some international work through my post-secondary studies, I was really impressed by how excited the church got about outreach, and how intentional they were about teaching kids – and adults – about why missions is so important, and how we can get involved in serving our communities, whether in the place we grew up or wherever in the world we saw a need that we could help meet. There was really a sense amongst the church body that God was calling us to serve Him in whatever way we could, and I think that's where a lot of what you see happening now grew out of – a desire to truly fulfill Christ's command to “go make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.” Jesus told us, “As the Father has sent me, I also send you”, and this church really believes that.

Reporter: Just like the “Dance of the Spirits” that illuminates the night sky, inspiring amazement and even wonder in those watching the spectacle from below, what's happening in La Ronge can also be rightly described as “a beautiful mystery”, transforming the community from within and leaving people wondering where it comes from, and what might happen next....