A Missions Minded Handbook
In Process for the
Evangelical Covenant Church of Alaska
Spring 2010

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Introduction

The memories of missionary activity are fresh in the Evangelical Covenant Church of Alaska. The first Covenant church in Alaska was in Unalakleet, established by a Swedish missionary by the name of Axel Karlson just before the turn of the 19th century. He was from the Swedish church called Mission Kyrkan, or Mission Friends. It is this heritage of the Covenant in Alaska, to be mission friends, which this writing seeks to support. This of course is a part of the original mission of God, who desires that all peoples and tribes come to right relationship (Isaiah 45:23, 2 Peter 3:9, 1 Tim 2:3-4, Philippians 2:9ff).

To this end this manual seeks to help brothers and sisters in the family of our Father in heaven understand one another better. It is the Christian responsibility and honor to lay down privilege for the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This means that those Christians of Western heritage must bear Christ in such a way as to always walk in honest humility before their brothers and sisters in the village. That means the proper response to many of these cultural communication differences is not, “Well we should both learn the others style.” The proper response must be, “What a privilege to learn from such a rich culture, and to honor my brothers and sisters by upholding their cultural style.” In honor of the culture, the rest of this will more closely resemble narrative styling. This is also quite Biblical, as the author of Hebrews provides a sophisticated exegesis by simply laying out Biblical stories in an intentional fashion.

It is our hope that this project paper might be helpful, please suggest changes!

A Short History of the Evangelical Covenant Church of Alaska

Man of the Sky: The Source of Intelligence

Before any white man brought Christianity to the Native people, God was already at work. In the Nana region, the story of Maniilaq gives witness to the Father and Son who lived in the sky. In the Cup'ig culture, God revealed Himself as Creator in the name of Ellam Cua. In the Norton Sound region, God revealed Himself in the story of the Savok family. Stories of shamans who recognized God's sovereignty are found in almost all regions. In many cases, former shamans became the best evangelists, although they were not always easily persuaded at first.

Maniilaq was probably born on the upper Kobuk River some time before 1830, and he may have died there in the 1890s. He was often regarded as a "Melchizedek" figure. He had many prophecies, including that "The Light will come in the form of the Word". Maniilaq recognized the Father and the Son as the source of intelligence and thought and that the Father and Son was the most powerful spirit. Maniilaq went on to call the most powerful spirit "the Grandfather" and even joined with other Shamans that believed in the same spirit, such as Piilaq. "It is said that the shamans saw a thin beam of light originating from somewhere above and going to wherever Maniilaq was." Maniilaq in turn taught his children and grandchildren about the Grandfather as well. Near the end of his life, Maniilaq prophesied "…people who live on the edge of the great sea to the west are meeting to send a delegation to the south to ask a man and a

woman of pale skin to bring the Light of which I have spoken so many times to my people."

Alaska Native Covenant pastor, Fred Savok told a story of his great grandfather, Kalineq, who, as a shaman, once impaled himself and removed the pole, showing that he was unharmed. Egaq, Savok's father-in-law, had a vision of a "Man of the Sky" that claimed to be the "Father of all people," and that soon his people would know Him. Shortly after, Egaq met Native missionary Uyarak, (sometimes spelled "Uyabak"). The Native missionary told them more about the "Man of the Sky." Some Natives sought out the teachings of the "Man in the Sky" to the extent that they left their home villages and traveled to Unalakleet of their own accord to see the newly arrived white man from the Covenant church. Savok went on to report that "The goal of the Covenant Mission was not to change the lifestyle of the Eskimo. It was simply to introduce God to the people of the region."

Savok spoke of his grandparents who sent their daughter (his mother) to the Covenant school in Unalakleet and then traveled there themselves yearning to read "the Book" and better understand God's message to them. Savok describes his relatives as living in fear of breaking superstitious beliefs that could have deadly consequences. Through interaction with the Covenant missionaries, Savok's family learned a new way of life without fear. Savok reported that the Eskimos continued dancing and participating in sports, they continued gift-giving and some superstitious beliefs were maintained. However, Savok records the most noticeable change the Covenant missionaries brought was less fear and more freedom of actions.

Missionaries: Saviors or the Destroyers of Culture?

Occasionally, Christianity is credited with the destruction of the Alaska Native culture, not only their religion. Many Alaska church historians contend that it was other white men in Bush Alaska that contributed to the loss of Native culture that has regrettably occurred. For example, Albin Johnson, a Covenant missionary wrote about the "degenerate and selfish white men, who for personal gain were quite willing to contribute to the degradation of the very people he sought to uplift." Edna McLean, renowned secular Alaska Native scholar and historian noted that "the first white men

that the Inuit encountered were explorers and whalers" "The second wave of white men to reach the Yupiks and Inupiat were Christian missionaries." In 1888, the inhabitants of 3 out of 4 Eskimo villages on St. Lawrence Island were completely wiped out. The reason cited was that whiskey was introduced in such excess, that the people forgot to hunt and all starved to death. "White men decimated the whale and walrus and drove the caribou into the interior, while introducing whiskey, prostitution, and disease." Another missionary wrote about "evils like liquor, which so readily destroys the character of a people introduced precipitously…to the white man's culture." The white man was credited with stealing land as well, "In some cases the U.S. government blatantly usurped land occupied by indigenous peoples." Additionally, by the early 1900s, epidemics brought by the white man began to decimate the Native peoples.

McLean offers a negative view of the church to keep in balance. Speaking of missionaries, McLean claims, "They were relentless in their self-righteousness, and considered it their divinely-inspired obligation to disrupt the social, educational and religious activities of the Yupiks and Inupiat." McLean also says, "The Native peoples of Alaska were taught that their languages were not important, their religion was bad and that they should become like the white man as quickly as possible." Despite McLean's claim about missionaries, she does share some blame. She reports that Native languages were not allowed to be taught in the schools by order of the government. Many blamed the missionaries, who ran the schools; however, the rules were given by the Department of the Interior and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Additional blame was cast upon Sheldon Jackson, the Commissioner of Education. Eben Hopson, the first North Slope Borough Mayor also spoke poorly of schools, saying, "The educational policy was to attempt to assimilate us into the American mainstream at the expense of our culture. The schools were committed to teaching us to forget our language and Inupiaq heritage."

The Comity Plan: Reaching Across Denominations

For the most part, Christianity was introduced to Bush Alaska in the late 1800's because of Sheldon Jackson. Sheldon Jackson was a government official who used his influence to secure funding for missionaries to enter into Bush Alaska, mainly under the

context of education. In 1880, Sheldon Jackson began seeking denominations to help evangelize the Bush, and many denominations refused. Jackson's plan was to divide Alaska into denominational regions so as to more effectively spread the Gospel without competition. Jackson's plan was called the "Comity Plan." Likely because of the sensitive nature of church and state relations, there are few and somewhat conflicting reports about the plan. In fact, many historians even deny that the plan existed. However, there is significant documentation, especially among church groups, to give witness to the plan.

According to early documents, Jackson, a Presbyterian, enlisted five other denominations to join his own, which was already working in the Southeast region and was beginning work on the North Slope region. Those denominations were the Baptists (given the Kodiak and Cook Inlet region), the Episcopals/Anglicans (given the Yukon region), the Methodists (given the Aleutian Islands), the Moravians (given the Yukon-Kuskokwim region), and the Congregationalists (given the Cape Prince of Wales region). By the time the agreement was reached in 1884, by one account, four other denominations joined. The additional four were the Salvation Army (given the remote Southeast region), the Catholics (given the Lower Yukon region), the Covenant church (given the Norton Sound), and the Quakers, otherwise known as Religious Society of Friends (given the Nana region). Most historians claim that the latter four were not part of the Comity Plan, as Burch notes, "The Mission Covenant was not party to the comity plan, and its members probably did not know about it." I tend to disagree, however, in part because of Axel Karlson's knowledge of Sheldon and some of the interactions he had with him. Regardless, in most cases among the 10 denominations, the mission work began a few years after the agreement, as with the Covenant church, which began its work in 1887. The Lutheran church, an 11th denomination, joined the field 10 years later in 1894.

The cooperation of the denominations in Alaska, in general, remained very strong and positive. Regions and villages were often exchanged with these friendly relationships. For example, the village of Yakutat was exchanged for Wales between the Covenant and the Presbyterians. The villages of Candle and Little Diomede were given to the Covenant by the Friends and the Lutherans, respectively. Additionally,

though I could find no documentation to support it, I have been told that the Covenant villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region were given to them by the Moravians. (I can find no other reason why the Covenant would be in the Moravian region). The Covenant also gave up several villages reached within the first decade of ministry including: Egavik, Fish River, Selawik, Noatak, Kotzebue, Diomede, Solomon and Bluff (located between Nome and White Mountain). Also given in the past 50 years include: Wales, Council, Solomon, Candle, Haycock, and Marshall. (However, in 2010, Marshall was re-adopted by the Covenant church through Samaritan's Purse). Some of those villages were given up because the population moved on and there is no longer a current village in those locations, most, however, were given to other denominations.

Covenant Pioneers: Swedish Missionaries in Alaska

The Covenant church first became aware of the Alaska mission field before the Comity Plan. Scandinavian explorer, A. E. Nordenskjold went to the North Pole in 1878-79 and noticed the need for missionaries to the Eskimo people and told the Mission Covenant of Sweden about the need.

By 1885 the Covenant prepared to send two missionaries. Finally arriving in 1887, one missionary ended up staying in Yakutat, which was Indian land, and the other heading toward the Norton Sound, which was Eskimo land. The missionary heading toward the Eskimo people was Axel Karlson (sometimes spelled Karlsson) from Sweden, who spoke Russian.

The first Russian-speaking Eskimo that Karlson met was the chief at Unalakleet, Nashalook. Karlson also befriended an orphaned teen-age Eskimo boy named Uyaraq, which means "Rock." Karlson taught him English and Uyaraq became Karlson's first convert as well as his interpreter and sled dog driver. The first mission station, completed in 1889, functioned as a church and a school in Unalakleet. Both English and the Eskimo languages were spoken at this school. One of Karlson's first converts, Stephen Ivanoff, left the village and went to North Park College. Ultimately, Ivanoff's pursuits were offensive to his people. The chief and council of Unalakleet ordered Ivanoff and his wife to leave the village. They moved to Shaktoolik and started a school and a Covenant Church.

