

Alaska Field Report



A year ago I could not have imagined that this report would be coming forth. But the Lord has His ways and it is best to cooperate with Him. I'm grateful that He is giving this opportunity to serve.

Before heading into some of the specifics regarding ministry in Alaska, I'd like to make some important issues clear. When Dale approached me in May of last year about taking the role of Alaska field director, my heart was ready. With no advance notice, I'd been wondering if God was going to bring a change to Debbie's and my life. There was nothing driving it other than wondering if a seasonal change was coming. And, I'd found my thoughts drifting toward "home" as I missed contact with "my people." When the phone rang, there wasn't a lot of time to prepare as the Smiths were about an hour and a half away.

Upon hearing Dale's request, there were two issues that I presented. One was our church here. We had been through a challenging time. Debbie and I had become different people in that we were intentionally and wonderfully involved in the lives of unbelieving people around us. And, people in our church were following our example and doing the same thing. It has been an incredibly life-giving time and we felt that now was not the time to leave that. Second, five years ago we learned that our oldest grandson was born with cystic fibrosis. Debbie and I have thanked the Lord over and over that we have been allowed to be close enough to be part of the help system for Henri. We believe that God has called us to this role and we take it seriously. So, with these two factors, we have stepped out. With recent developments in Henri's situation, we are sensing that the church piece will be closing out over the next few months. But the time we've had has been valuable and important. It is our plan to move over into the Portland area but the timing at this point is uncertain. Our intent would be to go full-time with InterAct at that time.

In the beginning...

My plan is to spend one week of every month in Alaska. I leave Sundays after church and return on Saturday evening. People have asked Debbie how she feels about this arrangement and her response is, "I believe that God has uniquely prepared my husband for this and I am completely okay with that." While in South-central Alaska, I stay in the accommodations graciously provided by Al and Gretchen Strawn on Lazy Mountain. I'm able to leave a few things there between trips which is a huge help. When in the Fairbanks area, arrangements are not quite as predictable. Dale has said that he wants me to get with each missionary family during the first year. That has been pretty much accomplished so far. I'm hoping to get out to Chignik to see Dave and Sally Hill in March. In addition to my efforts, George and Judy Richardson are doing a good job with "high touch" ministry. There have been a number of "hit the ground running" types of ministry. So far it has been good.

Ministry on the ground...

LEaD: This Leadership and Discipleship program started very shortly after I began. The initial applicant was soon joined by two more and by December a fourth member was on board. Steve and Jill Horsman have done an admirable job of developing the program and watching over the students. I usually take a couple of the devotional times in the morning when I'm in Alaska. The contact with the students has been very good.

I've met with the major players in the LEaD consortium. They all want to see things continue. There will be a governance summit next month. As I understand it, the purpose is to create official working relationships and responsibilities between those involved. I plan to be present at that meeting.

It is important that we evaluate the right things here.

- Is this the best way to develop leaders and create disciples? Don Shugak and Jim Barefoot are both convinced that a residential setting is necessary. So, are we creating another school?
- Is InterAct expected to be the financial backer of this venture? So far, student tuition has covered expenses. As we go forward, more financial involvement will be necessary. If InterAct is the only one willing to provide this assistance, what are the limits?
- Are we doing what we say we are doing? I asked Don Shugak what the target audience was. He said 19-35 year olds. If that is the case, two of the four current students are outside of this. While we will never exclude someone wanting to learn and grow, we are still not doing what we said we want to do.

It is good to have some positive momentum with LEaD. While a residential discipleship program is valuable, I believe that the real needs for leadership and discipleship of Native youth remain largely unmet and that is a concern. I long to see the church become the major developmental force in this area.

Village ministry: I'm praying that God gives us growing opportunity in this area. For now, our involvement is limited.

- Ruby—John and Jen Tramm extended their *EnGage!* experience and have stayed on in Ruby over the winter. I spent several days with them in December. While they may be *cheechakos*, they are handling the newly planted status in the right way. Jen is a farm girl and adapts readily. Together, they are learning well from the people there, carry humble hearts and are loving well. Having grown up there, it was surprising to be treated as if I'd never left. The connections with both the Trammes and the people of the village were excellent and I'm optimistic about the future.
- Chignik—Dave and Sally Hill labor faithfully there. I'm hoping to get out there in March; George and Judy were there in November. They do a good job of loving people and their

ministry flows out of that. There were numerous reports of the substandard condition of their house. I asked George and Judy to check that out, documenting it with pictures. The reports were correct. However, the Hill's themselves said they felt it was not worth doing anything and they were content to live with the situation as it exists as long as they are there. It is uncertain how long they will plan to remain in Chignik.

