

Cariboo Presbyterian House Church Mission

Picture a vast landscape of mountains and valleys - dense forest and grassy meadows - thousands of freshwater lakes and rivers. It is the Cariboo-Chilcoltin, a huge geographic region in central British Columbia, covering roughly a fifth of the province. The region stretches from the Cariboo and Columbia Mountains in the east to the Pacific Ocean in the west, with a large plateau area in between. In this beautiful yet challenging Canadian setting, the Presbyterian Church has established an inspiring ministry of housechurches, started by Reverend Dave Webber.

The Cariboo-Chilcoltin is homeland to its first peoples - the Salish, Chilcoltin and Dené. Today's population of all peoples is sparse but stable – roughly 100,000. There are three large towns, three major highways and a network of logging back-roads throughout.

Family livelihoods are rooted mostly in ranching, forestry and more recently, tourism. Drought, marketing difficulties, controversial trade agreements, and fluctuating currency values have collectively challenged the economy, leaving unemployment high and citizens struggling to make ends meet. Poverty is major and devastating in the First Nations' communities. And unlike prairie landscapes where churches dot the landscape, the Cariboo-Chilcoltin is mostly churchless.

Reverend Dave came to know both God and the Cariboo-Chilcoltin as an adult. When he was a boy in the 50s in small-town BC near the U.S. border, there was no church. His focussed search for God began around age 27 when he was struck with serious medical problems. By age 29, lymphoma cancer had progressed to stage-four – a death sentence at the time. But a small-group bible study, many prayers and the Lord's mercy brought about a miraculous healing and a call to the ministry.

In younger years Dave didn't have a church to learn from and lean on. In later years, he questioned the church, "Where were you when I needed you? I really needed you when I was 5, when my family busted apart. I really needed you when I was 12, when my community blew apart because the sawmill died and people were left jobless." At theological school Dave realized his question was a rural question. After seminary he began to ask "how can the church be present and viable in our rural and remote areas?"

In the 1980s Dave and his wife Linda began to pray and dream about being apostles to remote communities and to practice 'church' in non-traditional ways. In time, a vision for building a faith community through *housechurches* was born. The vision resembled customs in the first century, where rural families and neighbours gathered to worship in homes, not in centres. The vision saw people being the 'hands and feet' of Jesus in their immediate and surrounding communities. The vision was a call to remote rural areas to build God's community in family homes.

At first they were told by their mother church that the housechurch idea was nice, but not viable. The response was frustrating, but admittedly, there were obstacles and unknowns. Housechurches of different kinds had taken root in the hippy era of the 1960s and 70s, but by the late 80s there were only remnants around and only a few in Canada. Not many helpful examples existed to draw upon.

While ministering in their first parish, Dave and Linda waited and held tight to their passion and vision, wondering and watching to see what God was going to do. And then, others who shared their passion for rural ministry in remote areas came into their lives; they too, caught hold of the housechurch vision.

The Cariboo-Chilcoltin region was identified as a place with few churches and strong need. A proposal was written and submitted to the National Church. The answer came back, "It's an exciting idea, but there's no money." So they took the proposal to the local presbytery responsible for the Cariboo-Chilcoltin; the folks there saw it as a calling of God, and took it to the Synod of B.C. There, the proposal received approval – but still, there were no funds. So they went back and asked the congregations. And within six months, money for six months' ministry came in. In all, it took about a year. It was a jigsaw of people and circumstances coming together.

In 1989, Dave and Linda moved to the Chilcoltin and established the first housechurch in their own home in the hamlet of Lac la Hache. Many miles of back-roads were travelled as they sought interest. Mostly, the new housechurches developed one at a time. And mostly, they came together, quite apart from Dave and Linda trying to orchestrate them. They would seek to find a place to plant a house in one area and would get a call from a completely different area to come and start one up. It's still happening.

Dave knew himself to be a 'super-organizer'. It was a big adjustment for him when God took what Dave thought was a gift and 'blew it out of the water'. Everything was messy and disorganized. As he bounced down roads to visit different housechurches, he learned to say for each place.... "Lord, this group of people is yours. You are forming them. I am a part of them. I'm excited for that. You steer it. I don't want to steer it."