Though success eventually came, after Axel Karlson arrived, several years passed before much fruit was shown in conversion. Karlson noted that there was a lot drinking and gambling in the village before he arrived. "Things started badly in 1887 for the Covenant when some men threatened to kill the missionary, Axel Karlson. He was forced to live under Nashalook's protection for three months." "By the fall of 1889…the Inupiaqs were not as willing to accept his message of the gospel…Karlson recognized that his primary task was to win friends before attempting to win converts." "By the early 1890's…Alaska Natives in and around Unalakleet were coming to faith." To be sure of their conversions, converts had to study from several months to a year before receiving baptism." After finally being accepted into the community, Karlson's was given the Eskimo name of "Isregalik," meaning, "the man with the glass eyes." To this day, there are still many Eskimos with the name Isregalik in honor of Karlson. By 1902, 279 Natives had been baptized, and 375 were church members. Then in 1903 that number almost doubled.

Axel Mellander, professor at North Park, speaking of Axel Karlson said, "When he came, there were no Christians; when he left, there were no pagans." Secular historian, Ernest Burch Jr., took note of these phenomena, stating "The transformation of the Arctic Inupiaq population from zero to nearly 100 percent Christianity in less than a single generation requires explanation." McLean states, "The missionaries had a relatively easy task of assembling followers for their churches in northern Alaska." She also explained, "The Christian religion has been embraced strongly by Inupiat and Yupiks. This is not difficult to understand because the Inupiaq and Yupiks are very spiritual people. Secondly, the Christian concepts of resurrection and a person's ability to perform 'miracles', and the story of creation pertaining to a period of darkness and then of light, were already part of the spiritual beliefs and realities of the traditional system of beliefs."

The success of Karlson has been directly attributed to the conversion of Uyaraq, who became Karlson's translator and a powerful evangelist in his own right. "Uyaraq's most effective approach was deliberately to break taboos and to ridicule shamans while holding up a Bible. He did so while proclaiming that the book represented a spirit far more powerful than anything in the entire Inupiaq pantheon, and that this powerful spirit

is what protected him. Uyaraq was particularly active at some of the summer trade fairs in the mid-1890s, where he could attract large audiences. His work not only undermined the shamans, it cast doubt on the entire Inupiaq belief system."

Embracing Culture: Holistic Ministry

Early missionaries were concerned with much more than simply declaring the Gospel message. The Covenant stated that evangelism is more than declaring the Good News, but evangelism is also "teaching, ministering to physical needs, improving communications, and so forth." Early missionaries often used their own money to fund the missions. Ernst Larson, a Covenant missionary, was instrumental in pioneering the art of agriculture in the Arctic, not only for Covenant people, but for the whole state. Several pastors were also pilots.

Schools and churches went hand in hand, due largely to the newly appointed General Agent of Education, Sheldon Jackson, securing funds (around $25,000) for education in the Bush. Government mandated that schools teach children in the English language, reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, oral history, physiology, and temperance hygiene. However, the church and state relationship came to a screeching halt in 1912 when mission schools began to be retaken by the government and non-Christians took over missionary positions. While the government took some schools over immediately, the government was slow in taking over others, such as the Covenant school. The Covenant school, opened in 1889 and one year after the school in Unalakleet opened, there were 40 students. Ten years later, there were 93, and by 1905 there were 285 students. Unfortunately, numbers declined when the government finally took the school over in 1927.

Early missionaries, in general, strived to keep the Alaska Native culture. The Covenant missionaries were not "interested in changing the lifestyle of the Eskimo," but to transform the Eskimo into a "a complete child of God with a new direction and purpose" "The missionaries were committed to a whole person, the mind, body, and soul…The culture and tradition were left intact…the Eskimo villages along the coast continued to enjoy gatherings with much gift-giving, races, and dances, activities that did not involve evil spirits." Many missionaries became fluent in Alaska Native

language, such as Reverend Doctor William Peacock. Additionally, many early Alaska Native pastors never learned English fluently, but did ministry in their native tongue. The missionaries did, however, give English names to Natives when the Eskimo names were too hard for them to pronounce. According to the perspective of Savok, Natives realized the message of the missionaries was compassion and freedom. Savok writes that these particular white people were not taking advantage of the Natives, but were kind and honest.

Missionary Blunders: Learning From Mistakes

Although most missionaries sought to embrace the Native culture, not all interactions were positive. During the early mission work, some activities that were considered “strange” by the missionaries were banned. One such example can be seen in the paper “Cup’ig for Jesus” by Dale Smith of Mekoryuk.

“Christianity, as understood by many, if not most, of the early converts, involved the interplay between one munificent spirit — God, and one evil one — the Devil. To promote the victory of the former over the latter, they thought that Christianity, like the traditional Inupiaq religion, required the use of amulets — in the form of the Bible; charms or spells — in the form of hymns and prayers; and taboos — in the form of prohibitions against smoking, dancing, gambling, drinking and failing to observe the Sabbath, as well as the Ten Commandments. If the amulets and charms were used correctly and the prohibitions were obeyed, salvation in the next world and a better life in this one were expected to come about automatically.”

Another negative interaction began in 1898. In 1898, the Covenant began to be rocked by a scandal that would last for almost 20 years; some abandoned the Gospel message in favor of riches. The Gold Rush helped cause the scandal of Number 9 Above. The Covenant missionaries at Golovin "abandoned their posts and joined the mobs in their quest for wealth" on the golden beaches and rivers of Nome P.H. Anderson (one of the aforementioned missionaries) was even accused of “indiscreet conduct toward an Eskimo girl” by a fellow former missionary. The three Covenant missionaries who abandoned their posts ended up striking it rich, amassing a fortune of more than $400,000. The scandal of the money, however, was that the location where

most of the gold was found was originally claimed in the name of an Eskimo boy, Gabriel. The three Covenanters reclaimed the location as a “Mission claim” which was supposedly to go towards supporting ministry. Anderson received most of the money and gave little to the church. Of the small amount given to the church, little was used for Alaskan ministry. Instead, the money went to the Lower 48. Money used from the “Mission claim” went to build two buildings on North Park College campus, including the President’s home, partially paid for the gymnasium, and also built Swedish Covenant Hospital. The use of the “Mission claim” money was a source of bitterness among some in Alaska, as one Covenant pastor I personally have talked to believes North Park stole Alaskan money. Furthermore, the Eskimo family of Gabriel, who originally had the claim, sued Anderson saying the claim rightfully belonged to them. They eventually settled out of court for a sum of $25,000 plus attorney fees, of which only $17,500 was actually paid out to the family.

The Developing Church: the First 50 years

Even when missionaries made blunders, God continued to work in the Covenant church. Following the first decade of Karlson’s ministry, an astounding 447 converts were baptized from 1900-1910 in the Norton Sound. Many Native leaders began to rise in the church, although during this time white missionaries were always in charge over the Natives. Also during this time the Covenant faced financial problems resulting in their budget dropping from $14,000 a year to $2,800 a year. With a lack of money, Native leaders took charge and often started new churches in the early 1900’s. In 1919, the Covenant recognized their first Native Covenant missionary pastor, Wilson Gonongnan.

The 1920’s saw continued church growth, and by 1929, the Gospel was translated and distributed to the Yupik villages. In 1921, the Covenant sent missionaries (including 2 Native missionaries) to Siberia. In 1926 the Hooper Bay church was built and in 1929 the Scammon Bay church was built.

The 1930’s brought both struggles and joys. The greatest church struggle seemed to be that the 18th amendment was repealed in 1933. The repeal increased consumption and allowed liquor to flow freely in the villages, “casting a shadow” on the

ministry. The Covenant Church reported that “liquor is our arch-enemy” and that non-Christian “white men and his evil influences” (especially fishermen) were setting examples of “drinking, smoking, gambling, dancing, [and] breaking the Sabbath.” The Covenant added, “Marriage and family life are not given the sanctity and respect the Bible teaches.” By 1935 church attendance was reported “[not] as good as used to be.”

As for joys in the 1930’s, the Covenant church was well attended in the bilingual church services. By 1930 the Covenant had already begun mission work in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region. The Covenant also reported in their annual meeting that Covenant meetings had replaced many of the gatherings from the old Eskimo religion. Additionally, the Covenant sent a Native missionary internationally, sending Alaska Native Harry Soxie to Siberia. Missionary E.M. Axelson reported, “As a missionary, I am asked to assist in almost every field of human endeavor.” Axelson made an appeal to the Covenant church in the Lower 48 to send more Christian doctors, teachers, and fishermen to combat the negative white influence. In 1936, White Mountain had a Sunday school of 130, with six Eskimo teachers. In 1937, the Covenant had 30 men and women enrolled in their local Bible school.

The Established Church: Growth and Change

By 1940, the Covenant had 12 church sites and several other villages that missionaries visited. In 1941, the Covenant requested to take over ministry in Nome from the Methodist church. Although the Methodists did not turn over Nome, they did allow the Covenant to begin working in Nome in addition to their own work. Also in 1941, “splendid attendance” was reported among Norton Sound churches.

From 1950 onwards, the ministry was “marked by rapid changes.” McLean speaks of this rapid change from a secular perspective, “The changes that have occurred in the lifetimes of our elders almost defy belief. Most of the time there is no time to react, no time for comprehensive planning.” In the Covenant Church Alaska Native pastors led most small villages. The success of Native leadership was partially attributed to the local Bible Institute as well as some Eskimos being trained at Covenant Bible Institute in Canada. Also, the Covenant’s Children’s Home continued to be a vital ministry. Vacation Bible School ministry became a big operation in both the Moravian

and Covenant churches. The Covenant reported there was a Vacation Bible School in every Covenant village. “In 1954 an Easter offering of $1,148.38 was received.” Also in 1954 the Covenant church called an interdenominational conference of Moravians, Covenanters, Lutherans, and Friends.

Not all interdenominational relations were as positive. In the late 1950’s, a few rogue denominations, disregarding the comity plan, began to move into Covenant villages, causing confusion and division among the Eskimos. The Covenant noted these as “invasions” because there were still villages with no church, which the denominations could have gone instead.

In 1960, much advancement was made in the Covenant church. The Bible Seminary in Unalakleet “reactivated” and 35 students were enrolled in Covenant High School. After visiting Unalakleet, the Friends Church began a Bible school of their own. The Covenant radio station KICY also began to transmit in 1960. KICY became such an effective ministry that even the Moravian denomination contributed financially to KICY. Also significant was that the Covenant reported that church membership had reached over 1,000. As a struggle, the Covenant reported, “Many changes taking place in Alaska also bring great temptations to the Native Christians,” citing a desire for more money and a higher standard of living, as well as “big city temptations.”

In 1962, Arden Almquist of the Covenant reported, “We are well on the way to a truly indigenous work in Alaska.” At the same time Almquist commented that “not until rather recently were indigenous principles firmly adopted and a firm effort made to apply them.” In 1962, the Covenant celebrated 75 years of ministry in which about 120 missionaries worked either short or long term in Alaska. In a separate report from Almquist in 1962, the Covenant reported that problems facing the church were “a lack of trained Eskimo pastors, instability among the converts, [and] insufficient stewardship.”

