

# Alaska Mission District Rationale

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## Current Mission, Goals, and Vision of the Alaska United Methodist Conference

Our Conference Vision was presented and approved at the Alaska United Methodist Conference on June 5, 2010. This vision is offered to the individual churches to take, and to study, and to pray about. It is designed to be “OPEN”...recognizing that the mission of each individual church will reflect their individual settings. This is offered to our local churches and it is hoped that pastors and laypersons will begin discussing how this shapes their ministry today and into the future. The Visioning Team is committed to keep this mission before us and to work on resources to be used in the local church setting.<sup>1</sup>

### **Mission Statement**

The Mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Held and supported by the transforming relationship with God through Christ, we of the Alaska United Methodist Conference seek to be a community that creates a home for all peoples, finds our hope through grace and journeys together into God’s preferred future.

### **Five Top Priorities**

1. Stewardship
2. Revitalization of Churches
3. New Church Development
4. Native Outreach
5. Youth and Young Adults

### **Four Questions**

We have *four questions* to guide our discussions in our settings. These are meant to focus us and force us all to ask the big questions about who we are, who are the people in our communities that aren’t being reached, and what kind of sacrifices are we willing to make as we discern where it is that God wants us to go. Each church will come up with different answers here.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/the-vision-and-mission-of-the-alaska-conference/>

Question of Purpose:

**Why are you (we) here?**

Question of Mission:

**Where are you (we) going?**

Question of Community:

**Who will walk with you (us)?**

Question of Commitment:

**What will you (we) die for?**

## Our Vision Theme

Leading **GOD'S**  
20/20 VISION: To **new horizons**

This vision theme is for all of our churches to take back to their local settings. This theme gives us a time frame/benchmark of the year 2020. So, we have nine years to be focusing on this in our local settings and nine years to be thinking ahead to where God is calling each of our churches in the years to come. And we look at this, understanding that we are moving forward to a horizon...but that it's God's horizon. We look at this, praying that God would, indeed, give us 20/20 Vision.

Ten years ago, our conference launched 20/20 Vision: Leading to God's New Horizons. We dreamed about where God would lead us, and how stewardship, revitalization of churches, new church development, Native outreach, and youth and young adults would be priorities for ministries in the years ahead. Now, ten years later, we've seen many fruits of God's work in mission and ministry in Alaska. As we enter a new decade, we recognize the social and economic changes in Alaska and continue to look with hope toward God's preferred future as we continue to make disciples of Jesus Christ in Alaska through vital and innovative ministries.

## Rationale for Status Change

During the Alaska Annual Conference of 2016, General Secretary Thomas Kemper of the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) announced that it was his intention to cease the designation of missionary conferences within the United States. Historically, GBGM provided support to the Alaska Conference in terms of property management, missionary placement, and financial support. This support has decreased in recent decades, and the 2016 announcement was accompanied by a further decrease in the amount of support offered to the Alaska Conference by GBGM, now consisting solely of a \$60,000 block grant, which is mainly intended to help with moving expenses for pastors entering or leaving the Alaska Conference.

Because of decreased financial support from outside, the Alaska Conference has been spending from reserves for several years. At the current rate, reserves will be depleted in three years. This means missions and ministries vital to Alaskan communities would likely diminish and potentially cease to exist. Rather than halting essential work and witness around Alaska, the Alaska Conference Leadership Team is seeking creative ways to continue the Methodist movement in Alaska.

Since missionary conferences are not viable sustainable entities without being connected to a larger body, the changing relationship with GBGM means Alaska must seek out other partners to ensure the future of Methodist ministry and mission in urban, suburban, rural, and remote places around the state. Without long-term partnerships, vital missions and ministries in Alaska are financially unsustainable. The Alaska Conference has initiated collaborative conversations with GBGM and with the PNW Conference to develop a plan for a sustainable future for missions and ministries in Alaska.

The Alaska Conference does not meet the *Book of Discipline* requirements to become a regular annual conference, nor is it financially sustainable alone. Because of this, the option to change the status of Alaska from a missionary conference to a mission district is the most promising path forward. The General Conference is the only body that can release the Alaska Conference from Missionary Conference status, and since General Conference only meets every four years, there is urgency in acting now. The Leadership Team of the Alaska Conference has asked Bishop Elaine Stanovsky to call a special session of the Alaska Conference to vote on a petition to General Conference asking for Alaska to be released from missionary conference status in order to become a mission district of another conference. There are four conditions for a mission district in the *Book of Discipline*, any one of which must be met to receive the designation of mission district. The Alaska Conference definitively meets all four conditions, as is discussed in detail in the following sections.

