



# Stories in stone

How a hand-built stone church shaped a community and culture

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Old churches don't die all that often.

Sure, they can be converted into rec halls or museums, or cut up and sold as gothic condos for urbanites. The end result may hardly be recognizable as a church. But seldom are they totally erased from the earth.

So it was remarkable when, with one week's notice at the end of August, the hamlet of Kugaaruk, Nunavut, tore down a hand-built stone church on the shores of Pelly Bay that had been a symbol of the community for 80 years.

Even so, for the people of Kugaaruk, its demolition did not come entirely as a surprise. For decades, the church had sat largely unused, its rough stone masonry crumbling more and more with the freeze and thaw of each northern winter. For years, the hamlet had worried that someday, a child would make their way inside the plywood barrier that propped up its walls and be seriously injured.





Rubble is all that remains of Kugaaruk's stone church. (John Last/CBC)

But churches are always more than just buildings. Inside those walls, generations of Inuit celebrated Christmas, were baptized and married, and mourned the passing of their relatives. It was Inuit hands which built this church, elders now passed who formed its walls from uncut stones gathered from the land.

In fact, this church was more than a collection of memories, or even a monument to the ingenuity of Inuit. For the hamlet of Kugaaruk, it was in many ways its original reason for being — the seed from which a northern community grew.

And today, Kugaaruk is still growing — fast. It has a brand new school, new hamlet office, new fire hall, new housing. It's moving forward to the future, and quickly.

So when an old church dies in a place like Kugaaruk, it's worth taking notice, and listening to the stories that people will tell.





Father Franz Van De Velde, Kugaaruk's longest-serving priest, shares tea with Elizabeth Arnakajak and Agnet Nullut in 1938. (Submitted by Diocese of Churchill-Hudson Bay)

## I. Friendship & enmity

This fall, it's been unseasonably warm in Kugaaruk. Hunters aren't complaining.

Boats zip out into the bay each morning in pursuit of narwhal. On a tour of the community, Katherina Qirngnuq, the deputy mayor, points to the places in the Kugaaruk river where Inuit, for centuries, have piled stones to make weirs and trap the numerous Arctic char that swim its waters.

Kugaaruk is known for having the tastiest char in Nunavut, and for its good whale and seal hunting as well. Even caribou can be hunted here, in the sprawling tundra to the east of town and along the mountains that shelter the community on either side of the river.

It seems like the perfect place to settle, which is in fact what Inuit told Father Pierre Henry, the first priest to come to Kugaaruk.



The Kugaaruk River in fall. Its shallow, stony waters are perfect for building weirs to trap char. (John Last/CBC)

Levi Illuitok's father, Paulie Kutsiutikku, was the man who made the 200-kilometre trek to Naujaat (then called Repulse Bay) in 1935 to collect the priest.

"On their way back, as spring came, the ice started melting pretty quickly and became dangerous to cross," Illuitok explained in Inuktitut. "So the priest wanted to set up base where they had stopped to observe the ice.

"But my father wanted to keep going," he said. "He took him to what is now known as Kugaaruk, because it had plenty of wildlife and fish."

What had attracted the priest to Kugaaruk was a decades-long battle between Anglican and Catholic missionaries for the souls of Inuit. In a 2002 article for the journal *Inuit Studies*, Cornelius Remie and Jarich Oosten examine Church records to show how many early Arctic Catholic missions were established to contain the westward spread of Anglicanism, which had gained a foothold in the eastern Arctic.





Levi Illuitok crafts a harpoon tip in his Kugaaruk home. His father brought the first priest to Kugaaruk.  
(John Last/CBC)

But Kugaaruk's priest was met by an already-growing Catholic community. Even though mission records suggest the first Inuit conversions happened as late as 1917, there were already 36 Catholics in Arviligjuaq, the region of Kugaaruk, when the mission was founded in 1935.

In fact, Remie and Oosten write, the mission at Kugaaruk was started at the invitation of Inuit Catholics, led by the Netsilingmiut elder Qaqsuvik, one of the first Christians of Pelly Bay.

This kind of invitation was essential because, as hearty as northern missionaries could be in the 1930s, they were unlikely to survive long without the support of locals.

When Levi's father brought Father Henry to Kugaaruk, he helped build him an igloo, and provided him with a seal oil lamp to keep warm and melt ice to make water.

"My family stayed with him to look after him, and they would hunt and fish for him and his dogs," said Illuitok.

"And when summer came, they started constructing the foundation of the stone church."



An image of the stone church sometime after 1944. A number of stone outbuildings were also constructed as the mission grew. Only the small cottage, front left, remains standing. (Submitted by the Diocese of Churchill-Hudson Bay)



## II. Stones & mortar

There is a reason stone buildings are unusual in the North. Extreme temperature changes wreak havoc on the delicate mortar that holds stones together in construction.

