



Building Friendships Together in Alaska

Remote village churches and regional conferences are forming partnerships to meet the challenges of life in the far north.

IAN WRISLEY

They always laughed when he said it, but he kept asking. “So, when are you coming to Alaska?”

When Rodney Sawyer became the field director for Alaska in 2002, he joined the Council of Superintendents, and he’s been inviting them to come to Alaska ever since. Five years later, they came, meeting at Alaska Christian College in Soldotna. There they saw and heard firsthand some of the needs in western, or “bush,” Alaska.

The superintendents learned, for instance, that 95 percent of Alaska is roadless, so villages are accessible only by plane, boat, or snow machine. Unemployment in bush Alaska is nearly 85 percent and most people survive as subsistence hunters. Due to recent spikes in fuel costs, some families spend half their income to heat their homes and fuel

their snow machines. A gallon of milk costs upwards of \$8, and gasoline hovers between \$6 and \$7 a gallon.

They heard about villages without running water and parsonages so poorly insulated that boots had to be worn inside during the winter and a mop would freeze to the floor. They learned that, in Sawyer’s words, “There are a lot of ways to die in Alaska.” One pastor, traveling alone, found himself lost in a blizzard, skimming over open sea on his snow machine before finding solid ground again.

They also visited with students from the college, all of whom have grown up in the bush among a people who are both as generous and as tough as the land they have inhabited for thousands of years.

It was here that the Council of Super-

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intendents learned about the largest state in the United States. They heard the stories, met the people, and began to partially grasp the situation. Sawyer remembers Great Lakes Conference superintendent Dick Lucco standing up, beating the table with his fist, and declaring, “We’ve got to do something to help Alaska!”

The Covenant’s work in Alaska began in 1887 when Swedish Covenant missionaries Axel Karlsson and Adolf Lydell arrived in the frontier territory. Karlsson was able to connect with Nashalook,

tion of shortwave radio communications and dreams of missionaries and natives alike. Since 1960 KICY has been reaching western Alaska and even Siberia with music, indigenous programming, news, and call-in programs. Alaska Christian College was founded by Covenanters in 2001, and has recently received accreditation for its programs.

Not long after the superintendents’ meeting, conferences partnered with specific churches to encourage Alaska pastors and their families, to provide financial and physical assistance, and to form connections. The Department

parsonage, remodeling the kitchen and bathroom, replacing carpet and other flooring throughout the house, painting, and building a deck on the church.

In addition to the construction work, team members spent time with local people and formed a special bond with John and Carolyn Uttereyuk, the lay pastoral couple serving Scammon Bay. It was in June 2009, on her second trip, that Foss noticed a change in her perspective. Because of connections the team had made the summer before, there were friends to greet them on the airstrip.



Remodeling the parsonage in White Mountain, where the Midsouth Conference is partnering with pastor Ross McElwee

a chief in Unalakleet who, like the Swedes, spoke Russian.

The mission grew rapidly. The Covenant partnered with Presbyterian and Episcopal missionaries as well as the territorial government to provide schooling and other education to natives. They even imported reindeer herds to offset the depletion of traditionally hunted mammals by whaling ships. The four-year-old Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant Church was able to raise enough support to take over the mission work in 1889.

In 1954 the church established a high school at Unalakleet and served students until 1985, when a state reorganization of education made it possible for students to be educated in their home villages. The Covenant radio station, KICY, was the culmina-

tion of Church Growth and Evangelism pledged \$10,000 seed money for each conference to supplement their own fundraising to help their sister churches with physical maintenance. Several conferences have actively begun establishing their partnerships. The developing connections have taken forms as diverse as the Covenant itself. Here are some of their stories.

