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BRIEF STUDIES

LUTHERANS AT WORK IN ALASKA

(The following article, released by the News Bureau of the National Lutheran Council, was reprinted from *Lutherans at Work on Continental Frontiers*, a booklet prepared by the Division of American Missions of the National Lutheran Council as a Lutheran supplement to the 1958—59 home mission theme, "Christian Concerns of North American Neighbors")

Vitus Bering, a Dane and a Lutheran in the service of the Russian government, is generally credited with the discovery of the Alaskan Coast in 1741. Thus Russia established claim to this vast wonderland of the North. Except for an extensive traffic in furs, little by way of development occurred in Alaska under Russian rule. When in 1840 there was a change in administration in the affairs of the Russian-American Company, Captain Adolph K. Etholin, a native of Finland and a follower of the Lutheran faith, came to Sitka to head up the affairs of the company. He was accompanied by a Lutheran minister by the name of Sidnyeuus. A history of the Russian-American colonies, published at St. Petersburg in 1863, mentions that Etholin, shortly after his assumption of office, began the erection of a Lutheran church in Sitka. It also appears that the first pastor was succeeded by two other pastors, Platen and Winter, this ministry continuing up to 1865.

When the United States took possession from Russia in October 1867, a small parcel of ground in Sitka was excluded from the deed and set aside for the use of the Lutherans forever. During ensuing years the Lutheran Church was used from time to time by Protestants and Catholics alike, as occasion might arise. Gradually the building fell into decay, but the little organ which first sounded forth its tones more than 100 years ago is in the Alaska Museum, and the valued painting of the Ascension graces the Greek Orthodox Church in Sitka.

The first Lutheran ministry in Alaska supported by Americans began August 1894, when the Rev. T. L. Brevig came to Teller as a missionary to the Lapps, who had come to Alaska to train the Eskimos in reindeer husbandry. Thus it was, too, that mission work was started among the Eskimos more than 60 years ago by the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

For more than 60 years the Evangelical Lutheran Church has maintained a resident ministry, first at Teller Mission, then also establishing work at Mary's Igloo—which was given up a few years ago because of the migration of the Eskimos, and in later years also in Teller Town and Shishmaref. Shishmaref, Teller Town, and Teller Mission are fully organized congregations, with a pastor serving at

Shishmaref, a resident pastor at Teller Town, and a woman missionary at Teller Mission, and one at Mount Edgecombe. The Rev. Norval Hegland, stationed at Teller Town, operates a Piper four-seater plane, furnished by the Lutheran Daughters of the Reformation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Aside from the work among the Eskimos the Lutheran Church very much forgot Alaska until the year 1913. Here follows chronologically the establishment of resident work by the three Lutheran synods doing work in Alaska today. Petersburg, 1913, ELC; Ketchikan, 1925, ELC; Juneau, 1926, ULCA; Anchorage, 1926, Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod; Palmer, 1935, Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod; Sitka, 1935, ULCA; Anchorage, 1944, ELC; Fairbanks, 1944, ELC; Seward, 1948, ELC; Juneau, 1956, Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod; Spenard, 1957, ELC; Nome, 1957, ELC; Fairbanks, 1958, Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church for many years operated a Seamen's Mission in Ketchikan, beginning in 1924. Also, an independent Lutheran group built a chapel and operated a summer ministry to the fishermen out of Port Alexander in southeastern Alaska. An independent Lutheran group today operates a children's home at Cordova.

The Lutheran Church is thus represented in 13 cities and villages in the vast Territory of Alaska and today numbers 4,395 baptized members. Aside from the all-Eskimo congregations, where the tendency is for the membership to drift toward the larger centers of population, there has been a marked growth in the established Lutheran churches, particularly during the last ten years. In this vast wonderland of the North, with its majestic mountains, emerald lakes, mighty streams, vast forests, and unsurpassed fjords, and with its vast potential of as yet undeveloped resources, today, thank God, we find the Lutheran Church.

Because of the several large military installations in Alaska, the total population figure is not a stable one; that is to say, there is a constant shifting of military personnel. Be that as it may, from year to year the number of permanent residents increases. Today most of the large American oil companies are busily engaged in prospecting for "black gold." Millions of acres have been leased by these companies, oil in paying quantities has been found, and this prospecting will continue and ultimately, no doubt, develop into a big industry. Without a doubt, this tremendous American frontier of the North is destined for great economic development and a large population increase.

