

A Progress Report of the Frontier Apostolate Movement in the Diocese of Prince George, B.C.

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The Frontier Apostolate Movement, as it exists today, was the creation of the Most Reverend Fergus O'Grady, o.m.i., Bishop of the Prince George Diocese of British Columbia. The idea to capture the story behind it was prompted by an interview with the bishop; I quote:

The idea first came to my mind when I arrived as Vicar Apostolic of Prince Rupert, which later became the Prince George Diocese. The Catholic parents of the Indian territory asked for more Catholic schools. There were only three at the time in the entire Vicariate. The apparent difficulties include the fact that there was no assistance from the British Columbia government. Besides, it was not possible to ask for financial help from the people themselves, because they were faced with the personal problems of pioneers trying to build their own homes. Then the thought came to my mind to simply call for volunteers who would contribute their time and talent, first of all to the construction of three schools. As a result, seventy-five young men contributed their services to the construction of the schools and worked under the able and efficient direction of Reverend Joseph Bogues, o.m.i. Then a call went out for other volunteers to staff the classrooms, that by 1981 included fourteen schools.¹

This paper is limited to a description of the boundaries of this northern diocese and its bishops. It further explores the system of volunteerism that was adapted for the purpose of staffing an alternative educational system. The general thesis of the completed study will attempt to prove the hypothesis that the Frontier Apostolate Movement, over a period of time, has proved itself to be an operable form of volunteerism.

The Diocese of Prince George, shown on the accompanying map, includes the vast area between the fifty-third and fifty-eighth degrees of latitude. The west is bounded by the Pacific Ocean and Alaska and it includes the Queen Charlotte Islands. The eastern boundary is on the 100th

¹ Interview with Bishop O'Grady, July 6, 1985.

meridian. The territory covers an area of 135,000 square miles of mountain, forest and ranch land.² Of a population of 180,000, 12% are Roman Catholics.

The region was first opened to white settlement by the completion, in 1914, of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway line (now the Canadian National Railway) from Prince George to Prince Rupert. For almost forty years the railway provided the main transportation link. The completion of Highway 16 (the Yellowhead Highway) in 1952, though running close to the rail line, encouraged new industry and population growth. The fishing villages and supply stations along the Skeena and Bulkley valleys which had been whistle stops on the railway became towns and cities almost overnight. Despite the changes in transportation and the addition of air travel, the population remained concentrated in a narrow corridor through the southern part of the diocese.³

The history of the Roman Catholic Church in the region parallels secular development. In 1862, when the fur trade was the dominant feature of the economy and the native Indians the majority of the population, the work of evangelization began in this territory which was then part of the Athabasca-Mackenzie Vicariate. As the population increased, other divisions occurred. Consequently, by 1908 the territory was divided once more. The Holy See created the Prefecture Apostolic of Prince Rupert under the Right Reverend Emille Bunoz, o.m.i., that included the present limitations plus the Yukon Territory. In May, 1941, the Pro-Vicariate was limited to the present boundaries.⁴ Until Bishop Bunoz's death in 1945, there was need of only two schools in the diocese. In 1917, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto had staffed the parochial school and built a convent and boarding school in Prince Rupert. The same year, The Sisters of the Child Jesus of Le Puy, France, had begun to staff the Oblate Indian Mission school at Fort St. James on Stuart Lake. In 1922 this school was transferred to the new federal residential building erected at Lejac, B.C.

