

Greeting:

A wonderful salutation from the epistle to the Galatians by Paul.

³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen

SERMON:

Better times. We all want something better.

The promise of better times ahead –something many of us wait for.

1. Better times in our country.
 2. Better times in our families.
 3. Better times in our communities and schools.
 4. And over the next couple days, the many things we, the Alaska United Methodists, hope get better.
- To

We Christians live under the conviction that God brings the better times.

A call is not always easy to carry. It sometimes sends us to places where we might not want to go—or at least to places we are not too sure about. There are too many unanswered questions in responding to a call—even a call that comes from the one we call Lord. The difficult thing is that those questions never quite go away. We might be years into following this call, and suddenly the questions come back. “What am I doing?” “What have I gotten myself into?” “If this really is a call from God, why isn’t it working out better?” These are only some of the questions that come to us. You might have your own that you want to share. Or not share. Just wrestle.

Our United Methodist Mission statement reads in paragraph 120 of our Book of Discipline: The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

During the Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940, Winston Churchill said of the brave men of the Royal Air Force, “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”

A similar statement could be made concerning the missionaries from our churches. Compared to the larger body of Christians, who are mostly content to remain at home, our missionary force represents a small, almost insignificant percentage of the whole. Many of our clergy came to Alaska as missionaries, seeking adventure, hoping to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to Alaska’s Native peoples.

Yet, today, ...**yestoday ...**, many individual in some 100 communities throughout Alaska rightfully wonder, “What happened to the missionaries who came to bring us the stories of Jesus Christ?”

I hope this message encourages some of us to consider an expanded mission throughout Alaska. I hope that our earnestness is such that we are willing to go. I hope we become that mission district whose churches are consumed with an expanded missionary vision. I hope our Alaska United Methodists’ main aim is more than survival or maintenance. ... I often feel like that proverbial lonely voice out in the wilderness or perhaps a lonely voice out in the tundra, but I felt emboldened listening to our Bishop’s recent sermon on neighboring. ...

I ask a couple questions tonight - the first, “What is our call as a proposed mission district?”

First, a bit of Alaska mission history pertinent to us (some of you have heard this before): Christianity was first systematically introduced to Alaska Natives by Russian Orthodox priests in the late eighteenth century, but for several decades they restricted their activities to southern and southwestern Alaska. The Presbyterians became involved in Alaskan missionary work in the 1870s, but only in southeastern Alaska. By 1880 several other Protestant denominations joined with the Presbyterians in a verbal comity agreement whereby our then Territory was divided into denominational spheres of influence.

Within the North Slope area, Point Hope and Point Lay were selected by the Episcopal Church. The remaining six NSB communities were selected by the Presbyterian Church, as were the communities on Saint Lawrence Island along with their early work in Southeast Alaska. The rest of Alaska was carved out by other denominations. That influence is still strong today as communities state that they are Moravian, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Covenant, Russian Orthodox, or rarely as United Methodist.

But then some 75 to 100 years ago many missionaries left their fields throughout the remote communities of Alaska leaving some 100 or so communities without spiritual leadership. That situation was the primary reason I came into the ministry.

We, the Alaska United Methodist Conference, funded and convened an ecumenical gathering of Alaska Native Elders and Pastors to discuss impacts and challenges facing communities lacking pastoral care on a regular basis. We supported Giving Voice for about 15 years. I thank you for the support and sponsorship of this vital part of defining our Native Ministries.

I speak about today's situation primarily within the North Slope Borough and Saint Lawrence Island as the ministry I am involved in operates within the 10 communities scattered there. But ... I know the situation throughout much of rural Alaska is the same as what we see in our work served by Intergenerational Arctic Ministries.

Intergenerational Arctic Ministries (or IAM) began in 2016 when the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church USA visited, offering apologies for harm done to communities of Saint Lawrence Island and across the North Slope of Alaska by boarding schools and changes to our Native cultures that did not seem "Christian" to those early missionaries.

Intergenerational Arctic Ministries concentrates on six main areas of ministry. Our largest group are the listeners within each community. They are taught using the Stephen's Ministry curriculum on providing care. They are also asked to generate daily reports on all aspects of community life on a simple one-page electronic form. Our listeners also provide support for individuals and families facing critical situations until trained specialists can come to take over their care.

Our Healing and Renewal team offers prayer ministry for our communities at least twice a year with prayer circles and on-site, hands on prayer teams. Our prayer teams receive training offered by Elijah House on effective prayer ministry for healing and support during troubling times.

Our 12-step program incorporates the cultural values many of our communities and organizations feel are important for our native cultures to continue. Our leaders come with prior experiences with Alcoholics Anonymous and are taught team leadership using the Internal Family Systems addiction healing programs.