So the housechurch vision began to unfold. And with it, challenges emerged. The 'house' concept wasn't a problem, but quickly they found that an interdenominational ministry was needed – one that could meet the needs of the broad faith group that characterized the region. Initially they had envisioned a Presbyterian congregation with elders in each house, plus a travelling/teaching elder who would go from house to house to oversee the preaching; the Elders would be the church's administrative umbrella. But in the Cariboo-Chilcoltin, some Elders didn't want to be Presbyterian. As Dave put it, "Maybe Grandma was an Anglican; you can't sell Grandma's silver and you can't sell her tradition."

And so, structure and ideas started to shift. Sometimes there was big change; sometimes little. For a while they thought a house mentor could replace the Elder. But that didn't really work either because some houses developed several mentors and others, none. As time passed, more mature folks pulled alongside others and a flexible hybrid of Elders and mentors evolved. Today, the Elders, though not in every house, make up the administrative body (the Session).

The Lord provided Dave and Linda with much-needed help. A ministry team of ordained and trained lay missionaries eventually formed to provide teaching and preaching; the house mentors are involved under the ministry team's oversight. John Wymniga and Shannon Bell-Wyminga work especially with First Nations people in the North Chilcoltin. Charles McNeil works with a wide variety of ministries out of

Lac La Hache, most importantly with mentoring elders and lay ministers. Bruce Wilcox and Ginny Alexander are lay ministers working in the South Cariboo.

Over the years, five-year regional work plans were developed with input from each of the housechurches. These too, underwent change. Fortunately, with no church real-estate or carpeting to worry or fight about, people were flexible and open to change.

Originally, they thought the size of a housechurch would max out around 15 members; but some houses ended up with 45 and another with 6 – each and all functioning perfectly well. Liturgically, every house today is different, ranging from Plymouth Bretheren to Roman Catholic and everything in between. Church members don't necessarily gather on Sunday, some might gather Monday; or Tuesday; or Thursday; or whatever works. Seasonal flows of calving, harvest and weather dictate the timing of church 'seasons' and other get-togethers. Throughout it all, people are happily getting along. Collectively, the 'houses' are held together by the travelling ministry team and a newsletter.

One part of Dave and Linda's original vision did not change. All the marks of the church are in each house, including a focus on Jesus, praise, worship, scripture study and gathering around the sacraments. A typical house gathering lasts up to three hours. Everybody participates. They struggle to leave.

The spiritual growth in each house church has proven wonderful. Dave finds himself mostly functioning as teacher and equipper, and then sitting back to watch as the ministry unfolds around him. He says, "We do almost nothing intentionally to create this spiritual growth. It just happens."

Biblical literacy is huge. People are praying and supporting each other. And folks in every house are grabbing hold of the fact that they are the community of Christ within their community – the hands and feet of Jesus to those around them. Some are tutoring children with reading difficulties in a local school. Others support hot lunch programs. Children and teen ministries are forming. A women's support group gathers to knit clothing for community Christmas hampers. People are visiting the sick. Fundraisers are organized with profits shared where needed. The activities are growing and spreading. And woven throughout, is a dynamic mix of music and fun. The people are being equipped for ministry in their neighbourhoods and in the world.

In Lac La Hache, the housechurch ministry inherited the United Church building which they developed as a resource and office centre. It also houses *The Galilean Coffee House* that operates the second Friday of each month. People who wouldn't normally come to church come to the coffee house. The performers are Christians singing lots of different kinds of music, not always religious. The Gospel is lovingly presented through interpretations of secular songs and favourite hymns that are sung with different arrangements. It has become a central gathering place for people to relax and enjoy in community.

In the northern Chilcoltin, a housechurch is reaching out to the people from the Nazko First Nation. Gentleness, love and intensive theological reflection undergird everything. A healing community is developing to address the scars of residential schools and abuses. A children's program is in place. There have been some baptisms.

God's vision for a housechurch ministry is working in the rural Cariboo-Chilcoltin. A community of faith is growing. The Lord's people are studying the Word. They are praying. And wounded and broken people are being healed in the name of Christ.

Years earlier Dave challenged God "where were you, when I needed you? How can your church be present and viable in rural areas now?" Now, over 20 years later, that challenge has been answered in ways that he could not ever imagined.

For more information about the *Cariboo Presbyterian House Church Mission*, visit <http://www.cariboopresbyterianchurch.bc.ca>.

By Colleen Rickard, based on conversations with Rev. Dave Webber. April 2010.