

Bamboo church has no water, electricity

By Pat Schiefen
The Goodland Star-News
Want a challenge? Want to help people? Imagine leading a church on a tropical island where the people speak no English, have no running water and no electricity. Father Thomas Rowland, an Anglican priest of the Province of Melanesia, but originally from Oklahoma, has lived in that world for eight years. Rowland was in Goodland Sunday speaking to the congregation of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, 13th and Center. Melanesia is in the South Pacific, three-fourths of the way from Hawaii to Australia, he said. It comprises 80 islands, 65 of which are inhabited. Earthquakes shake the ground every so often, as the islands are volcanic.

The only familiar names are from the World War II battles of Guadalcanal and the Solomon Islands, but Melanesia includes New Guinea, Fiji, the Solomon Island and New Hebrides (Vanuatu), where he lives, said Rowland. The villages tend to be isolated in these mountainous islands, which have only narrow coastal plains. The islands were "discovered" in 1521 by Ferdinand Magellan, the Portuguese explorer. Melanesia is home to one-fourth of the world's languages, Rowland said, with people of each village having different speech and physical characteristics. Those in one village will be light skinned and the next dark skinned and the two speak two different languages. The islands are some of the poorest countries in the world, he said, with literacy rates of 20 to 50 percent. Most of the people live off the land as subsistence farmers or fishers. Their diets tend to be monotonous. Medical care is not common. The U.S. does not give any aid to the Solomon Islands, Rowland said. What they get comes from Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Japan and the European Union.

Churches and schools are built of bamboo p. In more populated areas, he said, some buildings are built out of concrete. There are enough earthquakes that deaths have been caused from concrete buildings collapsing. The curriculum in the schools is not much different from anywhere else, Rowland said, but students use chalk and slates. In two to three years, half of the students will be able to go to high school, he said. The natives were cannibals and head hunters originally, the missionary said. Isolated cannibalism continued into the 1990s, said Rowland. Christianity has helped the people develop a common language. Presbyterian and Congregationalists evangelized Polynesia, which includes Hawaii, while Anglicans (churches related to the Church of England, including the



Father Thomas Rowland, an Anglican priest, (right) stands in front of the altar in his church, built of bamboo on the island of Vanuatu in the Diocese of Melanesia.



Priest enthusiastic about call

Father Thomas Rowland, originally from Altus, Okla., is enthusiastic about his call to minister to villagers on the island of Vanuatu in Melanesia. He said he joined an urban Episcopalian monastic group, the Order of the Holy Family, in Denver after he graduated from high school. He was known as Brother Boniface. The group worked with young street people in Denver, then later moved to Santa Fe, N.M. Rowland said he went to teach in Tonga, an island by Fiji in the Pacific, and got his bachelor's degree at the University of Tonga. He joined the Peace Corps and taught for five years in Romania, in Eastern Europe. After he returned to the U.S., Rowland said, he wrote to many places, including the Diocese of Melanesia, with an offer to come and teach and the desire to become a priest. After attending the Anglican Theological Seminary of the Solomon Islands, he was ordained a deacon in 2002 and a priest in 2003.

Rowland lives in a bamboo hut with no electricity and running water. "I hire a local boy to bring water so I can take a bath twice a week," Rowland said, "whether I need it or not." On Sunday, he said, he wears a tropical version of clerical garb: short black pants with an open shirt and a cross. His cross is made of turtle shell inlaid with mother of pearl with a host above a chalice and the Greek letters alpha and omega, traditional Christian symbols. Rowland said he had been in Melanesia for eight years and the only English spoken was broken, or pigeon, English, combined with native dialects. Each village on the island has its own language. "It took awhile for my English to come back," Rowland said. "Pigeon English came back first." The priest is enthusiastic about his work on the island of Vanuatu and will return in February. "God led me there," said Rowland.

Episcopal Church in the U.S.) worked in the rest of Melanesia. In the areas where the Anglican Church worked, Rowland said, they did not require the natives to put on clothing and allowed them to keep their culture and dancing. He said he works in a village on the island of Vanuatu, which was colonized by both the English and the French. In colonial times, he said, there were two sets of schools, hospitals and police. The people got self government in 1976 and independence in 1978. Rowland is the priest for a village on Vanuatu. He says Mass and has an unofficial medical aid station, where he gives out aspirin and acetaminophen. The Anglican mission in the islands goes back more than 150 years, Rowland said. George

Augustus Selwyn became the Anglican bishop of New Zealand in 1841, said Rowland, and started the Melanesian Mission in 1849. John Coleridge Patteson became the first Bishop of Melanesia in 1861. The martyrdom of Bishop Patteson prompted England to end slavery in areas it controlled on Sept. 20, 1871. Up until that time, said Rowland, the islands were raided for slaves to work in the sugar cane fields in Queensland, Australia. Patteson went to an island that had been raided and was killed because the people thought he was a slaver. There are more Anglican monks and nuns in Melanesia than anywhere else in the world, Rowland said. Orders include the Melanesian Brotherhood, the Sisters of the Church, the Sisters of Melanesia

and the Society of St. Francis. There is a waiting list of two to four years to enter, he said. In 1999, he said, heathenism erupted in the Solomon Islands, using the term to describe a return to ethnic violence and intolerance. People from surrounding areas who came in to work were forced to leave by natives. This caused the fall of the government. The government was in such a turmoil that schools and hospitals closed, Rowland said. Warlords and ethnic militias were killing each other. A member of the Melanesian Brotherhood, Brother Nathaniel, in February 2003 thought he should go talk to Harold Kecki, a warlord on the Solomon Islands. Kecki tortured him for three days and killed him. In April, Rowland said, six broth-

ers went to Kecki to get Nathaniel's body. Kecki thought they were government spies and tortured and killed them, too. The death of the brothers led the people to want to stop the violence and the Prime Minister Sir Allen Kemakeza asked Australia for troops to re-establish law and order. An Australian-led multinational force arrived in July. Instead of bodyguards, Rowland said, the prime minister has Brothers of Melanesia with their walking sticks and sisters with veils accompany him. The brothers have helped end the violence and have helped to disarm the ethnic militias. For the Church of Melanesia's help to end the violence in the Solomon Islands, the Queen of England knighted the archbishop of Melanesia, the Rt. Rev. Sir Ellison Pogo.

corrections

A story about Sherman County raises in the Friday, Jan. 13, *Goodland Star-News*, incorrectly reported the pay rate for Public Works Manager Curt Way as \$53,000. His present salary is \$50,264, and the new salary this year will be \$52,000. This was a reporting error.

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