Since the Alaska Conference has had a close working relationship with the Oregon-Idaho and Pacific Northwest Conferences for several decades, including sharing episcopal leadership and conference staff positions, it is logical to continue our partnership with one of our sister conferences in the Greater Northwest Episcopal Area.

# Disciplinary Requirements for Mission District

¶ 415.4 Any district may be designated to be a mission district, and the district superintendent of that district, or his or her designee, shall be the agent in charge of the mission status, nature, and goals of the district. ... A mission district may be designated when any of the following conditions exist: 1) Membership opportunities and resources are limited and not likely to result in regular status for an extended period of time. 2) A strategic demographic, cultural, or language opportunity for serving a limited population is present. 3) It is expected that long-term sustaining funding from sources outside the district will be necessary to enable the district to exist. 4) The district is geographically located in a remote location from other districts of the annual conference. When any of these conditions exist, the bishop, in consultation with the congregational development area of the annual conference, may designate any district a mission district. The mission district may be organized in the same manner and have the same rights and powers as any district.

## Condition 1

*Membership opportunities and resources are limited.*

Many United Methodist churches in Alaska are located in rural and remote towns, and membership opportunities are limited by a small population base. Some churches serve towns that have high numbers of seasonal employees or retired “snowbirds,” and the population fluctuates greatly from season to season.

Resources are also limited in many locations served by local churches in Alaska. One pastor reports that their church “[is] heavily dependent upon the fishing season ... but as climate change continues to effect the salmon run, it is also impacting our economy and the level of need in and around us, as well as the level of erosion of the shoreline along the river” which will further impact the town’s economy.<sup>2</sup>

Another pastor reports that resources are also limited by the extremely high cost of living, even in areas close to Anchorage: “Housing is about as expensive as where I was living in Seattle but average incomes are a lot lower, there is less job stability, and most other cost of living factors (health care, transportation, groceries, utilities, etc.) are also a lot higher.”<sup>3</sup>

Even in the capital city, Juneau, it is essential for churches to partner with government and community organizations to address food insecurity among school aged children. Douglas Community UMC strives to help meet these needs through Feeding Juneau’s Future, backpack programs, and summer lunch

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<sup>2</sup> Tichenor 1

<sup>3</sup> Reijns 1

programs.<sup>4</sup> Seasonal employment and low wage jobs are common in Alaska, and year-round residents feel the pinch, particularly in the winter months when heating costs increase and transportation is more difficult. Likewise, Aldersgate UMC in Juneau was intentionally planted in the midst of a low-income housing area in Mendenhall Glacier Valley to better partner with people living on the margins<sup>5</sup>. The church strives to meet the needs of the community, particularly by providing affordable childcare. With low employment rates and high cost of living and transiency, membership and resources are limited.

The limitation of membership and resources is felt particularly in rural and remote communities, such as Sitka. Sitka UMC is located on the island of Sitka in Southeast Alaska. It is only accessible by plane or boat. With a population of 9,000 people, seasonal employment, high cost of living, little low-income housing, and a growing senior population, the membership opportunities and resources in Sitka are severely limited.<sup>6</sup> Sitka UMC helps make the community more resilient through their ministries and partnerships.

The seasonal nature of employment in Alaska is detrimental to year-round sustainability. Both human and financial resources diminish during the winter, and this is experienced in a drastic way by towns that rely heavily on tourism and fishing for their economic base. For example, the town of Seward's population explodes in the summer with visitors arriving on cruise ships, tourists going on wildlife and glacier tours, fisherman heading to the rivers and the bay, and campers and hikers enjoying the mountains and beaches.<sup>7</sup> All of these tourists swell the population of the town, as do the hundreds of additional seasonal workers who serve them. During the winter, the population shrinks and the financial resources ebb. This makes financial sustainability difficult, which is further exacerbated by aging populations who chose to become snow birds and leave Alaska during the winter, further diminishing membership and resources.