Our Collective Impact team gathers the daily data generated by our Listeners and generates reports pertinent to each community. These reports are provided to our back bone organizations (North Slope Borough and Arctic Slope Regional Corporation) and to Steering Committees for each community.

The Steering Committees are volunteer individuals who meet at least twice a year to digest the reports about their community. These reports deal with health, infrastructure, desires for improvements, and other items

affecting the people in each community. The steering committee prioritizes items to discuss and develop possible solutions.

Soooo, ... how does this introduction, the situations and the ministry I am involved with have to do with us, the Alaska United Methodists ?

I think we can honestly say the oral comity agreement of the 1890s has gone by the wayside. Allow me to share a few items to highlight that situation.

- 1) **During** one of our Stephen's Ministry training sessions, representatives of several families from Southwest Alaska joined us. They came from a community originally of Russian Orthodox persuasion but have been without a priest for some time. The families desired starting a home church but realized they did not know the basics of praying for one another, leading a bible study, or how to support one another in growing their spiritual faith. They came hoping to learn the basic of Christian care to apply for one another and for their community.
- 2) **My wife** and I flew to Kaktovik (a community of about 240 individuals) to minister during holy week and Easter. Prior to our coming, the elders of the community asked if I would offer sacraments as part of our worship. I asked and received permission from the Yukon Presbytery to serve communion and to offer baptism. Prior to the Easter morning worship, I knew of 2 families who desired their 4 children be baptized. Later, during the evening worship, several more families and individuals asked for baptism. We baptized 18 individuals ages from 3 to 19 years old.
- 3) **Intergenerational** Arctic Ministries is committed to visiting each community and lead worship at least once a quarter. That still leaves 11 weeks each quarter without regular church worship. Currently their communal "worship" gatherings consist of an evening of signing translated hymns, with prayers by an elder to open and close the evening.
- 4) **I recently** asked a village elder what how they worship on Sunday morning. Their response? "Televangelist then NFL on the television." Where is the community in that worship?
- 5) **Our deaconess** Fran Lynch, used to travel regularly to a couple rural communities teaching Sunday School, leading worship, and bringing children from those communities to Birchwood Camp.
- 6) **Several** years ago, several pastors from within our conference went to fill the pulpit at the Utqiagvik Presbyterian Church until the church called their own pastor.

Now, ... my second question for tonight: "Why expand from a new Mission District to doing more missions?"

One of the thoughts you might respond with is: "Why should we still be sending people out to preach the gospel to other cultures?" Sometimes this question is asked in a slightly more negative way: "Do we have the right to try to change the way people worship their God? Do we have the right to go into other cultures and tell them they are doing it the wrong way?"

I think those thoughts arise as part of our reaction to a colonial past. We fear that perpetuation of colonial attitudes through missionaries, taking their western thoughts and attitudes to other cultures, along with the good news might be harmful. We can understand why those sorts of questions arise when we see indigenous church leaders dressing up in clothes that were designed to keep a body warm in freezing English Churches in the middle of winter.

But do we have enough reasons to stop taking the gospel to people who have not yet heard it recently? And even forgetting other nations, people may want to know, "Do we have a right to share the gospel with our fellow Alaskans, who all have their own sets of beliefs and values? Those faithful in remote communities want to know whether in this multi-faith society of ours, will denominations still have a reason to go and share the gospel with them?"

I sense one problem today is that many denominations have “professionalized” missions. We say, “Mission work is for professional missionaries” and so we give a little money to help support them and we feel like we have done our part. ... We recently sent money to a Baptist Church in Alabama to support a nephew and his child on a mission trip to south America.

Mission is no longer a primary activity of today’s church, but missions is an attribute of God. Our God is a missionary God. **We must see mission as a movement from God to the world.** I suggest we re-look at ourselves and our churches as instruments for that mission. The church is here because there is mission (to make disciples ...), not the other way around. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, WE SERVE A GOD WHO IS A FOUNTAIN OF SENDING LOVE.”

Some ideas:

- a) We can send mission teams to conduct Vacation Bible School.
- b) We can go start Bible clubs or Bible Camps.
- c) We can share our pastors monthly to go and preach at some remote community.
- d) We can “adopt” a community church and share ministry in whatever form we feel comfortable would work.

What an opportunity we have, to go make disciples to help communities transform their world!

These words are from the preaching notes for next Sunday offered by Discipleship Ministries: “A call is not always easy to carry. It sometimes sends us to places where we might not want to go—or at least to places we are not too sure about. There are too many unanswered questions in responding to a call—even a call that comes from the one we call Lord.

The difficult thing is that those questions never quite go away. We might be years into following this call, and suddenly the questions come back. “What am I doing?” “What have I gotten myself into?” “If this really is a call from God, why is it not working out better?” These are only some of the questions that come to us. Just wrestle.”

Thank you and amen.