PACIFIC NORTHWEST

The past two summers Krisann Jarvis Foss, director of conference ministries for the North Pacific Conference, participated in two trips to Scammon Bay, the village her conference has partnered with. They worked on the parsonage and the church, repairing the foundation and steps for the

The week proved to be catastrophically eventful. A fire broke out in a nearby home while the team was there. The work crew joined the bucket brigade and battled the blaze for hours, but the house was lost. The week before, the same family had lost their grandmother. The entire team, says Foss, “deeply experienced the pain” the family and their village felt at the twin tragedy.

Sharing in that loss, however, helped to bridge the gulf between the work crew and the locals. Hours after returning to the parsonage from the fire bucket brigade, the team heard KICY radio broadcasting news of the fire; within days donations of food and supplies were arriving in Scammon Bay from other villages. Local residents came by and offered to wash

the clothes of the work team, knowing that the parsonage they were staying in had no running water. Foss knows it will take time to build those relationships, but it is worth the effort.

NORTHWEST

The Northwest Conference has two resources that make it possible to partner with two churches—size and experience. Glen Mehrkens, member of First Covenant Church in Red Wing, Minnesota, spent five years in Soldotna at Alaska Christian College as a facilities manager, so he knows firsthand that “hit or miss projects won’t do; what’s needed is a sustaining relationship.” He also hastens to add, “What a lot of people don’t understand is that there are two Alaskas—tourist Alaska, and bush Alaska.” In the bush, for example,

kitchen and bathroom. During this phase, they discovered a leak in the roof, so one group added that to their to-do list. Next summer they’ll be back to finish re-roofing.

Pastor Joel Oyounick, who grew up in Unalakleet, calls the project “Extreme Makeover: Missionary Style.” Oyounick says the difference in the parsonage is remarkable. “It seemed like a huge order,” he says, “but it was amazing to see God working through these crews.” He and Mehrkens believe that this will be the beginning of a long-term relationship, one that Oyounick hopes might include opportunities for pastor exchanges, so that urban pastors can experience life in the bush. He sounds a lot like many other people involved in this effort when he says, “We’re all intertwined in many ways.”

the construction needs will be met, but the relationships need to continue. The conference is encouraging churches to build their own relationships with Mekoryuk. As a result, Faith Covenant in Farmington, Michigan, and Stoneridge Covenant in Allison Park, Pennsylvania, are planning trips next summer. Construction projects are a possibility as are vacation Bible schools and other ministry needs identified by pastor Nathan Hanna and the congregation.

Lucco was able to attend the Alaska Annual Meeting and spent time with Hanna. He hopes to be able to host Hanna for the Great Lakes Annual Meeting, as well. He sees the partnership with Mekoryuk as “a really mutual thing.”

Hanna agrees. “There’s a lot to be gained by developing connections,”



A team from the Northwest Conference went to Unalakleet to work on the parsonage and the church.

there are no roads, and transporting materials and people can be very expensive.

In July and August Mehrkens led two of four groups from the conference to Unalakleet to work on the parsonage and church. A large part of their focus was on energy conservation. With temperatures that sink forty degrees below zero, plus forty mile-an-hour winds off the Bering Sea, energy efficiency is a must. The teams removed the siding from both buildings, added new insulation, and replaced and painted the siding. Then they moved indoors to remodel the

GREAT LAKES

One need the superintendents discussed in detail was the condition of parsonages in the bush. Dick Lucco remembers, “The more I heard, the more unacceptable that seemed to me.” So one of the first things his conference did was to donate most of their \$10,000 to help one of the groups led by Glen Mehrkens to insulate the parsonage in Mekoryuk. Now the Great Lakes Conference is taking a grassroots approach to their partnership. Lucco says they’re looking at the long-term; in two years all



Putting the finishing touches on a utility building in Mountain Village—team members came from at least four different churches in the Midwest Conference.

he says, “because our strengths and weaknesses are so complementary to one another. There are things we can offer by example, like having faith in tough circumstances.” He notes that the areas of struggle familiar to churches in the lower forty-eight, like building a sense of community and commitment, and encouraging active participation in church events, are areas where the people of Mekoryuk excel. He hopes that a visit from other Christians will help his congregation see and develop a deeper kind of discipleship that includes following Christian disciplines and develop-

ing practical skills like Christian parenting.