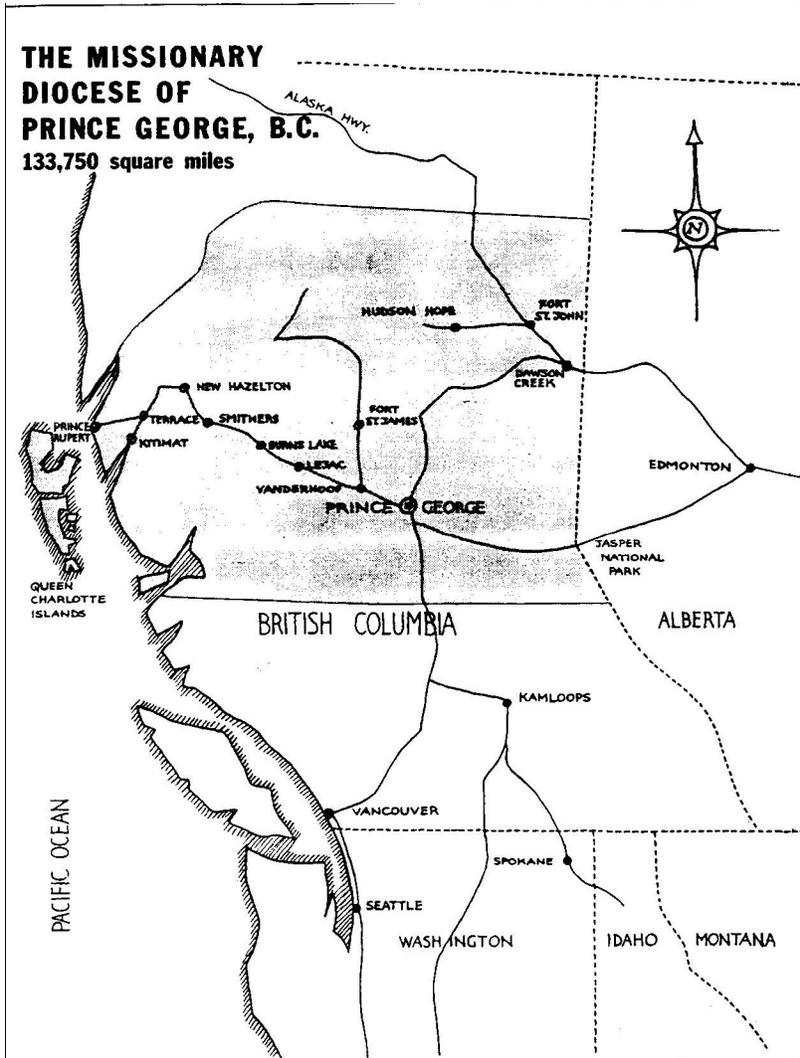
In 1945, Reverend Anthony Jordan, o.m.i., was consecrated bishop of the diocese. After an expansion of industry and a further population increase the bishop collaborated with the Sisters of St. Ann of Victoria, B.C. to establish Sacred Heart School in Prince George. In 1955, Reverend Fergus O'Grady, o.m.i., was appointed bishop when Anthony Jordan was named Archbishop of Edmonton.⁵

² Deschâtelets Archives, Ottawa. He 21011-1035C.

³ Office of Planning, City Hall, Prince George, B.C.

⁴ Deschâtelets Archives, He 21011-1035C.

⁵ *Catholic Directory for British Columbia and the Yukon*, pp. 67, 87.



The appointment of Bishop O'Grady coincided with rapid urbanization at several centres in the diocese. Furthermore, there was an increasing interest on the part of the Carrier Indians to have more education for their children. This particular tribe has its own history of evangelization by the Oblate missionaries. The majority embraced the Catholic faith. It is not surprising, therefore, that the times dictated a need to address their demand for further education.

As one of the first steps to cope with these changes, Bishop O'Grady transferred the ecclesiastical headquarters from Prince Rupert to the more centrally located city of Prince George. At the same time the See was raised from a vicariate to a diocese.

When Bishop O'Grady was appointed to the diocese, included in the duties of his office was his responsibility, as Church leader, to promote the Christian education of youth. The foundations of Catholic education have roots in the very essence of faith and religion. The Church's teachings have experienced evolution from the methodology of the Old and New Testaments, from the doctors of the Church and the contributions of the monasteries.

Furthermore, the means by which the belief in education has maintained itself lies in the directives of the papal encyclicals. For example, in the 1929 Encyclical of Pope Pius XI, he states:

Even though the school does not constitute the only, or even the most important factor in education, it still remains the common ground on which the family, the church and the state must meet in the field of education. From the perfect functioning of the school, depends in great part, the complete formation of the man and therefore the progress or retrogression of civilization itself.⁶

In fact, since education consists essentially in preparing man for what he must be and for what he must do here below, in order to attain the sublime end, for which he was created, it is clear that there can be no true education which is not wholly directed to man's last end.⁷

These strong directives formed the foundation upon which Bishop O'Grady based his plan of approach. The reality of the situation in the Prince George Diocese required the building of schools and a teaching and support staff to maintain them.

From the outset, in attempting a plan of attack to meet the challenge, the Bishop proved himself not only a man of foresight, but also a man of action.

⁶ Pope Pius XI on Christian Education. December 31, 1929. *The papal Encyclical, 1903-1939*. A Consortium Book. (New York: McGrath Publishing, Co.), p. 206.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 354, No. 7.