## Condition 2

*A strategic demographic, cultural, or language opportunity for serving a limited population is present.*

A perennial church vitality question asks, "If your church closed, would your community notice?" In many Alaskan communities, the answer is a resounding, "Yes!" In the unforgiving Alaskan winters, homelessness and food insecurity are dire circumstances, and churches through the state participate in or lead feeding and housing projects in their communities. Notably, the Willow Community Food Pantry serves over 700 people and distributes an additional 50 bags of food to children each week during the summer. According to the latest census information, this means over 30% of the population of Willow receives food through

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<sup>4</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/10/07/a-door-for-community-douglas-community-umc/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/09/23/neighbors-out-the-front-door-aldersgate-umc/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/09/30/small-church-big-heart-sitka-umc/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/03/24/a-tale-of-two-churches/>

the United Methodist Church. Alaskan churches are a significant part of the thin social safety net of many of our communities.

Because of this thin social safety net, UM churches in Alaska have a history of partnering with other organizations to improve the overall health and number of services available in communities. For example, the Willow church was instrumental in helping establish a clinic, public transportation, a health organization, and a recycling center in the community. The Homer UMC helped found the Hospital Auxiliary, the Haven House domestic violence shelter, and the Homer Community Food Pantry. Since many of our communities are so small, pastors become key leaders and congregants the driving force behind community health improvement projects.

Alaskan communities contain high numbers of people who fall on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum, and United Methodist entities do a great deal to help provide services and enrichment for those in need. For example, the Eagle River Methodist Camp in Juneau holds Camp Champ annually, which is a secular camp that provides summer camp experiences to children who are experiencing homelessness, have incarcerated parents, are living in a shelter, or experience poverty, parental addiction, or other challenges.<sup>8</sup> Eagle River Methodist Camp partners with the Juneau School District, regional churches, and social service agencies to identify children in need. This type of partnership with secular agencies is a hallmark of ministry in Alaska to help meet the needs of people who struggle economically or in other ways.

Alaska also has multiple military bases which have transient populations in need of spiritual care and support while they are stationed in Alaska. New Hope Methodist Presbyterian Church in North Pole is situated near Fort Wainwright, an Army base, and Eielson Air Force Base. The personnel stationed there and their families are an integral part of the New Hope ministries, and the majority of the children who attend the New Hope preschool are children of service men and women.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, New Hope Methodist Presbyterian Church maintains a vital connection to the village of Kaktovik, a community of about 300 mostly Inupiat people, which is located on an island off the north coast of Alaska. They have had no resident pastor for many years, yet the partnership with New Hope allows them to host a visiting pastor occasionally to provide worship services and Christian education opportunities.<sup>10</sup>

First UMC Anchorage also reaches across cultures to share ministry with First Samoan UMC. First Samoan UMC was founded 24 years ago. They share facilities and services with the First UMC Anchorage congregation, including quarterly worship with communion and neighborhood activities, such as building a

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<sup>8</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/11/04/doors-opening-to-gods-love-in-action-eagle-river-methodist-camp-south-east/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/10/22/doors-to-a-new-hope-new-hope-methodist-presbyterian-church/>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

float for the annual 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade. Music is a significant part of both culture and worship, and their ministries include a vibrant youth fellowship. First Samoan UMC also partners with Ola Toe Fuataina UMC Samoan Fellowship to hold both religious and cultural events.

Ole Toe Fuataina means “Newness of Life,” and this fellowship conducts all of its worship and ministry in the Samoan language.<sup>11</sup> They incorporate people from different places, villages, and denominations, to worship and study together. There is a strong emphasis on music and youth ministries.

Every Nation UMC is a new church plant in Anchorage in a neighborhood that contains some of the most diverse middle and high schools in the United States.<sup>12</sup> Every Nation UMC is open to people of all cultures and celebrates diversity by sharing food from a variety of cultures and singing hymns in many languages. This church plant intentionally reflects the diversity of its community.

