

2008 Conference Profile: The Alaska Conference: a missionary conference of The United Methodist Church

A. Geographical Location & Description:

The Alaska Conference encompasses the entire state of Alaska—a state with 640,000 residents and covering 570,374 square miles. Because of its size, there are great variations in topography, geology, and weather within the state.

Most of the churches are clustered in the Anchorage area, along the Kenai Peninsula, and between Anchorage and Fairbanks, which is on the road system. Other churches in the Southeast and West are not connected to other communities by road, and travel must be by airplane or Alaska Marine Highway (ferry system). The conference, in an attempt to provide supportive ministries and programs among churches, established four Regional Program Councils which meet periodically either in person or by teleconference (due to the distance and travel costs).

B. Demographics:

- a. Clergy Members (as of 07/01/08): 29 active elders; 1 deacon; 1 diaconal; 1 deaconess; 4 local pastors and a number of folks who are in retirement status from their home conferences but have made their home in Alaska.
- b. Lay Members: 4,070 full members with an average attendance of 2,568 (2006).
- c. Church Membership: 2 with 500-1000 members; 12 with 100-500 members; 14 under 100 members.

C. Conference 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 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 (approved on May 31, 2003).

D. Political/Social Makeup:

- a. Political make-up: Alaska is a frontier state, often attracting persons who wish to be as independent and "free" as possible. This tends to result in a more conservative political stance, emphasizing individual rights, though also resulting in the expression of personal behaviors that may be considered more liberal or contrary to the "norm" of society. The majority of the State Legislature is Republican, as are the three Congressional delegates of the state.
- b. Political issues include conflict between/with: major urban areas and rural communities; Native and non-Native groups; development and environmentalism; the Permanent Fund Dividend; and state funding.
- c. Church trends: Over the past twenty years the membership of the United Methodist Churches in the state has remained basically constant, despite the fact that the population of Alaska has increased significantly during that period. Current membership in the conference is: 87% white; 2% Asian; 6% Pacific Islander; 3% Native American; .5% Hispanic; .3% mixed race; and .8%

black. The churches of the Alaska Conference are mostly progressive, offering an alternative to the prevailing conservative voice of the state.

d. Social Environment: There are high ratios of alcohol and drug abuse throughout the state, as well as child abuse and domestic violence. Many rural areas located outside of the major urban areas have high poverty rates, with the lack of employment opportunities, subsistence lifestyle, limited economic infrastructure, and high cost of living continuing the poverty. There is a high “turnover” rate of persons moving into the State and then returning “home,” as well as persons who come for seasonal employment. There is an increasing influx of ethnic minorities to the state, especially Pacific Rim peoples. For instance, in the Anchorage school district caucasian students are now the minority, and nearly 100 primary languages are spoken. There are five main Native cultures in the state, which are interrelated for political and social purposes in the Alaska Federation of Natives. There is a very high percentage of military personnel around the bases in the Fairbanks and Anchorage areas.

e. Ecumenical environment: Ministry throughout the state of Alaska was divided between a number of denominations many years ago in the Comity Agreement, which has influenced church development in various areas and has limited United Methodist Church presence in bush Alaska. Several ecumenical organizations exist, including the Alaska Christian Conference. Three of the churches in the AC are federated with the United Presbyterian Church. The conference is also a part of the University Community Ministry in Anchorage, and United Campus Ministry in Fairbanks. In the past year, conversations among the previous comity agreement partners has been ongoing concerning shared ministry opportunities in places where mainline presence is not strong. A unique model of this occurred in 2007, where we were asked by the Presbyterians in Barrow, Alaska to provide clergy leadership while they awaited their called pastor. Five of our clergy and lay spent a few weeks each in Barrow to provide this necessary bridge for clergy leadership. It was widely and deeply appreciated by the Barrow Presbyterian church, and we continue to be in on-going conversation should the need arise again. Opportunities for further ecumenical involvement in this way have occurred concerning Nome and St. Lawrence Island, the Mat-su Valley, Angoon, Kake and Metlakatla in the Southeast to name a few.

E. Financial Status:

a. Clergy compensation: Ranges from \$34,850(conference minimum) to \$60,000, with a cost of living adjustment for areas with higher costs.

b. Apportionments and AC finances: The Alaska Conference has usually been one of the highest contribution per member rates in the denomination, but this is offset by the higher cost of living, the small membership local churches, and the costs of operating the conference. In 2007 apportionment receipts were 94%.

c. Very recently, the conference has been the recipient of significant funds (more than \$2,000,000), with more to be processed as we work through the property that was recently given to us from the General Board of Global Ministries. The leadership of the conference will need significant guidance, support and vision in order to deal with these monies wisely.

F. Issues:

- a. Clergy issues: Isolation from colleagues; distance from family; membership in home conferences as it relates especially to the lack of guaranteed appointment in The Alaska Conference; health benefits; relating to the General Board of Global Ministries; travel for fundraising outside of the conference; ordination of indigenous leadership; and local pastors being the only members of the AMC; and strengthening lay leadership within both the local churches and the conference.
- b. Lay issues: training; time and cost for traveling to meetings; access to leadership in the conference; dependence at times on VIMs and outside sources of funding and understanding themselves in the context of a connectional denominations.
- c. Conference strengths: Lay School of Theology; Regional Program Councils; strong UMW; active camping program; small enough to feel like family (this carries with it both the benefits and struggles of being a family); annual conference missional priority, unusual and easy access to episcopal, conference, jurisdictional and general church leadership; a proven and on-going ability to be flexible and creative.
- d. Areas for improvement: Reach more native and ethnic persons; revitalize conference youth ministry; adequate strategies for utilizing emerging funding streams; continue to work at hospitality to new and existing members.

G. Conference Episcopal Leader Expectations:

- a. The Bishop needs to be actively involved in the life of the Conference, being present as often as possible (especially Annual Meeting, Fall Meetings, Winter Meetings, and the February Professional Church Worker Retreat).
- b. She/he needs to be appreciative of the Alaska Conference and the state, willing to be engaged in the various activities that the AMC affords. There must be a willingness to travel throughout the state.
- c. Leadership in the continued development of what it means to be missionary clergy in this Conference, addressing such issues as clergy membership, the role of local pastors, commissioning, and our relationship with the General Board of Global Ministries.
- d. Ability to identify, attract, and support potential clergy from conferences throughout the country and the world, and to be discerning of gifts and grace for ministry in the Alaska Conference.
- e. Be a strong advocate for the AC within denominational structures, especially the General Board of Global Ministries, General Board of Pensions, and the Advance.
- f. Be willing to work ecumenically as much as possible.
- g. Be willing to work collegially and closely with a very small conference staff.
- h. Be willing to understand and work with the uniqueness of the role of Conference Superintendent, as opposed to District Superintendent, and be willing to invest both time and energy in creating a collegial relationship with that office.
- i. Be willing to be adventuresome in both travel and ideas, inviting the conference to do the same.
- j. Be or be willing to become culturally competent as it pertains to Native Alaskans and their unique gifts.