

AT HOME IN HOOPER BAY

Two young Covenanters from Illinois find a welcome on the Bering Sea.

BOB SMIETANA

Following a seal hunt: the view of the Bering Sea from Hooper Bay, Alaska

Whether they are from Rockford, Illinois, or Hooper Bay, Alaska, one thing is true about teenagers. They love to eat.

So when Rockford natives Jeff Seimers and Marcus Reese had trouble attracting kids to their youth group events at Hooper Bay Covenant Church, they tried a new approach. Instead of offering a Wednesday night youth group, they started Garlic Bread Saturday Nights.

“We found out they liked garlic bread,” says Seimers, “so we would make it for them and they would come over. We also started making cakes—so we’d have some good quality time, then we’d eat the cake.”

The power of garlic bread was just one of the many lessons that Seimers and Reese learned during their two

years working with youth in Hooper Bay. While they have since moved on, they still think of Hooper Bay as home.

Growing up at First Covenant Church in Rockford, Seimers and Reese dreamt of doing something adventurous together for God. When the Covenant Church of Alaska (ECCAK) offered to send them to Hooper Bay, a remote village on the Bering Sea, they jumped at the idea. They packed up their gear, climbed into a Subaru wagon, and headed for Alaska on February 8, 1999. After six weeks, 4,000 miles, stopovers in Anchorage, Bethel, and Scammon Bay, they made it to Hooper Bay. Along the way, they learned a few early lessons about life in rural Alaska. The first was to always take your gear with you.

After attending the ECCAK annual meeting in Scammon Bay, Seimers and Reese planned to go to Bethel,

where their gear was stored, then fly to Hooper Bay. Instead, the only flight they could get went straight to Hooper Bay. They arrived there with just a back pack, a change of clothes, and some stale PopTarts they bought at the airport.

Since no one knew when Seimers and Reese were arriving, there was no one there to meet them. They caught a ride to the parsonage with Nathan Toots, associate pastor of First Covenant Church in Anchorage, who was visiting family in the area. Then they were on their own.

The first few days were difficult. Although Hooper Bay has phone service, a store, and a post office, there is no running water in the village. And there was no pastor in the village to give them direction. “We didn’t know anybody,” says Reese. “We didn’t know where to go get water. We didn’t know

how to flush the toilet. We just looked at each other and there was silence. We were just stunned.”

The next day, Paul Nukusuk, chairperson of the church, stopped in to check on Seimers and Reese “to make sure we were still alive,” says Seimers, laughing. Although he would become a close friend, Nukusuk left the two on their own for the first few days. “I think that was the best thing he ever did,” says Seimers.

The morning after they arrived, Seimers and Reese started walking around the village, getting to know their new neighbors. At first, they focused on the basics—where to get water, how to get to the store, even where to empty the toilet. One of the first people they met was Goosie, a teenager who lived next door. They became friends with her family—since Seimers and Reese didn’t have a phone, they would go next door to make a call. That close relationship with neighbors is one of the things that makes life in Hooper Bay unique, says Reese.

“If you run out of sugar in the lower forty-eight, you get in your car and run

and Reese say. Along the way, they would visit with people, talk with some of the younger kids, and find out what was happening in the village.

“We would see someone on the road and stop and visit,” says Reese. “All of a sudden a trip to the post office would stretch out over a couple of hours because we would be talking to people along the way.”

As they got to know people in the village, Seimers and Reese were invited to be a part of the life of the community. Nukusuk, along with some of the other men in the village, invited them to go hunting. While they were allowed to shoot moose and caribou, they were not allowed to shoot sea mammals like walrus and seals. That practice is limited to Native Alaskans.

“Paul told us we could shoot them with a 35 millimeter [camera],” says Seimers.

While out hunting, Seimers and Reese learned of a tradition in the village. When a Native Alaskan young man makes his first catch—often a seal, walrus, caribou, or



Marcus Reese



Jeff Seimers

A month later, following a church service, Nukusuk got up and made an announcement in Yup’ik, the native language. Then Seimers and Reese learned the other half of the local tradition—after a young man gives his first catch away, the village holds a meal in his honor. So the church did the same for Seimers and Reese, with a surprise potluck following the service.

“People talked about this hunt we went on,” says Reese, “and about how we gave the meat out. There was all of this food—caribou stew, moose stew, fried seal, berries—we went through the line first. Everybody was just smiling and looking at us and shaking our hands.”

Living in close community with people meant sharing their sorrows, as well as their joys. Often the sorrow was at funerals—on their first day in Hooper Bay, Seimers and Reese went to a

“In Hooper Bay, when you run out of sugar, you walk next door and talk to your neighbor and borrow some.”

moose—he gives it all away. “Jeff and I went on this caribou hunt and we traveled like hundreds of miles by snow machine,” says Reese. “It was a pretty burly trip,

and between us we got five caribou. Then we spent the next few days giving it away.” Most of the people they gave meat to were older widows, who did not have a way of getting it on their own.

funeral. They went to one on their last day as well.