In the 1970’s Covenant High School continued to grow, reporting 55 students in 1966. In 1970, a shift was made so that no distinction was purposefully made between Native and non-Native staff during roll calls in the Covenant Church. In 1971, Covenant High School reported the highest rate of graduates in the entire state of public and private boarding schools, while the denomination reported, “Eskimo pastors are growing in stature.” In 1972, a bill was adopted in attempt to reclaim lost Native language and

culture, requiring bilingual and bicultural education where applicable. Covenant High School was ahead of the curve, already teaching Native culture. However, in 1976, a government run High School was started in Unalakleet, threatening Covenant High School, prompting “serious consideration to closing” In 1977, 10 of 12 village churches had their own pastors, while the remaining two, White Mountain and Golovin, shared a pastor. In 1979, the Covenant Church was reported as still growing strong.

In the 1980’s the Covenant saw much more indigenous leadership, even as they faced financial problems again. In 1985, Covenant High School closed. One of the largest obstacles the 1980’s churches faced was materialism and greed, which was taught by the Western culture. Covenant Bible Camp moved to the North River in Unalakleet in the 1980’s, which went on to become a vibrant ministry under pastor Chip Swanson. Campus Christian Fellowship at the University of Alaska Fairbanks was launched.

The Present Church: Advancements and Challenges

In the 1990’s and 2000’s, virtually no written history exists yet, which brings us to the time that I write this (2010). Among the biggest advancements in the 1990’s was the creation of Covenant Youth of Alaska, a state-wide intentional youth ministry department partnering with the local churches. In the 2000’s Alaska Christian College, Amundsen Educational Center, Arigaa college ministry at the University of Alaska Anchorage, and Job Corp ministry in Palmer all began.

As with almost all mission efforts, finances in Alaska have been more or less difficult at different time periods. In 1962, Arden believes that part of the answer is encouraging stewardship by turning the churches entirely over to local leadership and abandoning the view of Alaska as a mission field. This shift eventually came to pass years later when Alaska became its own home field, no longer a mission field. However, since that time my own observation is that finances, for the most part, have not improved. A recent move in the past couple of years has been to reach out to the Lower 48 Covenant fields and have them to adopt struggling churches, partially reversing the idea of not being a mission field.

The spirit of cooperation among the denominations of Alaska that was central to earlier ministry still exists to this day. The Alaska Christian Conference currently meets biennially with the American Baptist Churches, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal Church, Evangelical Covenant Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Friends Church, Moravian Church, Presbyterian Church USA, Roman Catholic Church, Salvation Army, and the United Methodist Church all as members.

Of course, the Covenant Church faces many modern challenges as well. To get a sobering perspective of issues the church faces today in ministry, one could look at McLean's analysis. McLean speaks of the current state of her culture, "The disruptive effects of rapid social and cultural change have wrought havoc on Alaskan Native families and communities. This is reflected in a depressing array of social problems including a high suicide rate among young Alaskan Natives, a high incidence of alcohol and drug abuse, the fetal alcohol syndrome, the breakdown of the extended family and clan system, loss of children to the welfare system, loss of language, lack of transmission of cultural knowledge and values, apathy, depression, low academic achievement and high drop-out rate, transitional problems between village and cities and the dilemma of integrating traditional and non-traditional economic systems (subsistence versus cash-based lifestyle)."

In a 2003 survey of Native Alaskans, conducted by an Anchorage, Alaska consulting company, respondents reported that the top four issues facing Alaska Natives were: subsistence, education, jobs, and substance abuse (McDowell Group, 2003). A recent summary of SLiCA surveys reported issues as widespread subsistence activity throughout the Arctic (including Alaska), and respondents reported that the major problems in their communities were a lack of jobs, substance abuse, suicide, and family and sexual violence (Leask, 2007) . Three other important measures are dramatically higher in Alaska than the rest of the U.S.A.: the incidence of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD); infant mortality; and tuberculosis.

Of particular interest for today's church should be that the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act settled land claims of the aboriginal peoples of Alaska by transferring approximately 44 million acres of public land and nearly $1 billion through twelve regional Native corporations and approximately 200 village corporations (Colt, 2001).

Some corporations are especially cooperative with religious organizations, while others are much more uncooperative. The church in Alaska has a much more complex system to work within than it once did.

Though I could not find any concrete demographics of Natives, in 2006, approximately 47,196 Natives were enrolled in Eskimo (Inupiat and Yupik) Native Corporations. This number is most likely very close to the actual population. With a rich history behind it and serious needs in front of it, the Alaska church has its work cut out as they seek to reach all nearly 50,000 Alaska Natives.

Villages in Focus

Land

Alaska Natives have endured countless years of land disputes (territory) amongst themselves. Land disputes are not new to the Alaska Natives. For example, many native groups traveled far distances for hunting game for their subsistence activities 'encroaching' upon other's territory. Many native groups knew their surroundings and respected the other groups land. Land is essential in the Alaska Natives survival. Big game such as caribou, moose, reindeer, and musk ox are essential subsistence food sources.

The commercialized effects of the land use have affected the ways native groups hunt game. For example, some land areas are 'off-limits' or 'no tress-passing' for hunting due to being 'state', 'federal', or land. Many people have purchased Alaska State hunting licenses to hunt big game that historically had been their hunting grounds. With the enactment of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), things changed. A hundred years ago, native groups would not have any 'papers' to hunt. With the influx of western culture and technology, obviously certain procedures have changed the way the 21st century Alaska Native hunts today.

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) was signed into law by President Richard M. Nixon on December 18, 1971. The Act evolved from a continued land dispute from Alaska natives claiming aboriginal rights to their lands. In an effort to resolve the land claims, the act was signed to create further economic development

opportunities. The act thus extinguished native land claims by transferring titles to the newly created 13 Regional corporations and over 200 village corporations.

Villages in the Bering Straits Region

The villages in the Norton Sound Region include White Mountain, Elim, Golovin, Koyuk, Shaktoolik, Unalakleet, and Nome. There are several more villages, but this concentrates on the villages with Covenant Churches. The Bering Straits Native Association (BSNA) was formed in 1967 as an association of the Native Villages in the Bering Straits Region. The Association was created to advocate for the passage of an Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. BSNA organized Kawerak as the regional non-profit corporation (incorporated under State Law in 1973) to provide services throughout the Bering Straits Region.

Kawerak contracts with the state and federal government to provide services to residents of the Bering Strait Region, 75% of whom are Eskimo, Aleut or American Indian, background. Kawerak's organizational goal is to assist Alaska Native people and their governing bodies to take control of their future. Programs include education housing, natural resource management, and economic development. Kawerak seeks to improve the region's social, economic, educational, cultural and political conditions. Kawerak reorganized in 2006 and we now have four divisions.[1] Considering the 2010 census is in progress, it will be interesting to see whether the changes in population have affected each community and what it means in social services provided.

White Mountain

The Eskimo fish camp of "Nutchirviq" was located here. The bountiful resources of both the fish and Niukluk Rivers supported the area's native populations. White Mountain grew after the influx of prospectors during the gold rush of 1900. The first structure was a warehouse built by the miner Charles Lane to store supplies for his claim in the Council District. It was the site of a government-subsidized orphanage, which became an industrial school in 1926. A post office was opened in 1932. The City government was incorporated in 1969.[2] According to the 2000 census, White Mountain

had a population of 203. In 2008, the Covenant membership was seventeen and the average weekly worship attendance was thirty three.

Golovin

The Kauweramiut Eskimos who later mixed with the Unaligmiut Eskimos originally settled the Eskimo village of “Chinik,” located at the present site of Golovin. Golovin was named for Captain Vasili Golovin of the Russian Navy. In 1887, the Mission Covenant of Sweden established a church and school south of the current site. Around 1890, John Dexter established a trading post that became the center for prospecting information for the entire Seward Peninsula. When gold was discovered in 1898 at Council, Golovin became a supply point for the gold fields. Supplies were shipped from Golovin across Golovin Lagoon and up the Fish and Niukluk Rivers to Council. A post office was opened in 1899. Reindeer herding was an integral part of the missions in the area in the 1900s. The City was incorporated in 1971.[3] Golovin had a population of 144 in 2000. The average weekly attendance in the Golovin Covenant church in 2008 was ten people with a membership of twelve.

Elim

This settlement was formerly the Malemiut Inupiat Eskimo village of Nuviakchak. The native culture was well-developed and well adapted to the environment. Each tribe possessed a well-defined subsistence harvest territory. The area became a federal reindeer reserve in 1911. In 1914, Rev. L.E. Ost founded the Elim Mission Roadhouse, a covenant mission and school. The City was incorporated in 1970. When the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) was passed in 1971, Elim decided not to participate and instead opted for title to the 298,000 acres of land in the former Elim Reserve.[4] Elim’s 2000 census population was 313. The 2008 membership in Elim Covenant church totaled 35 with an average weekly attendance of 65.

Koyuk

Community Vision Statement: "We are a community who rely on the wisdom of our elders to teach our people our traditional and subsistence lifestyle while living and

respecting the land, animals, and sea; we believe in quality education and employment opportunities through economic development for all generations while keeping healthy families and homes."[5] Koyuk had a population of 297 in 2000. The 2008 Covenant membership totaled 80 with an average weekly attendance of 17.

Shaktoolik

Shaktoolik was the first and southernmost Malemiut settlement on Norton Sound which was occupied as early as 1839. A site called 'Iyatayet' is twelve miles northeast which is claimed to be 6,000-8,000 years old. Reindeer herds were managed in the Shaktoolik area around 1905. The village was originally located six miles up the Shaktoolik River and moved to the mouth of the river in 1933. The City was incorporated in 1969.[6] The 2000 census in Shaktoolik was 230. Forty four Covenant members comprise the Shaktoolik Covenant Church with a weekly average attendance of 24.

Unalakleet

Archaeologists have dated house remnants along the beach ridge from 200 B.C. to 300 A.D. The name Unalakleet means "from the southern side." Unalakleet has long been a center for trade as the terminus for the Kaltag Portage, an important winter travel route connecting to the Yukon River. Indians on the upper river were considered "professional" traders who had a monopoly on the Indian-Eskimo trade across the Kaltag Portage. The Russian-American Company built a post in the 1830s. In 1898, reindeer herders from Lapland were brought to Unalakleet to establish sound herding practices. In 1901, the Army Signal Corps built over 605 miles of telegraph line from St. Michael to Unalakleet over the Portage to Kaltag and Fort Gibbon. The Native Village of Unalakleet was organized on June 15, 1939. [7] Unalakleet had a population of 747 in 2000. The 2008 covenant membership in Unalakleet totaled 80 with a weekly average attendance of 74.