Bobby Watt, a professional stonemason with 50 years experience restoring some of Canada's most iconic buildings, laughs when asked what he'd say to someone trying to build one in the Arctic today, even with modern technology at their disposal.

"I would say ... don't even attempt it," he says.

The fact the church was built — and several smaller stone outbuildings as well — is all the more impressive as neither Father Henry nor his flock had the tools for cutting stone, elders say, meaning its foundation, walls and steeple were all constructed with found stones.



Elder Celine Ningark in her Kugaaruk home. (John Last/CBC)

“The rocks had to basically be the same size, so the men had to look everywhere to find them ... and haul them back to the site by dogsled,” said Celine Ningark, an elder, in Inuktitut.

“The men worked extremely hard,” said Sidonie Nirlungayuq, another elder, in Inuktitut. “They had to haul heavy rocks ... without equipment, using only manpower.”

“I’m sure it got even more difficult as the structure became higher,” she said. “They had to use flat stones to make the roof, and make it stable so they could put a steeple on top.”

Binding the raw field stones was mortar made from mud and seal oil. Inside, the walls were lined with skins and newspapers for insulation, while the exterior was packed with snow in winter as an additional barrier against the Arctic chill.



In 1951, a bell was brought up to the steeple on a qamutik, or sled.



Even so, “it wasn’t very warm inside,” said Nirlungayuq, who remembers worshipping there into her adulthood. Stone construction is, after all, impractical in the Arctic, a fact Father Henry quickly came to terms with. Within a year, his records show, he had taken up a semi-nomadic life of his own, preaching at camps and spending winter months fishing along the rivers.

As the church emerged over four long years of construction, the mission grew alongside it. In 1938, Father Henry was joined by Franz Van De Velde, a Flemish priest who would come to be known for his hunting skills and feats of strength, and spend 30 years in the community.

By 1953, the mission had grown to include a water tower, greenhouse, blubber shed, cottage, and library, mostly built in stone — and most now gone today.



A stone cross is perched on a hill above the old cemetery. (John Last/CBC)



### III. Transformation & destruction

The long construction of the church wrought a transformation in Arviligjuaq. Of course, the presence of the missionaries meant more and more baptisms, which the priests said ensured babies would become guardian spirits if they met an early death.

Another consequence was the development of uniquely Inuit Christian ceremonies, with many conversions and baptisms taking place without the presence of a priest at all. Bernard Irqugaqtuq, a Netsilik Inuk and a longtime friend and guide of Father Van De Velde, wrote in his autobiography of a ceremony near Naujaat where Inuit shared in eating the taboo lung and heart of caribou as a symbol of their conversion to Christianity.

Throughout this early period, Remie and Oosten write, Catholic missionaries like Father Van De Velde appear to have been more tolerant of Inuit spiritual practices than their Anglican counterparts to the east. Their main concern, at least in their own writings from the period, was not the presence of Inuit modes of worship but the competition posed by Anglican missions, whose prayer books they were instructed to seize and burn.

The mission at Kugaaruk took this cause seriously. Records show that Father Henry sometimes travelled hundreds of kilometres to win back individual Catholics who had considered turning to the Anglican faith.



Stone inuksuit stand on a hill overlooking the church site. (John Last/CBC)

But this obsession with the spread of Anglicanism did not mean the erasure of Inuit spiritual practices was not part of the missionaries' aim.

"Inuit had their own beliefs, own laws, and their own spiritual people that we call *angakkuq* [shamans]," explained Christian Naalungiaq, an elder who was baptized by Father Van De Velde not far from Kugaaruk in 1940. "When called upon they would heal the sick. They also were used to find out where the animals might be, and they would go into trances and try to appease the animal gods, so to speak."