CENTRAL

In 2007 Joel Delp, who was interim associate pastor at Northwest Covenant Church in Mount Prospect, Illinois, was thinking about leading a mission trip when he met Byron Bruckner, director of Covenant Youth of Alaska.

Inspired by Bruckner and Rodney Sawyer's stories of the bush, Delp and five others focused on Elim.

That summer the team headed north to work with Elim's pastor, Terry Allen, and his wife, Teresa.

Despite the fact that they did not consider themselves a construction team, Delp's group was able to



The Pacific Northwest Conference is partnering with the Covenant church in Scammon Bay. Pictured: lay pastors John and Carolyn Uttereyuk (at right with their children) and the June 2009 work group.

Elim and Northwest," explains Delp. To that end, Northwest has hosted the Allens in their homes and in their church. Since the Allens have recently relocated, the mission board at Northwest is hoping to connect with the next pastor in Elim to continue to build that relationship.

MIDWEST

The Midwest Conference sent two work groups to Mountain Village last summer. The teams worked back-to-back weeks in July, meeting each other on the tarmac as the first group was departing and the second arriving.

Mission Aviation Repair Center pilots, who volunteer to fly workers into and out of the bush, provided transportation for both legs of the trip.

The crews built a garage where the men of Mountain Village could work on snow machines, an essential tool for living in the bush. The volunteers built the shed on pads set on the ground to allow the building to move as the ground freezes and thaws—a new kind of construction for the team.

Like other work teams, the Midwesterners were able to connect with local residents, many of them children. Their work site was continually surrounded by children, even throughout one thirteen-hour workday, and

the kids helped pick up trash and wood scraps at the site. In fact, on the second day he was there, Gary Carlson of Brantford Covenant Church in Clyde, Kansas, remarked, "Shortly after dinner, the children began arriving. It seemed like more than twice as many as yesterday. They are very interested in what we are doing, always want to help and enjoy making toys out of the scraps."

In addition to the work, there were boat rides and hikes, and team members were able to enjoy the landscapes.

Both teams feasted on local fare at potlucks and at pastor Carl Elwood's house, opportunities that allowed for further conversation and connections. The second team was also able to attend worship with members of the Mountain Village Church, followed in the evening by a potluck. (Some things are universal.) They enjoyed spending time with several local people, as well.

SOUTHEAST

There are a multitude of ways to partner with bush village churches, and the Southeast Conference has found creative ways to use limited assets to do so. Superintendent Robert Owens hopes they can "get some traction with Alaska." To that end, his conference has been in correspondence with Hugh Forbes, who pastors the church in Bethel, a hub city for the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.

One of the immediate needs there was for energy efficient insulation in the parsonage and church. Rather than eat up all their resources flying people and supplies to the church, the conference raised funds to send more than 1,500 pounds of insulation to Bethel. A local contractor loaned his insulation blower to a team from Arctic Barnabas, a local nonprofit that exists to provide encouragement and support for Christian workers in bush villages. The work was completed in November.



Erin Aurich with two of the many children the teams from the Midwest Conference met in Mountain Village.

make significant improvements to the parsonage, including changing windows, replacing flooring, repairing plumbing, and installing insulation. In addition to long work days, the team was also able to conduct a vacation Bible school with thirty-three of the forty children in town. "Not too bad," quips Delp.

Because of the connections made with the Allens, Northwest was able to send two teams to Elim the following summer. The first team concentrated on finishing insulation and other improvements to the parsonage while the second conducted a vacation Bible school.

"We're really interested in having a sister church relationship between

Bob Tenglin, member of Lighthouse Covenant Church in Tamarac, Florida, and former member of the conference executive board, says the Southeast Conference is interested in building “concrete connections between the southeastern United States and Alaska.... We want this to be an ongoing relationship.”