Nome

The people of Nome have lived on the Seward Peninsula since time immemorial. The unique cultures and languages have experienced considerable changes, but continue to thrive and develop today in the community of Nome. Among the member rolls are Central Yupik, Inupiaq, St. Lawrence Island Yupik and American Indians whose lineage is tied to Tribes in the Lower 48. For nearly 70 years, the Nome Eskimo Community (NEC) has represented the political, social, and cultural interests of native peoples in the community of Nome and the Bering Straits region.[8] Nome is considered the 'hub' of the Norton Sound region and the population in 2000 was 3,505. The 2008 membership in Nome counted 30 members and an average weekly attendance of 140.

History & Lifestyle

The Bering Straits region is diverse with three distinct languages spoken (Inupiat, Siberian Yup'ik and Central Yup'ik). It is not known with certainty where the boundary between the Central Yup'ik and Inupiat languages was located. The people of the Diomede and King Islands are Inupiat and Saint Lawrence Island is the home of the only Siberian Yup'ik people on the United States side of Bering Strait.[9]

Inland caribou hunters and fisherman, the Qawiaramiut, occupied most of the interior of the Seward Penninsula. Along the coast margin of Norton Sound, Unaliq people pursued sea mammals, fish and caribou. Walrus, polar bear, and seal were hunted on King Island, some 40 miles off the mainland and only 2.3 square miles in area. Diomede Island and Saint Lawrence Island people also lived off the ocean's resources. These Malemiut speakers (a dialect of Inupiat) married into the remaining families of Yup'ik speakers, eventually settling in Koyuk, Shaktoolik, and Unalakleet. Saint Michael and Stebbins are the home of Central Yup'ik people.[10]

The introduction of cash into the local economies and the establishment of permanent communities, schools, churches and hospitals/clinics have brought significant change over the past 100 years. However, living off the land

Language

Alaskan Inupiaq includes two major dialect groups: North Alaskan Inupiaq and Seward Peninsula Inupiaq. Seward Peninsula Inupiaq is spoken in the Bering Straits

region with the Qawiaraq dialect found principally in Teller and in the southern Seward Peninsula and Norton Sound area. The Bering Strait dialect spoken in the villages surrounding Bering Strait and on the Diomede Islands. The name "Inupiaq," meaning "real or genuine person" (inuk "person" plus -piaq "real, genuine"), is often spelled "Iñupiaq," particularly in the northern dialects. It can refer to a person of this group and can also be used as an adjective. The plural form of the noun is "Inupiat," referring to the people collectively. Alaska is home to about 15,700 Inupiat, of whom about 2,144 speak the language.[11]

Villages in the Calista Region

Calista (Cha-lista) is the regional for-profit corporation that was formed after the passage of ANCSA. The Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) is the non-profit organization charged with handling the social needs of the native population. Under AVCP, several of the Covenant villages such as Hooper Bay, Scammon Bay, Mekoryuk, Mountain Village and Bethel have tribal relations with AVCP either through services or contracts. Bethel is considered the regional ‘hub’ of Southwest Alaska.

Hooper Bay

"Askinuk" or "Askinaghamiut" are the early Eskimo names for Hooper Bay. The village was first reported in 1878 by E.W. Nelson of the U.S. Signal Service. The 1890 Census found 138 persons living in 14 homes. The name Hooper Bay came into common usage after a post office with this name was established in 1934. The present-day Eskimo name "Naparyarmiut" means "stake village people." The city government was incorporated in 1966. The Native Village of Hooper Bay is a federally recognized tribe and is located in the community. Commercial fishing and subsistence activities are the primary means of support. Members of the Village of Paimiut also live in Hooper Bay.[12] According to the 2000 census, Hooper Bay had a population of 1,014. Hopper Bay has a Covenant membership of 55 people with an average weekly attendance of 54.

Scammon Bay

It was known in Yup'ik as "Mariak," and its residents were called "Mariagamiut." The nearby bay was named after Capt. Charles Scammon a marine chief of the Western Union Telegraph Expedition in 1856. The name came into use when the Scammon Bay post office was established in 1951. The city government was incorporated in 1967. The Native Village of Scammon Bay is a federally recognized tribe. The community that relies on fishing as their main subsistence activity. Most residents travel to Black River each summer for fish camp which is 50 miles to the north.[13] Scammon Bay's population in 2000 was 465. The 2008 Covenant membership totaled 39 with an average weekly attendance of 75 people.

Mekoryuk

Nunivak Island has been inhabited for 2,000 years by the Cup'ig (Choop'ik). The first outside contact was in 1821 by the Russian American Company, who recorded 400 people living in 16 villages on the island. A summer camp called "Koot" was noted at the current site of Mekoryuk in 1874. In 1891, Ivan Petroff found 702 Cup'ig in 9 villages, including 117 people at "Koot." In the 1930s, a Native missionary built the Evangelical Covenant Church. People moved to the village from other areas of the island to be near the school. An Eskimo-Russian trader introduced reindeer for commercial purposes in 1920. BIA purchased the operation in the 1940s, and a slaughterhouse was constructed in 1945. Thirty-four (34) musk-ox from Greenland were transferred to the island in 1934 in an effort to save the species from extinction. A post office was opened in 1940. Many families moved to Bethel for their children's education returning during late spring for fishing and sea mammal hunting. The city was incorporated in 1969.[14] Mekoryuk had a population of 210 in 2000. Mekoryuk has a Covenant membership of 62 people with an average weekly attendance of 61 people in 2008.

Mountain Village

Mountain Village was a summer fish camp until the opening of a general store in 1908. This prompted residents of Liberty Landing and Johnny's Place to immigrate. A Covenant Church missionary school was also built in that same year. A post office was established in 1923 followed by a salmon processing in 1956 then a cannery in 1964.

All three have since ceased operating. The city government was incorporated in 1967. Mountain Village became a regional education center in 1976 when it was selected as headquarters for the Lower Yukon School District.[15] Mountain Village's population was 755 in 2000. In 2008, Mountain Village reflected 56 Covenant members with an average weekly attendance of 51 people.

Bethel

Bethel is located at the mouth of the Kuskokwim River 40 miles inland from the Bering Sea. It lies in the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge 400 air miles west of Anchorage. Bethel was first established by Yup'ik Eskimos who called the village "Mumtrekhlogamute," meaning "Smokehouse People," so named for the nearby fish smokehouse. There were 41 people in Bethel during the 1880 U.S. Census. The Moravian Church established a mission in the area in 1884. The community was moved to its present location due to erosion at the prior site. A post office was opened in 1905. Bethel was serving as a trading, transportation, and distribution center for the region which attracted natives from surrounding villages. Over time federal and state agencies established regional offices in Bethel.[16] The 2000 census revealed that Bethel had a population of 5,471. In 2008, 36 Covenant members revealed Bethel's Covenant membership with an average weekly attendance of 74 people.

History of the Region

Many of today's villages were ancient sites that were used as seasonal camps and villages for subsistence resources. Historically the Yup'ik and Cup'ik people were very mobile and semi-nomadic traveling with the migration of game, fish, and plants. The ancient settlements and seasonal camps contained small populations with numerous settlements throughout the region consisting of extended families or small groups of families. Yup'ik and Cup'ik people organized their lives according to the animals and plants they hunted and gathered. Extended families or small groups of families occupied most settlements and camps. Winter ceremonies illustrated the relationship between humans, animals, and the spirit world.[17]

All males in some Yup'ik/Cup'ik communities lived in a qasgiq, or men's house that also served as a community center. Boys old enough to leave their mothers joined male relatives in the qasgiq, where they lived, worked, ate, bathed, slept and learned men's customs. Women prepared and brought food to the qasgiq. Ceremonies, singing, dancing and events usually occurred in the qasgiq, thus making it a community center. Women and children lived in an ena, a smaller version of the qasgiq. Bearded seal or walrus intestine provided a removable "skylight" window. Like most other winter dwellings, the qasgiq and the ena shared the distinctive, partially semi-subterranean winter entrance passageway - which in the ena also provided space for cooking. Social culture and behavior were all geared toward survival and compatibility among family-village groups. Cultural roles and social rank were largely determined by gender and individual skills. Successful hunters, nukalpiit, usually become group leaders. Women roles included child rearing, food preparation and sewing, but men had to learn these roles as well when out hunting.[18]

Coastal villages traded with the inland villages for items not locally available. Seal oil was highly desired by inland villages who usually bartered moose/caribou meat and furs such as mink, marten, beaver and muskrat, for seal oil and other coastal delicacies such as herring and herring eggs.[19]

Lifestyle

Calista Corporation represents the largest ethnic population in Southwest Alaska whose region is characterized by a deep relationship to the land for subsistence hunting, fishing and gathering. The proximity to the ocean or river of nearly all village locations emphasizes the importance of fishing in the subsistence economy. Apart from a few villages founded through mining, trade, or transportation, most of the villages in the region originated as fishing villages. The Yup'ik and Cup'ik still depend upon subsistence fishing, hunting and gathering for food.[20]

Language

The word Yup'ik represents not only the language but also the name for the people themselves (yuk 'person' plus pik 'real'.) Central Alaskan Yup'ik is the largest of

the state's Native languages both in the size of its population and the number of speakers. Many children still grow up speaking Yup'ik as their first language in 17 of 68 Yup'ik villages mainly located on the lower Kuskokwim River, on Nelson Island, and along the coast between the Kuskokwim River and Nelson Island. In the village of Mekoryuk on Nunivak Island the language and the people are called Cup'ig or Cup'it in the plural form.[21]

Subsistence lifestyle

According to the Webster's dictionary, subsistence is defined as; a means of surviving. Both in the Norton Sound region and the Calista region, all native peoples have subsisted for their very existence. For example, the Cup'ig residents of Mekoryuk have depended on fowl, fish, and mammals for their existence for over 2,000 years. All include seals, walrus, sea birds, halibut, salmon, and reindeer. Land plants, berries, and sea plants have also contributed to their diet.

Each sea mammal has their own way of being prepared. The bearded seal is the main staple for the Cup'ig. Seal oil, dried meat, fermented blubber are derived from the seal, which are excellent eating. The seal oil is used to dip dried fish, dried seal meat, sea greens, and many other native goods. Walrus skin is the main food from the walrus. Sea ducks, swans, cranes, and geese also are a favorite for the people. Soup is the main course in preparing the fowl. Reindeer was introduced to the Cup'ig people in the mid 1920's and has become a favorite. Musk-ox has also become a subsistence food since the 1970's.