- Port Lions—this is a former InterAct station, one that was planted in the Slavic Gospel Association days. They chose to go on their own seven years ago. We have been contacted by Ron Paull who currently fills the pastoral role there. He is wanting some outside help and this includes the possibility of re-affiliating with InterAct. I'll be entering into conversation with Ron and then by his request the people of the church. Since the Hills were there previously, they may be of some help.
- The future—while I'd like to see us have a greater presence in the villages, it is important that we do it in the right way. Please pray that God gives favor, helps us make contact with the right people, and that we follow through properly.

Urban Ministries—InterAct has unique ministries in both Anchorage and Fairbanks.

- Fairbanks Native Bible Church is in the midst of a transition. David Joseph is passing the pastoral responsibility to Harry Hafford. Harry's mom is from Grayling and he was born in Galena. He grew up on the east coast of the United States and returned to Alaska four years ago. He is a terrific man and is in the process of learning his culture. The Zooks do a great job working with the youth at the church.
- SonRise Community Church is the new name of a multi-cultural church located in the Mountain View neighborhood of Anchorage. God has truly blessed this ministry. Dennis Richardson is looking for some additional help—associate staff for current ministry and someone who can be developed to assume primary leadership within the next few years. A unique feature of ministry here is their outreach to the homeless community. A meal is served every Sunday and a special service is conducted.

Lazy Mountain Campus—we are the stewards of this great asset. Doug Prins has been an invaluable person for a lot of years. His heart is being drawn increasingly toward people and away from the bricks and mortar. We need to have the right person in the overseer/maintenance role. While we have a young couple who are in appointee status, I do have some concerns.

It seems that the Native community does see the campus as a place of importance. When groups use the facility, the kitchen facilities prove to be woefully inadequate. It may be wise for us to think about selling a couple of properties and using the proceeds to build a kitchen and dining building. This would be easier and likely cheaper than trying to renovate what we currently have. This is a very early discussion matter and nothing more.

Looking ahead...

A question that comes regularly is, “what is your vision for the Alaska Field?” While my history in the state is long, I am not ready to fully answer the question. In recent years, it has become clear that my training has been in talking, not in listening. Yet, there is a growing awareness of how critical it is to listen well and to develop specific skills in that area. This is especially true in ministry to Native Alaskans. There is a great deal for us to learn, even after many decades of ministry.

Some things loom large. Chief among them is the lack of impact that the church, the one defined by Scripture, has had upon local communities and the culture in general. In many instances, the term church carries negative connotations. Yet, this is the primary tool God has given for the transformation of mankind. I wholeheartedly embrace the InterAct vision of making disciples. It seems important that we also consider the context in which that takes place. With that in mind, I will be giving specific attention to developing a model for discipleship that incorporates the power of community that God intends to reside within the church.

As the plane lined up on the runway at Ruby, I was overcome with the sense that, “I’m coming home.” Two days later, Clara Honea greeted me at the church service with a hug and “welcome home.” It is my deep desire to see God take this ministry which spans more than half a century and do something significant.

- The starting point
A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. [John 13:34, 35 ESV] From the first part of the same chapter we learn that this love is best delivered through service.
- Refocusing what the church does
In God’s Word, there are six metaphors which describe what this life with Him is supposed to look like. The vine, sheepfold, bride, body, building and priesthood are concrete images. Not all of these images exist in every culture. Yet, the images will find parallels in life that describe the same function. For instance, if sheep are followers and the sheepfold is a place of protection, what do you have in your culture that provides the same functions? How can we use that to provide specific, relevant images to convey God’s truth in a living way?
- Flattening the leadership structure
Nobody wants to be THE boss. That doesn’t mean there is an anti-leadership perspective. They generally don’t want to be over others. Yet, there is a willingness to share that leadership with others.
- Utilizing and enhancing the natural power of community to form Communities of Christ
I long to see the power of God’s children living and loving together impact and influence the villages and the Native culture in general.

There is more, but these things provide a starting point. John Tramm and I will begin the process of working through specifics in how we develop and then introduce these ideas. A couple of others have expressed interest in helping as well. As we begin in Ruby, my desire is that we develop some form of model that can be transported to other communities and uniquely adapted to develop the Community of Christ there.

There is one other piece for which I have no specific plan. But it never goes away either. I've been involved with a ministry called the Shepherd's House. They lead a residential program for thirty guys who are attempting to overcome addictions, rebuild after prison or just get a fresh start in life. It is not really a rescue mission in that it doesn't focus on the drop-in client and it is not a community of law but of grace. I've come to have a deep love for what God is doing there and to count many of these men and friends and fellow pilgrims on the path. I'd love to see something like this happen in Alaska. As I dream about it, I see Fairbanks for some reason. I only ask for your prayers.

In conclusion...

It is an honor to be involved with what God has begun in the North. I look forward to getting past the start-up phase. What He has begun, He will carry on to completion as we faithfully look to Him. (Philippians 1:6)

For His church,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Larry Ainsworth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "L" and "A".