This March the annual men’s retreat of the conference will host Rodney Sawyer as their speaker. They’ll also shrink the 4,000 miles separating them from their brothers and sisters in Bethel through a Skype video conference to get to know one another and to plan a work trip next summer.

EAST COAST

The East Coast Conference has been at work building a relationship with pastor Wassilie and Jean Mute in the village of Koyuk. The Mutes have served several churches in Alaska since 1982. For the past two years the conference has sent care packages to the Mutes, asked conference members to write or call with words of support, and asked missions committees to support their ministry financially.

In November the conference brought the Mutes to New Hampshire to attend the Fall Ministers’ Retreat at Pilgrim Pines. They met pastors at the retreat, shared their stories, and even sang one night. They also visited churches around the conference. Rob Satterberg, missions commission chair for the East Coast, says, “The Mutes had a chance to meet folks from the East Coast churches and tell us more accurately what the needs of the village are and what we can do to advance our friendship and ministry partnership.” Superintendent Howard Burgoyne believes that those face-to-face meetings will become a catalyst for a growing friendship.

Satterberg anticipates sending one or two teams to visit Koyuk next summer. At this point the need in Koyuk is for a garage for snow machine maintenance. The building could also be a

place for people from the surrounding community to meet and visit and see the gospel incarnated in the ministry of the Mutes. In keeping with the conference theme of “partnership, not project,” Burgoyne stresses that the trip will be an opportunity for ministering and being ministered to, not, as he puts it, “an adventure vacation.”

MIDSOUTH

Ross and Ruth McElwee were living a “normal Christian life,” in Texas after a stint as YWAM missionaries when they felt called to the Alaskan

mission field. It was that call that led them to the Covenant. As Ross puts it, “God uses Google.” An online search turned up a notice from Rodney Sawyer looking for people who were willing to live the isolated existence of the Alaskan bush pastorate. That led the McElwees to the Covenant and the Midsouth Conference, which impressed them with its love and diversity.

In 2008 the family of six packed up and moved to White Mountain, Alaska. While much of their support already comes from the churches of the Midsouth Conference, in the spring of 2009 an offering at the Midsouth Annual Meeting provided a new snow machine for hunting and travel. As Ross says, “This is not downtown America.” He has traveled one or two times a month to Golovin while that church has been in between pastors.

In addition, the conference has supported a remodeling effort for the parsonage, adding onto and updating the kitchen. This, says Ruth, lets the people of White Mountain know that the family is serious about their intention to stay long term.

Mission Friends” was one early marker for the people who would become the Evangelical Covenant. Native pastors in the Alaska bush are looking for just such friendship. Rodney Sawyer quotes one pastor, “We know Jesus, we want to dig deep into the word now.”

Sawyer remembers Gary Walter’s words when he became president of the Covenant in 2008. “There has always been that feeling of being ‘in it together’ from my perspective,” Sawyer says, “but now some of our most remote village churches can experience it. It has now been amplified with the conference and village partnership.” ■

Ways You Can Help in Alaska

- **Pray.** The bimonthly newsletter from Evangelical Covenant Church of Alaska (ECCAK), called *Chilling News*, is full of stories about people and ministry. It also has a daily prayer calendar. It can be downloaded at <http://eccak.org/news.html>.
- **Send mission teams.** Contact your conference office to find out what is happening. You can also connect through Alaska Merge Ministry at (907) 304-1617. Ask for James Barefoot.
- **Volunteer.** Christian teachers and nurses often come to bush Alaska to serve in the local Covenant church during off hours. Also, empty pulpits need pastors, both for the short- and long-term. Some villages have no one reaching out to the youth. Call the ECCAK office for current needs.
- **Give.** Through the ECCAK office, you can donate money to help send a child or young person to camp.
- **Donate air miles.** Many people accumulate air miles. Please consider donating some to ECCAK to help a bush pastor and family get away for some respite.

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