Many native groups in the area have commented on the land and sea being the grocery store for them. In a sense that is true. Without the wild birds, sea mammals, and land animals, eating would be the same for the native people. Although local stores have subsidized the diet of the native people, the main foods come from the sea, land, and air.

Modern technology has benefited the native people for easier and faster access in hunting and fishing. Aluminum skiffs, all terrain vehicles (ATV) snow-machines, outboard motors, radios, global positioning systems (GPS), rifles, ammunition, binoculars, knives, gasoline, motor oil, are now a necessity in hunting. Majority of all

communities have all these modern conveniences. The kayak, sled dogs, harpoons, bow and arrows are obsolete. Many communities have become dependent on the western technology and goods in their subsistence activities.

Village time

The pace in many villages is slow compared to the urban cities of Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. If one expects the ‘hustle and bustle’ of the cities, the village will be a very difficult transition. Many villagers enjoy the slow paced environment. Many communities have basic infrastructures such as schools, post office, tribal office, city government, local store, and maybe a Laundromat. Community meetings may start at 7 p.m. in the local community hall if they have one, but usually meetings really begin 10-15 minutes, thus the phrase ‘village time.’ No one knows where the term was coined, but this is common amongst many communities. The idea behind village time is that they don’t need to get to a place in a rush. Everything is confined in a small area where people can leisurely reach.

Differences in Communication

Is this a good project?

At the outset of this project I called some friends, and friends of friends in Western Alaska to ask for stories that I might use to highlight cultural differences when it comes to communication. One response that I got was that they had not thought of any such stories. Another person told me a short story, but said that things are usually so small that they would rather overlook them than confront them. The next person I spoke to told me that we are good and right to work on a cross cultural insight piece like this. He told of how so many outsiders come into his village with federal money and programs and just tell his people how things are now going to be, “They look at Natives like they’re nothing.” They don’t ask the community what they want or think. He said, “The Native people have feelings and intelligence, and know the environment. Come to listen.” After hearing these different responses I was confused until another story told to me came to mind…

Learn by doing, affirm positives

“As a village pastor I found the Inupiaq "indirect" way of dealing with things very frustrating. There are some ways that it feeds our carnal responses to life. For instance, gossip. In village life is was quite normal and very common not to tell the person you had a problem with directly but to tell everyone else and eventually the "problem person" found out. On the other hand much grace can be shown by being indirect. For

instance in our culture if you do something the wrong way we might make fun of you, or correct you publicly in a way that embarrasses you but with the Eskimos, time after time again they showed patience with me and grace to me by waiting for me to learn how to do something by experience and by watching others.

I had been asking men of the village to guide me as we traveled up a risky stretch of the Kobuk River by boat. They hesitated in guiding me and after I pressed the issue they finally explained, "If we tell you how to do it you will not learn, but if we let you do the best you can and you hit a gravel bar with you lower unit (possibly ruining your prop) you will never forget that spot again and you have learned well!" After that explanation it seemed to me that if I were entering a situation of "life or death" then someone would speak instructions and warning to me but if it were not "life or death" but only loss of material gain or loss of time they would not tell me directly that I was going the wrong way or doing the wrong thing so that I would learn from experience."

Are you seeing it? Values and traditions are handed down; skills are learned by watching and listening, and then trying. Critique is not the way to teach either – it is right to affirm the good and uplift it for your focus, so my first friend did not want to dwell on the negatives. These are not the only points that could be highlighted from this story. Story is not reduced down to bullet points in Western Alaskan culture: so it won't be here either – practice listening to story to get what the person is really saying! Here's another story to practice with!

Story

I wanted to go ice fishing one day and my friend was visiting me, so I asked him if I could borrow his dolk (ice pick). He told me that he once loaned his dolk out to his friend, and he returned it to him all dulled up and bent out of shape. I told him, "Oh ok, not to worry, I just want to go to the Point, so I will bring it back to you later today." Again he told me, "I once loaned my dolk out to a friend and he brought it back to me days later and it was dull." I was confused, so I took a minute and tried to reply as respectfully and earnestly as I knew how, "Oh I promise I will be very careful, but I know that there are holes out there that just need a little breaking through. It's a beautiful day out and I just want to catch some smelts for dinner and enjoy the sunshine." I was really

confused, and to my surprise my friend looked back at me with an almost sad expression. I just dropped it after three times and he soon thereafter went home.

So what happened here? Do you see what was going on? His story was his answer. Not everyone in Western Alaska will communicate just through story – many will be more direct with you – but many others know that indirect communication is the best way to go. In this way he was being very clear and honest with me, but I was too dull to see that! Not only was I misunderstanding him, but by repeating my direct requests I was being rude. Thankfully my friend is full of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, he has never mentioned this exchange. Here is another story told to me…

I could never understand why the older Eskimos thought a good service was one with 4 hours of singing! Since I have been in Wasilla it dawned on me in my reflections that Eskimos did not preserve and pass along stories of importance and learning by writing them down in a book for later generations but it was through song and stories that wisdom was preserved and passed along. Also, wisdom was not taught directly but was implied in the story and song. It must be a difficult change to move from that way of communication to the idea of processing and teaching confronting, direct truth from the written word. I wonder.

I think there is much to be said about Christians in village life telling stories instead of preaching. Stories from the Bible told without exegesis, isogesis, and hermeneutics! At some point I am sure we must ask people what they understand so that we are laying a safe foundation of doctrine.

Learn by doing

Going out ice fishing in the winter can be a great joy in Unalakleet. The best tasting trout are caught up the river a-ways. Being new in town, I would wait until my friend would ask me to go with him. This was such a joy to have someone lead and show me how. After I had lived in the village for a year I would sometimes call my friends to see if they wanted to go fishing the next day or so. Many times they would mention the weather report and ask me what I thought of it. I was a bit baffled. My thinking was that they knew the weather, and what was safe or not – so I would just flip the question back to them and say, “What do you think?” I thought I was being

respectful by just honoring their recommendation. In retrospect, I realized that they were trying to teach me how to read the weather for myself. They did not want me to always have to ask them about the weather, they wanted to equip me to read the weather and to make wise decisions.

Humor

On the phone with a Cup'ig brother from Mekoryuk I was asked, "Are you Alaska Native?" To which I had to respond, "No sir, I was born in Alaska but am not Native." He responded, "Why not!" A sense of humor is priceless. Sarcasm is not appreciated, and seems to be a waste of time, why be insincere? Clean jokes are loved and are straightforward; they are also straightforward ways to enjoy fellowship. This same friend told me that he was probably speaking Bush English, and people from Washington D.C. would probably have a hard time following him. Another brother from another village told me about a time he took a trip to Western Europe.

English as a second language

"A friend and I went on an extensive trip after Christmas of 1979. We hit most of Europe and Spain was one country we enjoyed. I had taken 2 years of high school Spanish and had also taken a semester in college so one morning I thought I'd take a shot at communicating with the people at the hostel (even though they spoke English reasonably). This was a mistake - they would not speak a word of English to me the rest of the time. If they would have slowed down to about a quarter of the speed they were talking I might have sat on that stone bench (poyo) instead of that poor chicken (pollo) amongst numerous other misinterpretations due to my SVSL (Spanish VERY Second Language) issues.

The indirect bonus is that when I started teaching school in Savoonga, where English was 2nd language for all of my students I understood better the need to speak clearly and not assume that their level of English comprehension was the same as mine. I often thought back to my experience in Spain and was more patient with my students. It was a valuable lesson."

Non-verbal

Now we know that actions speak loudly, and that much of communication is non-verbal. There is no exception in the village setting. It is important to learn the differences in body language in the village. As one sister told us, “Body language, being quiet and not responding verbally doesn't mean we don't understand or not care. Even verbal language sometimes will seem like your ignorant. For example, saying, "Oh," is a very common response to a lot of things.” It is not a request to be treated like a child.[22] Being quiet and not responding can come from the cultural value of thinking before speaking, and not directly commenting – but indirectly commenting. People nodding when you are passing them on the street is another way of communication. It tells you that the person is okay, and in similar manner that person knows that you also are okay.[23] Many well meaning brothers and sisters have missed the visual responses that are commonly given.

“It was her second year in Alaska and we were teaching in Noorvik as first year teachers. She asked a student a question and there was no verbal response. She asked him a second time for a response, only to receive silence. Becoming frustrated, she asked a third time and getting no response, she sent him to the principal’s office. Maybe two weeks later, she asked a different student a question. The student looked at her and raised her eyebrows. At that moment Kristi had a cross-cultural epiphany realizing that that meant, "Yes." Then she realized that in her situation a few weeks before that the student that she sent to the principal's office had done the same thing - raised his eyebrows. She felt so bad, went to that student and apologized and learned a lesson in cross-cultural communication, that words sometimes are not used. We laugh about that one.”

In the same way, a scrunching of the nose or a frown is saying, “No!” loud and clear. What you might notice is the grace that the student, their principal, and perhaps the student’s parents (if they were even told) gave this new teacher. Another sister relayed another story of grace.

One day a woman from the lower 48 was passing through our village with her pastor husband. She wanted to meet some of the people so I took her over to the elders’ luncheon going on. There was a group of women visiting and eating. So she

decided to go over and introduce herself to them. But she did so using this baby voice, saying in slow drawn out ways, “Hi, my name is so-and-so” I could not believe it. Did she have any idea that these were retired schoolteachers and very intelligent and wise women? Did she know that one of them is a millionaire who stays in the village because she likes to fish? But these women were very kind to her. When she left, they just went back to telling their stories and having a good old time.[24]

All of these stories are not to say that Native culture is perfect, but no culture is. Yet it is the culture to which you have been called by God to serve in! Communicating with our brothers and sisters in the Lord across cultural styles requires patience and grace from everyone involved. So jump right in! Learn by doing! Wave to people you do not know, look for rising eyebrows, listen closely to the stories you are told, and praise God with a new song!

Ministry in Focus

A Few Words About Youth Ministry

I can think of a handful of faithful servants of God that have done youth ministry in the Bush who came from the Western culture. Among them, they have many common traits. All started ministry with an open heart which led them to committed lifelong service. All of them have developed a deep love for the Native culture. They are excited to live a subsistence lifestyle. They have developed a love for Native food. They practice hospitality the way that Native communities do. They seek to learn the Native language (at least as much as is taught these days). They take part in cultural activities. They practice non-verbal communication. They have adopted a slower pace of life. They focus more on relationships than on an exact time. They listen to others before they talk and when they do they have a calm voice. They are learners. All of these servants have made the conscious decision to live their lives on the terms of another culture (to borrow an idea from missionary David Mark who wrote the book *On Someone Else's Terms*).