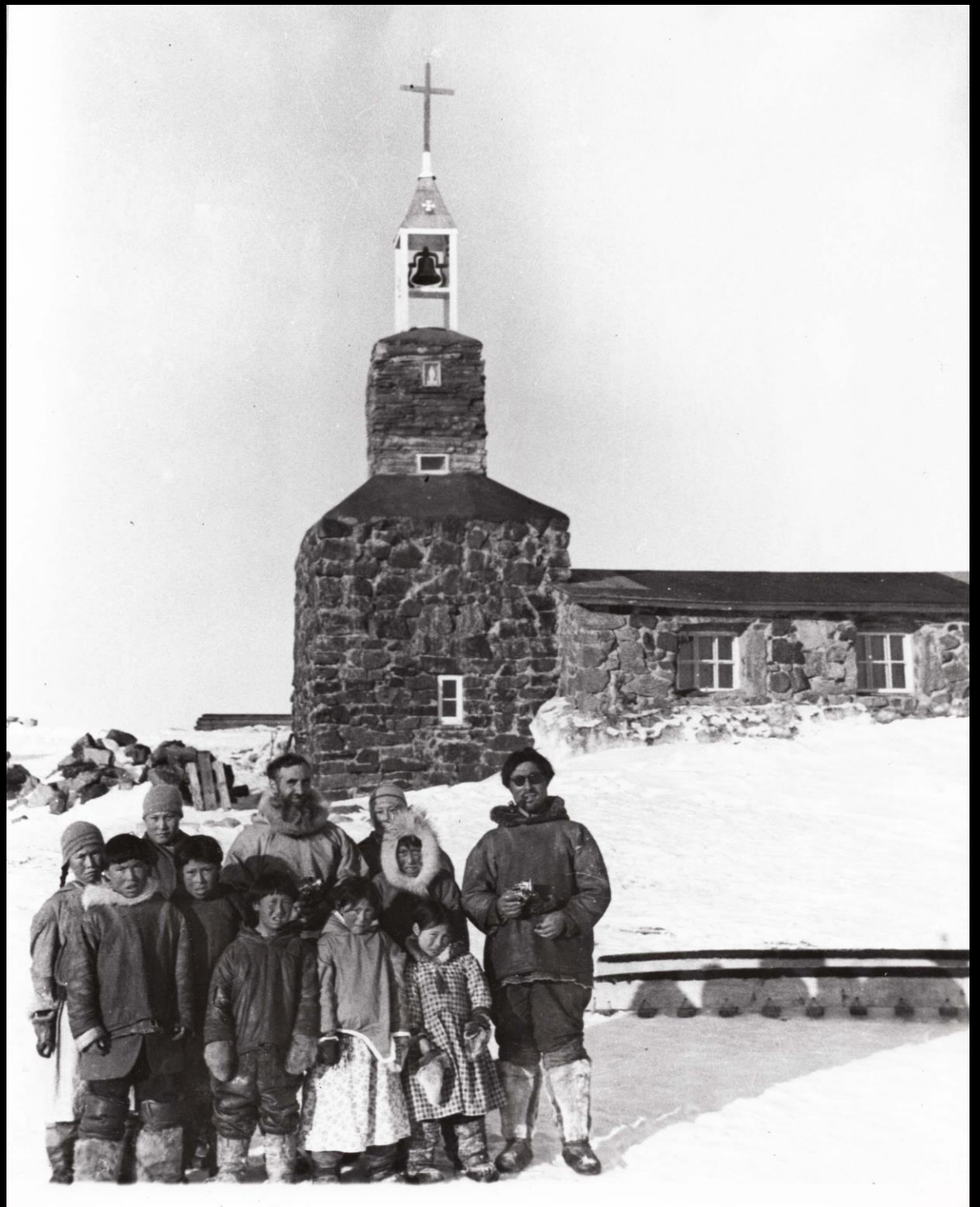
But "when the priests came, they forced the *angakkuq* to get rid of their inherited gifts ... and let go of all the powers," said Naalungiaq, in Inuktitut.

"The priests would preach to [Inuit] about shamanism being evil, and of the devil and not of God," said Illuitok, the elder whose father brought the priest to Kugaaruk. "They persistently encouraged them to abandon their shamanistic beliefs and rituals, and turn to Christianity."

The result was a growing Christian community in Arviligjuaq. The first Christmas in 1935 was attended by 40 people, records show. At the second, there were 60.



Father Van De Velde poses with the family of Simon Inuksak in front of the church in 1957. (Submitted by the Diocese of Churchill-Hudson Bay)



Nirlungayuq, the elder, remembers stories of those first Christmases.

“They would build a huge igloo with four rooms ... and people would have church service in it before the church was built,” she said.

“There was probably less than 100 people here permanently at the time when people gathered here for celebrations,” she said. “After Christmas, people would head back to their own camps.”

By 1946, five years after the church was completed, nearly 100 people were regularly in attendance. Christmas in Kugaaruk became the main occasion for extended family to gather and share stories, Naalungiaq, the elder, explained. It was the “beginning of the end for ... living in isolated camps,” he said.

Over time, the mission developed other enticements to stay in town. During construction, the priests paid for labour in the form of tobacco and tea, and operated a general store, which became an important point of contact with the rest of Canada. They encouraged commercial trapping, which had not been common in Arviligjuaq, selling the furs south to support their operations, and those willing to travel to Naujaat and collect supplies were paid in Hudson Bay Company credits.

The increased contact with outside communities brought several outbreaks of flu to the community. With traditional medicine discouraged, the mission became a crucial source of medical care.

For most of the 1950s and '60s, the mission was, effectively, hamlet office, health centre and church rolled into one. It wasn't until the late 1960s, when Canadian sovereignty replaced conversion as the main motivation for the presence of qallunaat in the Arctic, that the mission waned in importance.