The basis of his approach was his conviction that the education and Christian training of youth was the most imperative challenge facing the Church. He also had a firm belief that the Catholic community of faith is interdependent upon the parish, the home and the civic neighbourhood. Only by addressing these elements could the Church fulfill its mission.

By 1955, however, the traditional pattern of staffing Catholic schools in British Columbia was changing rapidly. The religious congregations of men and women, who from 1847-1960 dedicated their lives to Catholic education, experienced a sudden decline in membership. Therefore, the projections in 1955 indicated that the Church had to re-examine its position as educator and explore new avenues that would allow it to continue its mandate.⁸

A further complication was created by the opening of this area through improved transportation. Cities like Prince Rupert, Kitimat, Terrace, Smithers, Vanderhoof, Burns Lake, Fort St. James, Prince George, Fort St. John and Dawson Creek attracted immigrants from various European countries including Spain, Portugal, Italy, Holland and Germany. In each of the cities where these newcomers settled, the percentage that were Catholics was sufficient to produce instant parishes. Furthermore, parents desired a Catholic education for their children. Added to this, the changing attitude of the Federal government toward Indian education triggered an immediate need to address the subject of Catholic education for them.⁹

The history of the subsequent construction of thirteen grade schools and one high school in the diocese is beyond the scope of this study. The early volunteers, however, who carried out the actual work, are best described by one of them:

They were rugged individuals with generous hearts, adventurous minds and pioneering spirits, wielding D4's, D7's, bulldozers, cats, trucks and welding torches instead of pens, pencils and typewriters.¹⁰

The whole group, including teaching personnel and support staff, became part of the movement which has become known as The Frontier Apostolate. The work of the clergy, the religious congregations of men and women and lay teachers is not included in this study; their contributions and influence have yet to be written. The name, "Frontier Apostolate," emerged from the geographical area of British Columbia that is frontier country.

A simple statement of what a volunteer is includes a competent individual's free will contribution made for the betterment of society, based

⁸ Projection figures available in the Prince George Chancery Office.

⁹ N. B. Hawthorn, C. S. Belshaw, S. M. Jamieson, *The Indians of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), pp. 320-321.

¹⁰ M. Van Nooten, *Domano Chronicles* (Prince George, B. C., 1965).

on an essential concern for one's neighbour and for which the individual has an emotional attraction.¹¹

A cluster of one hundred nineteen application forms, selected from an available 2000, was analysed in order to determine their volunteer status based on the above definition.¹² The detailed type of application form required of each individual, retained on file and made available, was very comprehensive and nothing essential to this study was omitted. Forty-one items were coded on an 80-column format and the outcome of this procedure indicated the following results:

TABLE 1 - Origins of Volunteers

1. Continents

Africa	Asia	Australia	Europe	N. America	S. America
1	1	2	42	71	2
1%	1%	1.7%	35.4%	59.6%	1.7%

2. Countries

Canada	England	Ireland	N. Zealand	Nigeria	Philippines
50	16	16	1	1	1
42%	14%	14%	1%	1%	1%

Scotland	United States	Australia
9	24	1
7%	20%	1%

3. Provinces of Canada

Alberta	Br. Columbia	Manitoba	N. Brunswick	Nfld.	N.T.
3	7	-	1	1	-
6%	14%	-	1%	1%	-

Nova Scotia	Ontario	P.E.I.	Quebec	Saskatchewan
1	31	1	4	1
1%	62%	1%	3%	1%

Europe and North America provided the highest number of volunteers. Canada led the countries, followed by the United States and then the British Isles. Within Canada, the province of Ontario indicated the highest percentage. The sources for this, one might think, represent centres in the province where established Catholic educational institutions existed. This, however, is not the case. In the United States, for instance, not one of the twenty-four states included contributed more than three applicants. In Ontario, as well, the volunteers were from various parts of the province.

The age groups among those tested ranged over a large number of years:

¹¹ Routh A. Thomas, *Volunteer and Community Agencies*. (Springfield, Ill., U.S.A.: Charles C. Thomas Publishing, 1972), pp. 3, 4.

¹² Frontier Apostolate Application Form, Chancery Office, Prince George, B.C.

Table II – Ages of Volunteers

16 - 20 years	11 - 9%
21 - 30 years	86 - 72%
31 - 40 years	13 - 11%
40 - 60 years	9 - 8%

The work experience factor ranged between one to fifteen years and all but one were employed at the time of their commitment. At this particular period of time (1955-1978) there was fair job security. As the teachers, especially, were from Catholic institutions, the decision to make a two-year contract for missionary purposes pretty well assured the individual of a job on return.