As I was sitting down to write this chapter, I began to think about some of the negative stories I have heard of youth ministry being done poorly in the village settings. Certainly the Body of Christ can learn what not to do from stories such as these. However, even in sharing negative stories I began to realize doing so may be culturally inappropriate.

In the Western culture learning usually comes from criticism. In the Western academic world, students are taught that in order to write a good paper they must disagree with somebody else. Students must create something new and innovative. In many cases, success comes from tearing others down. However, in the Native culture, learning comes from watching and imitating. Rather than criticizing, the Native culture learns by affirming traditions and virtuous people. If Western culture learns by saying, “Don’t do this,” then Native cultures learns by communicating, “Watch me, this is what you do.”

That little aside may seem strangely placed in a section about youth ministry, however, an attitude of learning and humility is incredibly important in all ministry, and especially when doing Native ministry in the Bush.

This section is not meant to be a “how-to” of youth ministry, but rather to emphasize the needs and to introduce some of the resources the Covenant church has available. Youth ministry in the Bush is often a very well received ministry, both by youth and by the community. The Native communities are, after all, communities of hospitality. Elders and community leaders are often excited that someone is giving youth a healthy place to gather and positive activities to be a part of. Youth are equally as excited for something new and fun to do. Several years ago I lived in a village that had not had youth group for a little while. The first week that I restarted the youth group, 75 High School and Junior High students showed up. Along with this interest for something new and fun, I think that there is a genuine interest in matters of faith.

Not all of youth ministry is blueberries and cream though. I have sometimes thought about what I would entitle a book if I was to write about youth ministry in the Bush, and I think I might call it “From the Jaws of Death: shining Hope for the hurting.” Everyone who is involved in youth ministry for any decent length of time among Alaska Natives will experience a youth dying in a tragic way. I personally have mourned two suicides and one vehicular death by youth in my ministry. Youth ministry in the Bush is a matter of life and death.

The problems of youth in the village are similar to youth anywhere, but often seem to be more intense. Dealing with grieving issues is one of the biggest struggles. Many youth have become calloused to death, resulting in very unhealthy grief patterns.

Cycles of abuse are all too common. Youth too often will follow in the footsteps of their parents who abuse alcohol. The same could be said of cycles of drug abuse, physical abuse, or sexual abuse. Most romantic relationships of youth are overly physical and unhealthy. Many of the struggles that youth have also center around identity. In a Native culture that is bombarded with Western culture, many youth are uncertain where to identify themselves. A Gospel of Hope that proclaims comfort for those that morn, freedom from abusive cycles, and an identity as children of God is desperately needed.

Village churches need to reach out to the youth if they are to be snatched from the jaws of death. Youth ministry has a great opportunity to introduce youth to the church. Unfortunately, few village churches can sustain a youth ministry. Often pastors are expected to do youth ministry in addition to their normal congregational duties.

Every village is different and one approach to youth ministry may not work in every situation. However, I am convinced that there are local people in every village that have gifts for doing youth ministry. Part of having an effective youth ministry in the village is to find those people and create a ministry team.

In addition to creating a local ministry team, part of success is taking advantage of being part of the larger state wide youth ministry team as well. Covenant Youth of Alaska (CYAK) has been the statewide youth department of the Evangelical Covenant Church of Alaska (ECCAK) since 1992. CYAK ministers to youth, ages 12-25, in their "Continuum of Care." CYAK provides support, resources, and training for youth workers in the Bush. CYAK also organizes fall and spring youth retreats in each region. They oversee many ministries, including Bible Camp in Unalakleet, college ministries in Fairbanks, Palmer/Wasilla, Anchorage, and Soldotna. If you have a youth ministry need, you should contact CYAK.

Last, but certainly not least, as missionaries to the youth of the Bush, we need to realize that God is already at work. We are not the savior, but we know the One that is. We are not charged with transforming the lives of the youth nor to transform the systems that they are in. Rather we are charged with shining a Light that brings Hope and the introduce youth to Jesus, the only one who can bring true transformation.

Evangelism Among the Alaska Native People

For more than 20 years, a Christian comedy duo from the Lower 48 has been visiting villages doing evangelism. A big part of their ministry is giving an altar call, asking, “If you were to die tonight, do you know where you’d go?” They then go on to give youth an opportunity to accept Jesus into their hearts for forgiveness of sins and a promise of eternal life. The duo has experienced great success both in Alaska and throughout the world. This particular duo has on their website that they have been to all 50 states and 14 different countries, and have seen more than 92,000 people make decisions for Christ.

I first encountered this comedy duo when I was doing youth ministry in a large village and I liked them a lot. In the hundreds of youth groups that I have led in the past 10 years, I have only gone to youth group without a plan one time. As I arrived at youth group the night that I had absolutely no plan about what I was going to do or talk about, I prayed. Before I told anyone of my lack of planning, one of the youth group volunteers told me that a Christian comedy duo was in town for a school function and might be able to stop by. Sometimes God works alongside us, other times God despite us. And God answers prayers.

The night that the comedy duo saved my bacon they gave an altar call and a few youth responded. To their responses I declared, “Praise the Lord!” In the coming months our youth group had a chance to follow up with these students and talk to them about their decisions; it became a chance for discipleship and a chance to go beyond a personal faith into a faith that is concerned with loving others as well.

The next year the comedy duo returned and visited another village. A month or two after their visit, I was asked to speak in this village for a youth event. However, I was specifically asked not to give an altar call during the event. I was curious why such a request was made, which opened up a long dialogue. Apparently, the youth worker at this village was upset that the comedy duo that had come earlier from the lower 48 was teaching an incomplete Gospel message. He was upset that the duo appeared more interested in a number to add to their decision counter more than they were interested in the people who made decisions living lives of following Jesus. He pointed out that many Christians visit villages, present a Gospel message, then leave and there is no

follow up. As a result, most of the youth in the village have prayed the “sinner’s prayer,” but few were actually living lives that reflected Christ.

The youth worker in this village brought up several good and interesting points, although I disagreed with his ultimate conclusion that we should no longer have altar calls at youth events.

The first point was that the Gospel message is almost always brought in by white Westerners. Unfortunately, I think that many Natives have learned from this trend that white people should be the ones in leadership in the church. Rather than looking for who among them should be built up for ministry, some Natives look for help to come from Outside. Rather than having a white Western man delivering an altar call, what if a speaker stepped down and invited a local Christian to share Christ?

The second point is that an incomplete Gospel message is being preached. There was some truth in that observation. With the onslaught of Western media in the Native culture, individualism has been chipping away at the Native values of family and community. What may have once been natural for a Native to do good works must now be re-taught to those new to the Christian faith. When the Gospel is preached, much more emphasis needs to be given to taking up our cross daily with Christ. More emphasis needs to be given to the result of transformation and loving both God and others.

The third point is that we are often are so interested in numbers that we forget about the person that the number represents. In villages, which are small communities, Western people often expect similar numbers as they would experience in the lower 48. Western people are much more likely to make a goal of filling a village church with at least 50 adults and 20 youth in attendance. Instead, of counting bodies, we should be looking for transformation and witness in our congregations.

The final point raised in our conversation was that, for the most part, we are sorely lacking in follow up and discipleship. I agreed with the youth worker’s evaluation that most of the youth had prayed the “sinner’s prayer,” yet were not following Christ. Where the comedy duo left off, no one had followed up with those that had made a decision in this village. I would like to suggest that this was not a failing of the comedy duo, but rather of the local church. We need to be intentional about seeking those who

we know have made decisions and find out if they really understood what they were doing and if they are really ready for a transformed life. We also need to have a system in place to disciple young Believers (young spiritually, not just young physically).

There are also issues which hinder evangelism that are specific to the Native culture. I recently worked on a 90 page report on conversion in the Alaska Native culture[25] and asked 5 simple questions of 45 participants. I asked: What are cultural strengths that encourage Natives to convert to Christianity? What are some cultural barriers that Natives face in conversion? What are some unique ways that Natives express their conversion and faith? What do you believe is necessary in order to convert to Christianity? And lastly what do you think could increase the number of conversions among Natives?

Although I don't have space in this section to go into too much depth, on the next page are the most common responses to those questions that were in my research report. To these I encourage readers to take these answers and engage them with others in the community. Ask one another in the church, what would it look like to apply these strengths, combat these barriers, and to express a uniquely Native faith in Christ?

1. What are cultural strengths that encourage Natives to convert to Christianity?
   - Spiritual awareness
   - Belief in a Provider/Creator
   - Community hospitality
   - Respect for Elders
   - Dependence on the land/Stewardship
   - Respect for others
   - Church history
   - Receptive to the Gospel
   - Generosity

2. What are some cultural barriers that Natives face in conversion?
   - "White" Christianity
   - Culture has been abused
   - Abuse (physical/sexual)
   - Peer/family pressure

3. What are some unique ways that Natives express their conversion and faith?
   - Music (Worship)
   - Testimony
   - Native Dance
   - Interaction with Creation

- Art

4. What do you believe is necessary in order to convert to Christianity?
   - Place faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior through belief in His life, death, & resurrection
   - Awareness of spiritual need
   - Holy Spirit
   - Life change
   - Repentance of sin
   - Surrender
   - Outward confession

5. What do you think could increase the number of conversions among Natives?
   - Mentoring/discipling
   - More youth outreach
   - More indigenous leaders
   - Holy Spirit
   - Holistic ministry
   - Realize the grace in the Image of God
   - Relational evangelism
   - God's Word
   - Commitment
   - Lead by example
   - Teach that Christ gives dignity
   - Prayer
   - Relevant Native church

Native Culture and the Gospel

All people are created in the image of God,[26] and so all cultures reflect attributes of the God of Scripture.[27] Some Christians are hesitant to praise any particular culture, with the fear that cultural values may be confused with the Gospel by which we are called to live or that the culture may become an idol. These concerns are valid. For quite some time, Western culture has assumed its perspective isn't a perspective at all, but it is 'the way things are.' All other perspectives and cultures are often judged by how well they fit into the Western framework for understanding the world. Wealth and military force have reinforced this view, and forced or persuaded millions of people around the globe to change.

