

History of the Covenant Church in Alaska

By Shelly Tarin

Establishing the Covenant in Western Alaska

Alaska's history includes a time when churches held the responsibility of educating Alaskans, both Native and white. The Covenant Church is a relatively small denomination, but has had a large impact in Western Alaska through churches and schools established by both Native and white.

The Covenant Church originated in Sweden as a branch off of the Luthern Church of Sweden. Alaska is the Covenant Church's oldest mission field. It has had a presence in Alaska since 1887 when two Russian-speaking Swedish missionaries Axel E. Karlsson and Adolf Lyndell were sent over. Karlsson was formerly a missionary to Siberia. The original intent of the Swedish Covenant Church was to access Siberia through a "backdoor", which quickly became the Alaska Mission. Fortunately for Alaska Natives in the Norton Sound area, Karlsson developed a devotion to the Eskimos in Alaska.

The first Russian-speaking Eskimo Karlsson met was the chief at Unalakleet, Nashalook. Karlsson's friendship with the chief helped him survive threatening villagers for the first months in Unalakleet. Karlsson also befriended an orphaned teen-age Eskimo boy named Uyabak, or Rock. Karlsson taught him English and Rock became Karlsson's first convert as well as his interpreter and sled dog driver. Karlsson also mentored Stephan Ivanoff, a teen-ager at the time from Unalakleet who spoke English, Russian, and Yu'pik.

Karlsson continued to make friends in the village by teaching wood construction. The first winter there he and his interpreters lived in tents. As he constructed a log cabin, he taught the Eskimos how to use the woodworking tools. The Eskimos taught him what to use for insulation. 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. Stephan Ivanoff and Rock were both educated there and went on to spread the message of the Covenant Church to the surrounding villages for many years. Karlsson's investment in friendship and evangelism helped establish Unalakleet as the central Covenant station from which Western Alaska could be reached.

In 1889 the American Covenant Church took over the Alaska mission from the Swedish Covenant Church. Most of the American Covenant Church members, however, were immigrant Swedes or descendants of Swedes. Adolf Lyndell, who arrived in Alaska at the same time as Karlsson, served the Alaskan Mission by generating support from the Covenant churches scattered throughout the Midwest of the United States. By 1891 five additional missionaries were sent to Western Alaska. With their help, a children's home was added on to support orphaned children in the area.

With the interest and support of many Swedish-American adventure-seekers, there were four Covenant Churches in Alaska by 1925. The first Native Covenant missionary was Wilson Gonongnan. He led a church in Mountain Village from 1919-1929 before

continuing on to other villages. Hooper Bay received its church and its own native missionary in 1926. In 1929 Scammon Bay received a Covenant Church, and after that they followed one after another. By 1940 there were 12 Covenant Churches in Western Alaska. These churches were pastored both by Native and white missionaries and pastors.

The Native Response

Initially the Natives confused the white missionaries that came to Western Alaska with traders. Previous white men that the Natives encountered wanted only to trade. According to the perspective of Fred Savok, author of Jesus and the Eskimo: How the Man of the Sky Brought the Light to my People, the 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.

Savok writes 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. He says 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.

Stephan Ivanoff, who helped establish the mission station in Unalakleet with Karlsson, became "thoroughly imbued with the Western way of life" (Ivanoff-Brown 99). His response to the arrival of the Covenant Missionary was an embracing of the education that was offered. He became a skilled carpenter, boat builder, and businessman. He also traveled to Chicago to the Covenant Church's college there and earned his certificate as a minister. He returned to Unalakleet and built a roadhouse along a dog sled route. Ivanoff and his family traveled back to the Lower 48 to share the educational and religious needs of the Natives in Western Alaska.

Ultimately, Ivanoff's pursuits were offensive to his people. The chief and council of Unalakleet ordered Ivanoff and his wife to leave the village. The chief claimed that they had broken the taboo that "no member of our village will rise in wealth over and beyond the others" (Ivanoff-Brown 100). The family sold their business and in 1907. They moved to Shaktoolik and started a school and a Covenant Church. Ivanoff continued to serve the Covenant Church and died in 1967 at the age of 82.

Meeting the Needs in Western Alaska

The Covenant Church established a private high school in Unalakleet in 1954. In 1960 it established KICY, a Christian radio ministry headquartered in Nome. The radio station exists today and continues to broadcast programs in Russian and Eskimo languages as well as English. The Covenant High school closed in 1985. Both the High School and the radio station made a big impact in Western Alaska for Christ and the Covenant Church.

The idea of the radio station was brought up by a Swedish missionary, Nils Hojer, who wanted to reach Siberia for the Lord. His passion in 1923 was sustained through various American missionaries. Short wave radio became a popular way to connect the villages and it became evident to the Covenant Church that radio was in ideal way to communicate in remote Western Alaska. Through support of Covenant Churches in the Lower 48 and countless volunteers, radio equipment and a diesel generator to run the transmitter were installed in Nome by 1960. The radio reached Siberia and many villages and listeners in the Native Languages. In addition to “Eskimo hour” there were news and sports reported as well as an on-air bible club and interviews and call-in programs. The Covenant Church continues to minister through KICY radio to this day.

Covenant High also served a pressing need in the villages. The high school thrived between 1954 and 1985. During this time, the village schools only went to 8th grade. The centrally located Covenant High in Unalakleet was available to students who wanted a higher education. The people who served at Covenant High taught everything from home economics to bible classes as well as academics. Most students there were willing to learn and most staff was enthusiastic and happy to be there recalled Ken Anderson, a former teacher at Covenant High. When asked, Anderson said that some Covenant High graduates went to college and came back to the villages. He could think of a graduate who came and established an airline, others who came back as mechanics, city planners and doctors. Anderson’s experience with rural education was a positive one and he was happy to be a part of the mission work accomplished there. Covenant High closed in 1985 largely due to the 1972 Hootch v. Alaska State Operated School System lawsuit. This court decision led to the opening of 105 secondary schools in the Alaskan villages, so that children could attend high school in their own home communities.

Toward the Future

The history of the Covenant Church in Alaska began with individual relationships, then churches and schools and finally the radio station. Through these, the people of the Norton Sound area heard the Christian message. 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.

The link the Covenant Church has established in the history of these small villages is significant. Within the sweeping changes the Eskimo villages have endured, the Covenant Church has stood. Just as the communities respond better to school teachers who commit to a long-term stay in the village, the presence of the Covenant Church long term has cultivated trust from the people. There have been rises and falls in the positive response and results of the Covenant Churches in the villages, but like a committed friend, the Covenant remains accessible. Amidst the cycle created with the loss of identity for Natives in the villages, the Covenant Church, with it’s reputation of compassion and sincerity, exists both as a connection to the past and a way of hope for the future. The shared history the Covenant has in this region will fortify the church so it is able to be a stronghold for the people.

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