Korean UMC provides a home for Korean immigrants to worship and learn in Korean. They celebrate their culture, and the church helps act as a bridge between cultures.<sup>13</sup>

Partnering with people of different cultures has always been a priority for Anchor Park UMC in Anchorage. They have hosted the Tongan Fellowship since 1978, sharing in its cultural gifts, music, and worship. Recently, Anchor Park reached out to a new demographic to meet the needs of a growing number of people in Alaska affected by addiction and substance abuse. To help address the opioid crisis in their area, they created and host the REAL About Addiction support group, which has led the congregation to pack Narcan kits for the city.<sup>14</sup>

St. Peter the Fisherman UMC in Ninilchik also addresses addiction by hosting AA and NA meetings, which provides a critical service to a community that has few community meeting spaces.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Soldotna UMC provides a food pantry for their area and cooks free weekly community meals. They also partner with local churches to serve as cold weather shelters for people who experience homelessness.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/07/15/finding-newness-of-life-through-our-doors-ola-toe-fuataina-um-samoan-fellowship/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.asdk12.org/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&DomainID=70&ModuleInstanceID=12586&ViewID=6446EE88-D30C-497E-9316-3F8874B3E108&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=20635&PageID=133>

<sup>13</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/05/13/two-doors-for-two-cultures-korean-umc/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/06/02/welcome-love-serve-anchor-park-umc/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/05/28/living-into-our-history-st-peter-the-fishermans-umc-in-ninilchik/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/05/20/come-to-the-table-and-eat-soldotna-umc/>

## Condition 3

*It is expected that long-term sustaining funding from sources outside the district will be necessary to enable the district to exist.*

Ministry in Alaska is expensive, challenging, and most of all, unpredictable. On November 20, 2018, a 7.1 earthquake rocked South Central Alaska, collapsing a highway overpass, rendering at least one school unusable, destroying houses, and in the case of The UMC of Chugiak, damaging the church building. A year after the earthquake, the portico of the church remained closed for safety reasons. Even after working with FEMA to repair the building, the cost was more than the congregation could provide on its own.<sup>17</sup> As an essential part of the communities of Chugiak and Eagle River, The UMC of Chugiak helps supply basic needs to families in need, offers a safe and warm after school space for young people, and provides a much needed Recycle for a Reason program to help reduce and reuse items in the communities that might otherwise go to waste. The financial burden of building repair endangers their ability to be in ministry with their community.

Many churches in Alaska have relied on Volunteers in Mission (VIM) teams for construction and repairs, most notably Girdwood Chapel UMC. Outside fundraising and VIM team work provided the lion's share of time and resources for completing the new church building in Girdwood, which at the time was the only church in the entire community.

Fairbanks First UMC, a church founded as a mission by missionary churches in Alaska, has always relied on outside funding to continue its work in Alaska. Recently, Fairbanks First partnered with the Fairbanks Rescue Mission, and with the help of VIM teams, constructed a housing community for chronically homeless adults.<sup>18</sup> This work was only possible through outside partnerships and resources.

Unalaska UMC is located on an island on the Aleutian Chain 800 miles from mainland Alaska. Even by Alaskan standards, Unalaska is remote. Partnerships with churches in the Lower 48 have financially sustained the ministries of Unalaska UMC for many years. Unfortunately, with the changing political climate of the denomination, some of those partnerships are at risk or have been severed, leaving the people of Unalaska in a financially unstable situation. In a constantly changing community where most work is part time or seasonal, isolation is severe, and resources are desperately limited, the church is a point of stability and hospitality. By providing clothing, household goods, and family recreation, the Unalaska UMC is a fixed point in an ever-changing community.<sup>19</sup> That work will only be able to continue with long-term outside financial support.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/09/16/our-doors-are-open-the-umc-of-chugiak/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/08/12/born-of-mission-fairbanks-first-umc/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/09/03/when-your-doors-are-like-hatches-unalaska-umc/>

First UMC of Ketchikan, founded in 1901, is the first completed church building in the first incorporated town in Alaska. This church has a significant presence in this town of about 8,000 people. The church's hostel was established in the 1960's and is staffed by volunteers assigned by the General Board of Global Ministries. The church is also the First City Homeless Shelter and the Ketchikan Warming Center, providing safe and warm space day and night for both those who experience homelessness and for tourists who need a place to take a break.<sup>20</sup> Ketchikan has long relied on outside funding to sustain its leadership and ministries. Former pastors of this church were GBGM missionaries.