Children of God compose Western culture, and so like every culture, it reflects certain godly attributes. However, Western people must read the scriptures with believers from other cultures to prayerfully discern how God is calling us to be transformed and live together as one body of Christ here and now. Studies show that the Church is quickly shrinking[28] in Europe and America like a salmonberry that has sat in the sun on the tundra through a hot July and August. Many have noted that the United States and Europe are the most difficult mission fields in the world right now because affluence, materialism and individualism make hearing God's Word so difficult.[29]

In Luke 10:25-37, Jesus points to the Samaritan as modeling the way that God calls all people to love their neighbor, showing mercy. He suggested that those who thought they were insiders when it came to the truth of God, the Levite and the Priest, were not in fact, obedient in being merciful. Jesus was born a Palestinian Jew, yet he did not point to a Jew, but to a Samaritan. The gospel has been translated over and over from culture to culture and language to language. “The church at every time and in every culture is in a continuing process of correction, admonition, repentance, conversion, engagement and change.”[30]

It is a blessing from our Creator (Agaayun) that people from different cultures are united into one body in Christ. We are called to learn from one another to get a more complete picture of who we are called to be (and become) as the people of God. Paul writes, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17) This section will explore some of the ways that traditional Alaska Native culture reflects many of the ways that God calls all people to live through the Scriptures.[3132]

Where I Come From

When my grandfather lived in the village of Hooper Bay, Alaska in the 1950’s there were no telephones, freezers, snow machines or four-wheelers. In 2010 there still isn’t plumbing except in teacher housing. My grandfather, who grew up in Colorado and Seattle said that the Alaska Native people were the strongest, smartest, toughest people he had ever met. They lived in the harshest climate on the planet making brilliant use of available resources. The men rose hours before the sun rose in the winter to prepare their dog teams for travel to get wood or to hunt.

I do not write this paper as any sort of expert or authority on Alaska Native culture or Christianity. I am a Swedish-American seminary student whose faith and life has been transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. God has used many Native friends to help me understand the Gospel and my identity as a Christian in ways examined below. My prayer is that in sharing these stories, the body of Christ will be built up. I hope that Native young adults and teenagers do not stop seeking the wisdom of their elders. All Christians must be mindful that many aspects of mainstream Western pop

culture and media are being embraced by youth, but often reflect values that hurt Christian communities.

Hospitality and Community

Be sure to welcome strangers into your home. By doing this, some people have welcomed angels as guests, without even knowing it. Hebrews 13:2
Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Romans 12:23
Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. 1 Peter 4:9
You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. –Leviticus 19:34

Josh Reese was new to Alaska. He moved to Anchorage to lead a young adult ministry and assist with worship music at First Covenant Church. His first trip to the Yup'ik Eskimo village of Scammon Bay was for the statewide annual meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church of Alaska (ECCAK). After unloading from the eight-seater plane, the group from Anchorage gathered with the critical mass from the rest of the state at the church for dinner and worship. As the evening wore to a close, Josh asked the local pastor where he was lodging for the night. He was told to walk to the end of the main road through town and stay at the green house on the right. His hosts were expecting him. He threw his North Face backpack over his shoulder, and walked the quarter mile through the snowy streets of 'Scammon' to knock at the door of his abode for the night. An Eskimo couple in their fifties opened the door, and said, "Hello!"

Josh introduced himself and explained that he was supposed to stay there for the night. The family quickly welcomed him inside, showed him where he could put his things and dished him up some caribou soup for a second dinner, insisting that he eat. After an evening night of sharing stories, Josh went to bed, and rejoined the conference the next morning after a hardy breakfast of sourdough pancakes with fresh wild blueberries and strong black coffee. He mentioned to the pastor how he had really enjoyed getting to know the family the night before, only to find out that he had knocked on the wrong door!

While this sort of thing may be more likely to happen in some villages than others, there is a strong value of hospitality in Alaska Native culture. Curtis Ivanoff shares a memory of his uncle in the village who would welcome him into his home whether he was busy or not, with the same greeting, “Hey Curtis! You’re right on time! Come have some (*insert fresh caught seasonal food here*)!” The culture in the villages is much less based on formal schedules than Western culture, which is not inherently more Christian, but the welcoming spirit of warm hospitality is a reflection of the Kingdom.

It was the mid-1970’s when television was first broadcast to many villages. An elder shared the story with me.[33] He explained that before television came to the villages the streets were alive with kids playing outside and adults were going house to house visiting and telling stories late into the night. The first broadcast was in the spring time and he went out bird hunting. He returned to the village in the late evening and it was still light out, but the streets were quiet and empty. Everyone was inside, sitting in front of the television set. In such a small community the impact of television in disjointing local communities is far more visible than in the rest of the country. While television and movies bring many other parts of the world into the home, there is less time for conversations, games and relationships face to face. Television forms the way we think about who we should be and what we should want, or else advertisers would not spend billions of dollars each year to convince us. Though it brings some good things into communities, Christians must not allow its influences to keep us from visiting with elders over coffee, playing outside or fellowshipping together.

Sharing: Moose, Goose, Freezers and Fish[34]

> *The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same. -Luke 3:11*
>
> *They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous sings were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together*

in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. - Acts 2:42-46

"…We must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive." -Acts 20:35

An elder in Hooper Bay shared this story with a friend who passed it down to me. When freezers first came to the village hunting practices changed. People used to often hunt more in broad daylight. It was a community celebration when God provided a catch. The bounty was shared generously. With a large animal, like a tuntuvak[35], mukluk[36] or arveq[37], the whole community could be blessed. Before there were freezers there were different methods for preserving meat. The most common were in drying it, in some cases, burying it so it could ferment, and also preserving it in seal oil.[38] When freezers came to the village, this elder noticed that more people started leaving for their hunting trips before light and returning after dark or very late in the summer. This was because many were hoping people would not know about their harvest and look down on them for not sharing the bounty. With freezers and change in culture, a more individualistic mentality took root. There is still a lot of sharing in the villages, but there is less communal sharing than there once was.

In many tribal groups, young hunters give the first animal they catch to an elder. The young hunter must pass along the first seal, the first beaver, the first rabbit…and so forth. This shows respect to the elders for sharing their wisdom in passing down traditional knowledge to the next generation. It also reflects the integrated nature of the community. Christians are called to give. One aspect of offering a tithe to God is acknowledging that all that we have comes from the Great Provider. We did not make the world, nor are we self-made. God made all that we have. In passing along the first animal caught to an elder, it is an acknowledgement that the land and its bounty are not ours to possess, but to enjoy and use as it has been passed down to us and entrusted to our care. Though this tradition began long before the Gospel came to Alaska, it reflects the same Spirit with which we are called to give and serve and provide for all those in our community, especially for those who may not longer be physically able to hunt for themselves.

Giving and sharing are both reflections of faith and trust in God that there will be enough to meet needs. After delivering his people from Egypt, God provided manna for them to eat in the desert.[39] He commanded them to take only what they needed for that day. People have faith that God will bring salmon up the river year after year, and this is reflected by taking only what is needed. It is much easier to remember that God is Provider when you must rely on animals returning to your area each year compared to going to the local grocery market where there is a greater illusion of human control and provision.

Another example of sharing in Native communities comes from Thanksgiving feasts. Timm Nelson was struck by the way that Native community adopted and transformed the American tradition when he moved to the Inupiaq village of Noatak. Most Alaska Native people do not celebrate Columbus or the pilgrims. Nelson observed, "At Thanksgiving feasts in the village, the whole community brings what they have to share, and share together. The youth serves the community and eats last. The food is passed out until it is gone, and people eat as much or as little as they require and take the rest home in Tupperware, providing food for the coming weeks for those who need it. The work is all done by volunteers."[40] Similar community meals are a regular part of life and have been a tradition long before anyone in Alaska had heard of Thanksgiving. They are known as Potlach, Potluck, and Nikipaq and often center around the church. In the second chapter of Acts a community of believers is described coming together and sharing their possessions in common. Feasting on the Lord's provision and enjoying fellowship through serving one another is a great embodiment of how we are called to enjoy the fruits of God's creation.

Life in and with the Country, with Open Eyes

> *"Ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you. Which of these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind." -Job 12:7-10*

God has spoken to people in the wilderness for quite some time.[41] This is reflected in the Old and New Testament in the Bible. God split the Red Sea to deliver his People from the Egyptians. He gave the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Jesus regularly withdrew to 'lonely places' to pray and the wilderness played a crucial role in his preparation for ministry. The ministry of John the Baptist took place in the wilderness and many prophets went there for refuge from persecution. Many Alaska Native people have witnessed a miracle of God's protection or provision when out in the country. Western people are often skeptical of miracles. They ask, "How do you know the miracles really happened or just weren't just a trick of the mind?" Western culture places a higher truth value on things that can be measured and repeated by science. Fortunately, miracles can't be controlled by people.

> *For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' – Acts 28:27*

Perhaps more miracles aren't observed in North America because so many ears are filled with headphones and so many eyes are fixed on a clock to make sure there is time to make it to the gym before shopping for dinner, cooking, cleaning up, helping the kids with homework, remodeling the attic, and balancing the family checkbook before watching the evening news, adding a new blog and going to bed. Noise and busyness can prevent us from hearing God. Life in the village is slower.

James Barefoot lived in a few different villages over 25 years. He observed that, "Alaska Natives see nature as something to be thankful for, to use, to yield to, and respect. They believe nature to be more powerful than themselves while the Western city dweller lives under the illusion that one can control nature and its effects on our lives."[42] Travel plans changing or being cancelled because of bad weather does not stress people out or 'ruin everything' but it provides an opportunity for more visiting with friends over coffee in town. Psalm 34:8 comes to mind, "Taste and see that the Lord is good, blessed are those who take refuge in him."

Students come from villages all over the state of Alaska to attend Covenant Bible Camp near Unalakleet. Beginning in 2004, students started complaining that they

weren't allowed to use their IPods to fall asleep, because they couldn't relax without their music. Each year, constant noise and music has become a more a part of life for young people in the villages. Village youth have access to Western pop culture like never before. The internet, music, movies, iPods and Satellite television offer a constant alternative reality to the river, the ocean, the tundra, and the stories of elders around the fire. Silence is difficult for most people in the United States, and filling life with noise makes it hard to hear God speak.

God spoke to Elijah in a whisper.[43] Many people who have stood on a mountaintop looking over unending hills of tundra, fished a quiet river or spent an afternoon picking berries have heard God in these quiet places. As the noise and constant stimulation from Western media increase for Native young people, the culture will continue to change more and more quickly. Young people have become less interested in living off the land, partially because to hunt well, one must be patient and listen carefully. There is no music or immediate gratification. Patience and silence become less and less comfortable to people who are constantly stimulated by images and sounds. Sadly, this cultural handicap in hearing the Spirit of God and sensitivity to spiritual presence comes with some of the benefits of technology. God's grace abounds, and all Christians can learn to listen and hear again.

Respecting Elders

"In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." -1 Peter 5:5

"Every time an elder passes away it is like a just library burned down."

–Hazel Freytag, college student from Unalakleet

The elders are the sources of knowledge. They know the land, plants and animals better than anyone. Much of their knowledge has not been recorded in books. Elders know which greens are best to eat and how to prepare them. There are thousands of details one must know to successfully harvest an animal and make good use of the meat and hide. There are countless stories of new people who come to

Alaska and try to do things their own way, only to end up frustrated, lost or dead. The environment can be dangerous.

