



The Alaska Story

This is the season for regional annual meetings. The Covenant, though one church, has eleven regions within the United States and Canada known as conferences. Each year delegates from churches within those areas gather to celebrate what God is doing and to deliberate on where God is leading. It is also a time to make new friendships and deepen old bonds.

This year I traveled to the meeting of our Alaska region, known as ECCAK (Evangelical Covenant Church of Alaska). Given the scope of what we do and the relatively small population of the state, Alaska may be the only place in the United States and Canada where having heard of the Covenant is culturally normative—well, OK, at least not all that unusual.

It was a special meeting, commemorating when the gospel came to the beautiful and rugged western coast bordering the Bering Sea 125 years ago. This is where our Alaska ministry began. Though also now in other parts of the state, we have partnered all these years in remote villages, typically of a few hundred people, dotting the Norton Sound, accessible only by plane (weather permitting), snow machine in winter, and boat in summer. This is where the Discovery Channel’s bush pilot reality show *Flying Wild Alaska* is centered. It is also the terrain for the Iditarod dog sled race.

Western Alaska is also referenced in the Bible. Jesus said we are to be his witnesses “to the ends of the earth.” He was speaking in Jerusalem, and the farthest place away in the northern hemisphere is western Alaska. Unalakleet, Koyuk, Elim, Mountain Village, Shaktoolik, Golovin, Mekoryuk, Scammon Bay, White Mountain, Hooper Bay, Nome—those are the places and these are the people Jesus held in his heart when he gave that command.

Axel Karlson of the Covenant Church of Sweden was the first missionary, arriving in 1887. Karlson was actually hoping to get to Siberia, but he was diverted, winding up in Unalakleet instead. He did not know any native dialects, but he did speak some Russian, a language somewhat familiar to a handful of Alaskans from previous Russian trading outposts in the area. One of those Alaskans, Stefan Ivanoff, agreed to travel with Karlson as a translator. Stefan soon became one of the very first to follow Christ.

So, here you have a Swede, speaking Russian with a Scandinavian accent, being translated into Inupiaq and back again. Somehow, in the grace of God, it was enough. Two years later, the Swedish Covenant asked

our own fledgling movement, just four years old at the time, to step into the initiative in their place. The Covenant did, and Alaska became one of our very first mission endeavors, along with China. The blight of a few early missionaries being sidetracked by the gold rush notwithstanding, the emerging endeavor, joining the efforts of Alaska Native leaders and missionaries, went on to develop churches, orphanages, schools, and clinics over the first several decades.

Alaska is where the Covenant Church first grew in multiethnic understanding. It hasn’t always been easy, and it hasn’t always been done right. No one would deny that there have been hurtful, paternalistic, and insensitive moments. But just because we haven’t always gotten it right, doesn’t mean it isn’t right. And so names like Oyoumick and Carlson; Slwooko and Bruckner; Savok and Fondell; and Soxie and Fiskeaux join together at the Lord’s table.

Today I do not know of any group having more multidimensional impact than the inspiring ministries under the auspices of ECCAK. In addition to the work of twenty congregations, you help make these signature ministries possible:

- Radio station KICY, broadcasting from Nome to western Alaska, and, with 50,000-watt capability, Russian language programming deep into the Russian far east regions of Siberia, Kamchatka, and Chukota.
- CYAK (pronounced “kayak”), a statewide youth ministry equipping villages for youth ministry, as well as providing other leadership development and public services for youth and young adults.
- Alaska Christian College, only eleven years old but already accredited, whose mission is to empower Alaska Natives through biblically based education to pursue excellence in character, learning, and service.

You can find out more about these ministries at CovChurch.org. They are all worthy of your support.

Oh, and that first translator for Axel Karlson named Stefan Ivanoff? He was the great-grandfather of Curtis Ivanoff, who now serves as the regional director of ECCAK. It is one of those meaningful full circle stories: the descendant of the one who was so important in seeding the mission now leads the mission. ■

Gary Walter is president of the Evangelical Covenant Church.