Several of the funerals were for young people who had committed suicide. According to the National Adolescent Health Information Center, the suicide rate for Native Alaskan teens is twice the national average. The rate for Native Alaskan teenage boys is four times the national average.

One of those young people who committed suicide was Goosie, their



Children of Hooper Bay

out to the store,” he says. “In Hooper Bay, when you run out of sugar, you walk next door and talk to your neighbor and borrow some.”

Going to the post office became the “big ministry event of the day,” Seimers

Bob Smetana is features editor for the *Companion*.



Hooper Bay Covenant Church

neighbor.

On a Sunday morning, about seven months after arriving in Hooper Bay, Seimers ran home to get something after the morning service. He heard crying, and saw a crowd gathered outside of Goosie's house. After he learned of Goosie's death, Seimers hopped on

"I had nothing to say, and people were looking to us for comfort. [But] I had a shoulder and I had tears."

his four-wheeler and got Reese. Then the two of them went back to see Goosie's mother.

"She came out and pretty much melted in each of our arms, just wailing," Seimers say. "It had just been an hour that she had known her daughter had committed suicide. I had nothing to say, and people were looking to us for comfort. [But] I had a shoulder and I had tears. That was the most important thing that God let us do—mourn with those who mourn."

After someone dies in Hooper Bay, the visitation is done in their family's home. The furniture is taken out of the room, and the deceased is placed in the center of the floor, and people come and sit and be with the family.

During that grieving process, Seimers and Reese opened their home. People came in to cook for Goosie's family and their visitors. Goosie's friends came by to be together and talk.

"Here it was at five in the morning, and we'd been sitting around the body for two days," Reese says, "and all of these high-school students had just

kind of wandered over to our place. We had what they call 'a healing circle.' We just started talking—'What do you remember about Goosie?' 'What are your thoughts about all of this?' 'How do you feel about sitting over there around her body?'"

"This was our neighbor," Reese says. "The Bible says to grieve with those who grieve and rejoice with those who rejoice. It seemed like we were doing a lot more grieving."

Following the service on Easter Sunday 2001, Seimers and Reese left Hooper Bay. They say the timing was right—there was a new pastor, Grant Funk, at the Covenant church who had been

able to take over and lead the ministry there. That didn't make leaving any easier, say Seimers and Reese. And neither one of them left Alaska. Reese got married last fall and now teaches at a public school in Anchorage. Seimers teaches at Alaska Christian College in Soldotna, a new school started by ECCAK to help Native Alaskan students make the transition from high school to college. (Only about 5 percent of Native Alaskans students go to college. Of those, only one out of five make it through their first year.)

Both Seimers and Reese say they will never forget the lessons they learned in Hooper Bay, no matter where their lives take them.

"I want to be able to live the richness of life that we were living in Hooper Bay whether I am living in Anchorage or Chicago, or wherever," says Reese, "valuing people and experiencing God and community. We used to ask ourselves, 'Why did God have to bring us all the way out to the Bering Sea to teach us some of these lessons?' But he did and we are thankful." □

HOOPER BAY HOMECOMING

This past April, just a year after leaving Hooper Bay, Jeff Seimers returned there with a group of students from Alaska Christian College (ACC) in Soldotna. He shared some of his thoughts about that experience with us.

As I flew back to Hooper Bay, it almost felt as if I never really left. The weather was sunny (which is unusual for Hooper) and Grant Funk, the pastor there now, met the plane with our old snow machine. Grant took us to the new church building, which was being planned while we were there. It was encouraging to hear the stories of how the people of the church and the village helped construct the church building. No outside labor was used.

It was exciting to be back "home." I was able to hop on a snow-machine and drive around with the wind in my face, which is something I miss. It was encouraging to see people and catch up with what has happened in the last year. Many people said "welcome home," which reaffirmed my connection to Hooper as always being my place of origin when it comes to Alaska.

When I went into the room where Marcus and I had lived, it brought back many different emotions and feelings. I knew that this was no longer my home, but I understood that the opportunity I had to serve in Hooper Bay was such a gift.

Within the village there had been a couple of recent deaths, one by cancer and another a teenager who went through the ice. I was able to talk with some of the people that were affected. Something that really stuck was one woman said she was going to chain me to the church now that I was back and she wasn't going to let me return to Soldotna.

The ACC group led the Sunday evening service with singing, testimonies, and a drama. I was the speaker. We also helped in the local school, by being victims in an airplane crash for a first-aid class taught by Grant Funk. We led a meeting for kindergarten through sixth-grade students, and another for junior and senior high.

As I look back at my time in Hooper Bay, I see how it shaped my understanding of culture and the importance of relationships. I learned that Christianity and the life God has for us has little to do with two hours every Sunday in church. It is about dropping our agenda and giving our lives to other people. □