What of the future for the Lutheran Church in Alaska? The answer

to this question lies very largely in our concept and attitude as to our responsibility of today. Thus far the Lutheran Church has entered into the larger centers of population, it is true; but by no means has the Lutheran Church thus far entered in through the open doors of opportunity to face up to the Christian responsibility of bringing the Gospel to the many as yet unchurched communities. If we are to plant the Lutheran Church and bring the Gospel to presently strategic and potentially strategic communities of this vast land, we must support this work with prayerful understanding, good will, and generous financial help in far greater measure than has hitherto been the case. Aside from the Eskimo missions the organized congregations are more than 90 per cent self-supporting. The Lutheran Church today is not spending very much money in Alaska. From now on it will be necessary to exercise a greater degree of patience, because the towns remaining and as yet unoccupied by the Lutheran Church are small and the many scattered villages will perhaps be reached only by airplane on a "circuit-rider" basis. But this is the business of the Christian Church; it is God's business; and it is our responsibility as a part of the great family of Christians to obey the Lord's injunction to go and preach the Gospel.

Many are the stories that could be told of the self-sacrificing Christian services of Christian pastors, pastors' wives, and women missionaries, who have labored for years under pioneer conditions in the Northland. Don't feel sorry for these folks, however, because they would be the last ones to ask for sympathy from the standpoint of privation! They glory in their work and count it a privilege to participate in planting the Lutheran Church in this last great American frontier. Living costs in Alaska are extremely high; building costs, too, are extremely high. Salaries have not been commensurate with the high cost of living, and the church must be prepared in any future building program in any place in Alaska to invest much larger sums than in the past.

Today one can travel by automobile from any point in the States up through the interior of Alaska and down to Seward. Out from this great artery within the territory, roads are being built, and conditions, as far as travel is concerned, are not what they were even a few years ago. Of course, the day of the dog team will never end in portions of Alaska. But the greatest factor of all is this: There are no more air-minded people than Alaskans. The airplane has really come into its own in Alaska, which is shrinking as to size. The territory is served by several scheduled airlines from the States, and the many bush pilots fly to almost any area of the vast land. The Lutheran

Church, to really do the work it should do in Alaska, aside from establishing work on a permanent basis in several places, should think in terms of an air ministry. More and more ministers of the Gospel will be flying from the home base to the many scattered villages round about. The Lutheran Church has today only one such ministry, the one operating out of Teller.

Is it true that it is extremely difficult to establish the Lutheran work in Alaska? The answer is definitely no, provided there is proper financial backing and encouragement from the home base. Of primary importance is, of course, the need for men of deep consecration and of somewhat venturesome spirit—men, and women, too, who love the frontier and gladly face up to its challenges. To be sure, as in every frontier situation, the forces of evil are at work, but perhaps not more so than in the States, where, because of greater population, the sins of immorality and looseness are more easily hidden. We have not found it to be true that the hearts of the pioneers are harder than the hearts of men here in the States. It is true, however, that among those forgotten and left by the church to shift for themselves out in the frontier camps and villages and lonely spots, there is the tendency more quickly to lose one's self-respect. The Gospel is no less needed on the far-flung frontier than here at home. Without it all perish.

While we have referred to Alaska as a frontier land, remember that in this air age almost any point in Alaska is but a few hours removed from any point in the States. This is indicative of an increasing interest in Alaska by those who would just want to enjoy some of the most majestic scenery on earth and those who are looking for opportunity and permanent residence. Make no mistake about it, Alaska is getting under way on a big scale. If we as a Lutheran Church want to be in the picture and be in a position in the future to discharge the God-given responsibilities and exercise the blessed Christian privilege of bringing the Gospel to precious souls, we had better be alert to the need of venturing in Christ's name now.

For many years following the acquisition of the territory by the United States, Alaska was often referred to as "the land that God forgot." God never forgot, but men did. But in His loving remembrance and mercy the Gospel is being preached in far-flung places in Alaska today. Our heavenly Father remembers those as yet without the Gospel or the Lutheran witness, for He still says, "Go, and preach the Gospel." God help us that we do not forget!

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