Willow UMC began as part of the Parks Highway Parish. With outside financial support and the help of VIM teams, the church became a single point charge and was able to build a sanctuary, fellowship hall, and parsonage. Later, they expanded the food pantry in the original church chapel. Today, Willow UMC provides emergency assistance to the community through gas vouchers, firewood, heating oil assistance, showers, water, food, and much more.<sup>21</sup> Willow UMC credits VIM teams and partnerships with churches and conferences outside of Alaska for sustaining their missions and ministries in Willow and the surrounding areas.

Almost every church in the Alaska Conference has been blessed by the work of VIM teams and by partnerships with individuals, churches, and conferences in the Lower 48 who have helped provide building materials and labor, Sunday school curriculum, Bibles, even altar-ware. These partnerships and resources are essential for the long-term survival of ministry in Alaska.

## Condition 4

*The district is geographically located in a remote location from other districts of the annual conference.*

Not only is Alaska far removed from other Annual Conferences, churches within the Alaska Conference are oftentimes located at a great distance from one another and face significant transportation challenges, such as flights, ferries, or long drives. That means relationships within communities are vitally important for establishing and nourishing social cohesion and support. Many people in Alaska moved from "Outside," which means that neighbors quickly become family. UM churches in Alaska provide a natural and much needed avenue for support in areas and climates that are extremely isolating.

Because of the vast geographic expanse, Alaskan churches also play a key role in emergency services and disaster response. The Homer UMC is an emergency shelter for the town of Homer, which is located at the end of the highway system. The emergency shelter opens after earthquakes and during tsunami warnings.<sup>22</sup> Christ First UMC became the FEMA Disaster Recovery Center after the 2018 Cook Inlet

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<sup>20</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/08/26/doors-for-two-seasons-first-umc-of-ketchikan/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/07/22/when-the-doors-open-to-the-whole-community-willow-umc/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/03/17/tsunami-hospitality/>

earthquake.<sup>23</sup> St. John UMC in Anchorage opened its doors to host residents of Karluk Manor, a housing-first model for helping homeless persons who struggle with chronic alcoholism<sup>24</sup>, when their building had to be evacuated following the earthquake. After the Sockeye Fire in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley<sup>25</sup>, Willow UMC was instrumental in providing long-term disaster response.

Nome Community UMC partners with sixteen other communities in the Norton Sound Region for mission and ministry.<sup>26</sup> This church operates the only thrift store in the region, providing clothing and household goods to remote areas far from the road systems. Additionally, Nome Community UMC works with the Quyana Care Center (an assisted living facility), serves elders and youth through the Nome Community Center, acts as a homeless shelter and youth court, and provides layettes to every baby born in Nome. They provide vital connection to people across a huge geographic area.

Finally, the geographic sprawl of Alaska means that there are vast areas that do not have access to mainline Protestant theology. Because of this, some union congregations have formed, such as New Hope Methodist Presbyterian Church, which was founded 46 years ago in North Pole to provide Bible study and worship for mainline Protestants living in the area.<sup>27</sup> Access to mainline theology in remote areas was also the impetus for the Parks Highway circuit, a ministry that encompassed a 170 mile round trip drive from Palmer to Trapper Creek, including Christ First UMC in Wasilla and a Bible study group in Talkeetna.<sup>28</sup> While the people of Alaska comprise the whole theological spectrum, smaller, independent, more conservative churches have thrived in more rural and remote parts of the road system while mainline Protestantism has faded. Mainline Christians are an underserved population in many Alaskan towns because of their distance from larger, more established mainline churches.

## Conclusion

The Alaska United Methodist Conference is a vital part of the social safety nets of the communities served all around Alaska. In order to continue to make disciples of Jesus Christ, the Alaska Conference must move forward in more creative and sustainable ways. The logical next step is to be released from missionary conference status in order to be designated a mission district of another conference which can provide financial and administrative support so Alaskan churches can continue their vital work across the Last Frontier.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/04/29/who-is-my-neighbor-christ-first-umc/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/04/22/welcome-to-st-john-st-john-umc/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/07/22/when-the-doors-open-to-the-whole-community-willow-umc/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/06/25/finding-community-through-the-back-door-nome-community-umc/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://alaskaumc.org/2019/10/22/doors-to-a-new-hope-new-hope-methodist-presbyterian-church/>

<sup>28</sup> Talbott 1