A youth worker relatively new to a village went out snow machining way upriver with an elder from the church. The youth worker had ridden quite a bit and strayed from the trail to take little jumps off of snow drifts into the powder. When the elder looked over his shoulder and saw what he was doing he stopped his machine. The youth worker approached him to see what was up. The elder told him to stay on the trail, explaining that many people fall through the ice on this part of the river this time of year.

When the weather gets really cold the ice thickens quickly and pushes the water underneath with so much pressure that it squeezes up the edges, near the river banks. A thin layer of ice freezes over this water, which can be inches or waist deep. It is called overflow. It can be lethal because it is often hard to see, especially when the ice is covered with snow. It is very dangerous to get wet out in the country, especially when it is cold outside. Putting a snow machine through the ice isn't cheap.

The story illustrates the point that young people often think they know what they are doing, but aren't aware what is at stake. It is also a metaphor. It is wise to stay on the trail of those who have gone before you because it marks the path of good ice. Elders tell the stories that help young people know where they've come from and who they are, "Stories shape us and form the reality of our world,"[44] and faith comes by hearing (Romans 10:17). Traditional values were taught through stories. This is the same way that Jesus taught, through parables.

It is extremely important for the whole Church to return to heeding its elders and the stories they share. Scripture defines all people not how they are but by whose they are: beloved children, created in the image of God (Ephesians 5:1, Genesis 1:27). 1 Corinthians 6:20 says, "You were bought with a price, therefore honor God with your body." Jesus died so we could be at peace with God and one another, and we shouldn't act like this didn't happen. Christ died, and Christ rose so that we could be reconciled to God and others, to become whole people, who we were created to become. All Christians are called to watch and learn from our elders and seek their stories so we learn how to navigate the rivers of life and so we can live, marry, raise kids, work, play, serve and die well. Paul writes, "Imitate me, as I imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Some Questions

This section has not covered all the bases. There are things in Native culture that resonate or reflect the Gospel that I do not explore here. One friend who has lived and worked with conflict resolution pointed out that there is a desire for reconciliation present in the Alaska Native culture unlike any other culture he has seen. 2 Corinthians 5:17-18 teaches that God has given us the ministry of reconciliation, just as he reconciled us to himself through Christ. This would be a good topic to explore. There are also many more texts in scripture that were not mentioned that relate to the topics mentioned above.

It would be good to see a similar project completed by a Native Alaskan, and to hear what a Native brother or sister in Christ sees in their own culture or Western culture that reflects the Kingdom. Many new insights would sure come forward. This paper is a reflection of numerous conversations with Alaska Native people and people from other cultures who have lived in Native communities, but it is not complete!

Conclusion

While enjoying some dry fish and seal oil, during a *Nikipaq* night at Alaska Christian College in Soldotna, Tom Mute originally from Bethel, AK said, “This isn’t tradition, man, this is how it is.” As a person who has only spent limited time enjoying living with Alaska Native brothers and sisters in Christ, its hard for me not to notice and appreciate the powerful ways the culture reflects so many aspects of the Kingdom of God that are particularly broken in mainstream American culture, even in the Church. I do not want to idolize Native culture as the model for perfection, but rather a powerful witness to the Western church that needs to remember that its elders must be respected and heard. Hospitality is essential in communities that are becoming more and more fragmented by people choosing to forget their neighbors to find relationships that are more appealing on the internet. As Christians we are called to share our blessings, not just after are freezers are filled. We have to tell the stories of God’s People to remember who we are and that all we have comes the Great Provider. As we obey the command to love God with all we are and have and loving others as we love

ourselves, [45] we find that we are not observing tradition, but living the lives that God created us to live. Living God's way in his world is like being a salmon smelt swimming with the current downriver into the ocean of God's love rather than spawning upstream as a rotting maluksuk.[46] Native young people have a unique opportunity to honor their elders and cultural traditions, but even more importantly, the God of all creation, in sharing, giving, serving and listening.

> *On this mountain the LORD All-Powerful will prepare for all nations a feast of the finest foods… the best meats will be served. Here the LORD will strip away the burial clothes that cover the nations. The LORD All-Powerful will destroy the power of death and wipe away all tears. No longer will his people be insulted everywhere. The LORD has spoken! At that time, people will say, "The LORD has saved us! Let's celebrate. We waited and hoped-now our God is here."* *-Isaiah 25:6-9*

Our God reigns. He has saved us! He made us for fellowship together in the Spirit! This is not tradition. *This is how it is.*

Authors

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Dale explains the history of the Norton Sound and Yukon Kuskokwim Delta regions. He also explains the history of the villages, the language, subsistence lifestyle, communication styles, population counts in the communities, and membership counts in the churches. Dale is a Cup'ig Alaska Native from Nunivak Island located in Southwest Alaska 30 miles from the mainland coast. Dale is seeking a Master of Arts in Christian Ministry (MACM) with expected graduation date of May 2011. Dale is married to Mary, originally from Toksook Bay on Nelson Island in southwest Alaska. They have two children, Clowie age 5 and Cody age 3.

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Adam London

Adam London is the husband of Shirleen and father of Thomas and a baby on the way. Adam's Inupiaq name is Umialikaq, named by North Slope elder, Jennie Felder, after her own grandfather. Alaska is his home, although he spent much of his childhood growing up in Colorado. Adam attended the first class of Alaska Christian College in 2001-2002 and has done at least part-time youth ministry in Alaska ever since. Adam graduated from North Park University in 2004 with a B.A. Youth Ministry. Adam has worked with Covenant Bible Camp, Unalakleet Covenant Church, Alaska Christian College, Nome Covenant Church, KICY, Campus Christian Fellowship (a part of Fairbanks Covenant Church), Arigaa college ministry (a part of First Covenant Church, Anchorage), Amundsen Educational Center, and Covenant Youth of Alaska. As part of his ministry experience, he traveled to about 40 different villages in the past 5 years and loves village life. Adam has heard the call to be a village pastor, and is responding to the call by attending North Park Theological Seminary and is working towards his Master of Divinity degree. During the summer you can find the London family on the tundra picking berries or on the river catching fish for the winter. Adam's wife is a teacher by trade, so as a preacher-teacher one-two punch, they pray that they will be fishers of more than fish, but also of the Eskimo people.

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Nick Bruckner

Nick Bruckner was born in Anchorage but mostly grew up Outside (Alaska), until returning to his roots after graduating from North Park University. He is the grandson of Don and Eunice Bruckner. He spent two years serving with Covenant Youth of Alaska, helping plant a ministry for Native young adults at the Job Corps Center in Palmer (Pipiaq). He also served with the Arigaa ministry at University of Alaska Anchorage and Covenant Bible Camp. He is currently working towards a M. Div degree at North Park Theological Seminary prayerfully anticipating a future in Alaskan ministry. Nick has a strong interest in the way Christ is made known to people through culture and creation and contributes a section exploring some of the ways God's will for people is revealed through Alaska Native culture. He enjoys subsistence living and being outside in God's creation, especially on a boat, quad, or snow machine.
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Jamie Rose

Jamie Rose is the husband of Erica (Ellingson) Rose, the son of Dave and Julie Rose, and the brother of Katie and Kristofer Rose. He has been claimed by Jesus Christ to be called a child of the King. He is honored to call the Evangelical Covenant Church his family within the family of God. As a result of seeking first the kingdom he is pursuing a Masters of Divinity from North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago. He is born and raised in Alaska and loves days spent outdoors. He has lived his formative years to date in Angoon, Palmer and Wasilla, Unalakleet, and Chicago. Erica and he are prayerfully anticipating God’s call to…
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[21] Osahito Miyaoka, Osamu Sakiyama,and Michael E. Krauss.
[22] Frances Smith from online Q & A
[23] Email from Henry Oyoumick
[24] Phone interview with Heidi Ivanoff February 2010
[25] London, "Conversion in the Alaska Native Culture"
[26] Genesis 1:26
[27] H. Richard Niebuhr wrote a book called Christ and Culture that gives different ways to understand the relationship between Christian faith and non-Christian culture. Niebuhr, H. Richard. Christ and Culture. Harper Collins: San Francisco, 2001.
[28] Olson, David T. American Church in Crisis. Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2008.
[29] The most commonly referenced book on this point is from Lesslie Newbigin. His book is The Gospel in a Pluralist Society. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1989.
[30] Guder, Darrel. Ed. The Missional Church. Eerdmens: Grand Rapids, 1998. Pg. 224.
[31] There are many Alaska Native tribes, which have different traditions, languages and cultural values. This paper will explore distinctive values within each culture, which are common to most tribal groups, though they may be manifest in different ways in each culture.
[32] Most of the cultural knowledge present in this paper comes from oral tradition handed down from Inupiaq and Yup'ik Eskimo friends from numerous villages. The Alaska Native Knowledge Network at the University of Alaska Fairbanks has a website that lists cultural values claimed by different tribal groups in the state, as well as those held in common between all Alaska Native Peoples. These include: "*Show respect to others, share what you have, Know who you are, accept what life brings, have patience, live carefully, take care of others, honor your elders, pray for guidance, see connections-all things are related.*" http://ankn.uaf.edu/ANCR/Values/index.html, 2006.
[33] This story was relayed to me by Herb Ivanoff of Unalakleet in February of 2010.
[34] See also*: Hebrews 13:12, 2 John 1:5, Proverbs 22:9*
[35] Yup'ik Eskimo word for moose, Hooper Bay is a Yup'ik village. There are many Alaska Native languages not represented in this paper simply because the Covenant church is only present in Yup'ik, Cup'iq and Inupiaq villages, not because their cultures reflect the Kingdom any more or less.
[36] This is the Yup'ik word for bearded seal, which is oogruk in one Inupiaq dialect (also spelled ugruk).
[37] Yup'ik Eskimo word for walrus.
[38] Rendered seal fat is used as a preservative for meat and greens, but also as a condiment for many kinds of food.
[39] Exodus 16
[40] This quotation, used by permission, came from an e-mail correspondence on February 6, 2010.
[41] See also: Gen 1:14-31, Matt 6:28, Psalm 34:8, Num 35:33-34, Psalm 148. These texts are not a complete list, but point to the goodness of God's creation.
[42] This quotation is from an e-mail exchange on 1/30/2010. Used by permission.
[43] 1 Kings 19:11-13
[44] Roxborough, Alan J and Fred Romanuk. The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006. Pg. 69
[45] Matthew 22:36-40
[46] Maluksuk is Inupiaq for decomposing salmon that is spawning to lay eggs and die upstream at the end of its life.