The selected volunteers were from 87 different cities of the world. There is no evidence that any one city promoted the movement. Because of the nature of the project not only teachers, but also persons from all walks of life with skills relevant to the need, could apply. The selection offered 33 different occupations, including janitors, electricians, bus drivers, plumbers and house parents. While the process was open to all denominations, provided the individuals complied with the philosophy and directives in the guide book *The Call to Service*, the response was overwhelmingly Catholic. When an individual wrote for information to the diocese, along with an application form the guide book was included. This pamphlet states the purpose of the movement, its geographical location and the areas to be filled. It explains in detail the required life style, the program and the general requirements. A two-year commitment is recommended but the individual is free to make a choice of more or less time. A two-thirds majority chose two years, while one-third signed for one year. The cluster selected indicated 33% men and 67% women had applied.

The following table indicates the classification status of the group tested.

TABLE III – Status of Volunteers

Brother	1	1 %
Divorced	1	1%
Married	38	32%
Nun	6	5%
Separated	1	1%
Single	68	57%
Widowed	4	3%

Married couples with children were accommodated. In this specific group thirteen children accompanied their parents. Members of religious congregations could also apply. Marital status was two-thirds single to one-third married. Twenty-four had spent two to four years in a seminary and ten had spent time in a novitiate.

Academically, a high number qualified with a college or university education. Their professional certificates were evaluated and verified by the Department of Education for the province.

It is revealing how individuals first discovered information regarding the movement.

TABLE IV– Knowledge of the Movement through:

Advertisement	31	26%
Bishop O'Grady	8	7%
Nun	3	2%
Other volunteers	24	20%
Priest	19	16%
Religious Organization	2	2%
Speaker	2	2%
Vatican Council	1	1%
Word of Mouth	29	24%

As our society knows “it pays to advertise.” In this instance, as well, it ranked as the highest means of obtaining volunteers. The high percentage responding “other volunteers” testified to the project’s credibility, as does, also, “word of mouth.”

In the screening of possible social problems, only one had a physical disability and three had had treatment for alcoholism. A high percentage had experienced travel through the military, with a lesser number having travelled for educational and/or business purposes. Thirty-one different interests in non-teaching areas emerged, as well as a variety of twenty-six hobbies.

The general theme that ran through the replies to the query “Why did you apply?” is a desire to contribute to a need of the Church in new territory through offering a personal contribution for favours received. The benefits the individual hoped to accrue from the experience were fellowship with other Christians, growth in spiritual maturity and the opportunity to help build a Christian community.

In comparison with the definition of volunteerism previously stated, the data accumulated on this sample places the Frontier Apostle on a high level of commitment to service.

Of twenty-five volunteers interviewed, the factors that gave them the most concern were:

- fears of the unknown
- diversity of geographical areas from which they came
- cultural differences among themselves and with those with whom they worked
- for teachers, the implementation of a curriculum with which they were not familiar

– living a new life style.¹³

Despite these difficulties, the subjects interviewed considered these problems as challenges which they had committed themselves to accept.

The numbers who apply as Frontier Apostles far exceed the demand (approximately 200 per year). This indicates that volunteerism is a vital force within the Church. Other groups in the diocese, including the clergy, supportive members of religious congregations and salaried lay teachers, still contribute to the framework of the school. Nevertheless, the added element of the Frontier Apostolate Movement makes the whole project possible.

TABLE V - Number of Frontier Apostles Who Came to the Diocese
1981-1985

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Number</u>	<u>Teachers</u>	<u>Other Personnel</u>	<u>Attrition</u>
1981	47	27	20	3
1982	50	28	22	3
1983	55	25	30	4
1984	73	42	31	2
1985	47*	24	23	1

* Lower numbers in 1985 occurred because of the extended commitment of some in 1984.

This table, which covers the last five years, indicates that even after thirty years (1955-1985) there is a steady recruitment which meets the need. The very low attrition rate is evidence of its stability.¹⁴

Further study of the movement will include:

- * The influence of the Frontier Apostles who have married and continue to work in the system.
- * A profile of individual apostles who have made an outstanding contribution to education in the area.
- * The means to upgrade teachers and non-teachers in order to make the movement a Canadian societal achievement.
- * Future directions for the Apostolate.

¹³ Interviews with Frontier Apostles, Sept.-Nov., 1985.

¹⁴ Frontier Apostolate Office, Chancery, Prince George, B.C.