A crucifix on the wall of Kugaaruk's new church. (John Last/CBC)



## IV. Past & future

Today, the nearby cemetery and a pile of rubble are the only indications that this was once the hub of Kugaaruk's commercial and spiritual life.

Most people describe their reaction to the demolition of the stone church the same: "mixed feelings."

"It was an icon, for sure, a very valuable piece of building," said Katherina Qirngnuq, the deputy mayor. "The elders were not happy that it had to be torn down."

"For myself, it's a mixed emotion," she said. "I'm kind of sad to see it go, because there's a history in it. And that's where people were baptized, received their confirmation and ... were married."

"Everybody felt it when it was going down," said Teddy Apsaktuan, the mayor. "It's been there for a long time."



Construction vehicles work at clearing up the old church site. (John Last/CBC)

But the stone church has been little more than a symbol for some time. A new church was built to replace it as early as 1960. From 1990, when it was donated to the hamlet, to when it was boarded up in the 2000s, it acted as a local museum.

The hamlet has received funding at least once before, from the territorial government in 1993, to restore the church. But since then, it's been unable to find the necessary funding. Nunavut's Heritage department did not respond to requests for comment.

Bobby Watt, the master stonemason who has worked on dozens of heritage projects, estimated repairing a structure like Kugaaruk's stone church would cost around half a million dollars. With its uncut stones and locally-sourced mortar, the work would be extremely delicate, and would need to be done in a single season, to prevent the wear caused by freezing and thawing.

"It's like balancing bowling balls," Watt said. "Quite frankly, the fact that it lasted 50 years astounds me."





Stones from the old church lie in a heap in front of the stone cottage built for the priest. It's not clear yet what will happen to the smaller structure, which is also in need of restoration. (John Last/CBC)



The Catholic Diocese of Churchill-Hudson Bay, which is responsible for Kugaaruk, only learned of the demolition in its aftermath, Rev. Anthony Krótki, its bishop, explained. But it is unlikely that the Catholic Church could have come to its rescue.

Parishes “sink or swim” on their own ability to generate revenue, explained Rev. Paul-Andre Durocher, bishop of Gatineau and an expert on the decommissioning of churches.

“Generally money doesn’t move around in the Catholic Church,” he said. “That’s kind of the reality. Each diocese ... is completely independent from another diocese.”

Where congregations do raise funds for other dioceses, as through the Catholic Missions in Canada program, the focus is usually on investing not in buildings, but in people, through food distributions and new programming, Durocher said.



Inuit art adorns the pulpit crafted by Nirlungayuq in Kugaaruk's new church. The qulliq in front is lit when the gospel is read. (John Last/CBC)

Nowadays, in Kugaaruk, mass is held up the road from the old stone church in a large and comfortable modern building. There is no resident priest in Kugaaruk anymore. Instead, baptisms, communions, and funerals are handled by a catechist, Zachary Oogark.

Oogark said the hamlet had been debating for years about whether to demolish the church. When the decision was finally made, there was little he could do.

“I didn’t really want to see it demolished,” he said, “but as it became more unstable and dangerous to children ... and couldn’t be restored due to lack of funds, we as the church decided to just go along with it, because we had no other option.”

Some things about Kugaaruk’s Christian life haven’t changed. Christmas masses still pack the church, Oogark said, and there’s a fusion of Inuit and Catholic tradition that continues as well. A qulliq is lit when the gospel is read, and the altar, crafted by Nirlungayuq, the elder, is decorated with Inuit imagery and draped in sealskin.



The new church's steeple silhouetted by the sunset. (John Last/CBC)



But around the church, Kugaaruk is changing. Its population is quietly booming, and in fall, so much building is underway that the whole town looks like a construction site. Apsaktuan, the mayor, suggests the demolition of the church has freed up valuable space in town that could be used for more housing, which the hamlet, like many other Nunavut communities, is desperately short of.

Inevitably, the place of the Church is changing too. Like elsewhere around the world, Kugaaruk's residents are "not as dedicated as they once were to the church," Oogark says.

That's not really a surprise. There was once a time when Kugaaruk's stone mission was the de facto local government. It's a potent symbol that not long before the church was demolished, a new and beautiful hamlet office and community hall was built.

In late September, it's a bustling place. Elder councillors and young people employed by the hamlet mingle in its reception area. Friends chat in front of display cases housing artefacts from Kugaaruk's past.

Someday, the deputy mayor tells me, the church's own artefacts could be housed alongside these ones — another era, preserved in glass, in the modern heart of Kugaaruk.

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Inuktitut interviews and translation by Sarah Leonardis | Written by John Last | Lead Image: Kugaaruk's stone church in 1982 (N.W.T. Archives/Nicholas Tuele Collection/N-2013-008-0016)