



neighbors

SPRING 2010

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

Extreme Ministry



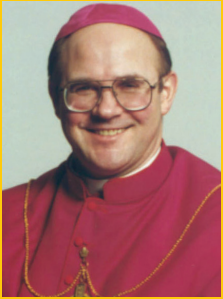
BY BETH GRIFFIN

Ministering to Catholics in northern Alaska redefines “extreme.” The Diocese of Fairbanks covers a vast area of Alaska that is roughly equal to the combined size of every state along the eastern seaboard, from Maine to

Florida. However, only a handful of the 46 Catholic parishes are accessible by road. Some are so remote that they see one of the diocese’s 18 priests only twice a year. Travel to parishes in the bush is often accomplished by boat, airplane, and snow machine.

Such trips test both the body and the budget.

The physical challenges of ministering in the Diocese of Fairbanks are mind-boggling for the average resident of one of the lower-48 states, but they are accepted and respected aspects of



FROM THE CHAIRMAN

DEAR FRIENDS,

To say the Diocese of Fairbanks faces challenges would be a staggering understatement. The parishioners of Fairbanks are

challenged by great distance, difficult terrain, extreme weather, poverty, and priest shortages. Few priests serve the great distances and face great difficulty getting from one parish to the next. Training for deacons and laypersons is vital to the diocese so that it can continue providing pastoral care in each parish.

The Diocese of Fairbanks handles its unique challenges with fervor. Its staff focus on God's work of evangelization and ministry even amid their most difficult circumstances. Fairbanks's Sr. Kathy Radich summarizes the difficulty in the diocese by saying the people "recognize they are being asked to do more than most Catholics."

As we approach the 2010 national date for the Catholic Home Missions Appeal, I ask that you reflect on the pastoral needs of our fellow Americans in this time of economic strain and pray that eventually all of our U.S. dioceses can meet the spiritual needs of every parishioner. I thank you in advance for your generous gifts to the Appeal on behalf of my subcommittee and of those dioceses, like Fairbanks, who rely on Home Missions to fill in their gaps.

Most Rev. Michael W. Warfel
Bishop of Great Falls-Billings, Montana
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee on
Catholic Home Missions

continued from page 1

the vocation lived by the priests and religious who are called to serve there. With a heavy dependence on local lay leadership and ordained deacons, the Diocese of Fairbanks may actually be a working model of the future of the Church in the United States.

Parishes are central to village life, providing spiritual, material, and emotional sustenance. Fairbanks's Bishop Donald J. Kettler says, "The purpose of the Church here is to walk along with the people, especially the Native peoples, who are in the process of adapting a subsistence lifestyle to the economic style of our contemporary world."

He says the Church is helping the people to combine elements of their traditional culture with modern American society. "People look to the Church to be a fulcrum for that changing culture."

"The men and women who serve here are really extraordinary," Bishop Kettler says. "Not only do they deal with different transportation, culture, and language, they do it in one of the harshest environments on earth."

Evangelization is the primary focus of the diocese, says Bishop Kettler, since approximately 60 percent of the people of Alaska are unchurched. Strong diocesan religious education and catechetical programs reinforce sacramental ministry. The programs are coordinated by women and men religious, who fan out into distant missions in every sector of the diocese.

Bishop Kettler counts personnel and finances as the twin challenges to the mission of the diocese. "The men and women who serve here are really extraordinary," he says. "Not only do they deal with

continued on page 3

continued from page 2

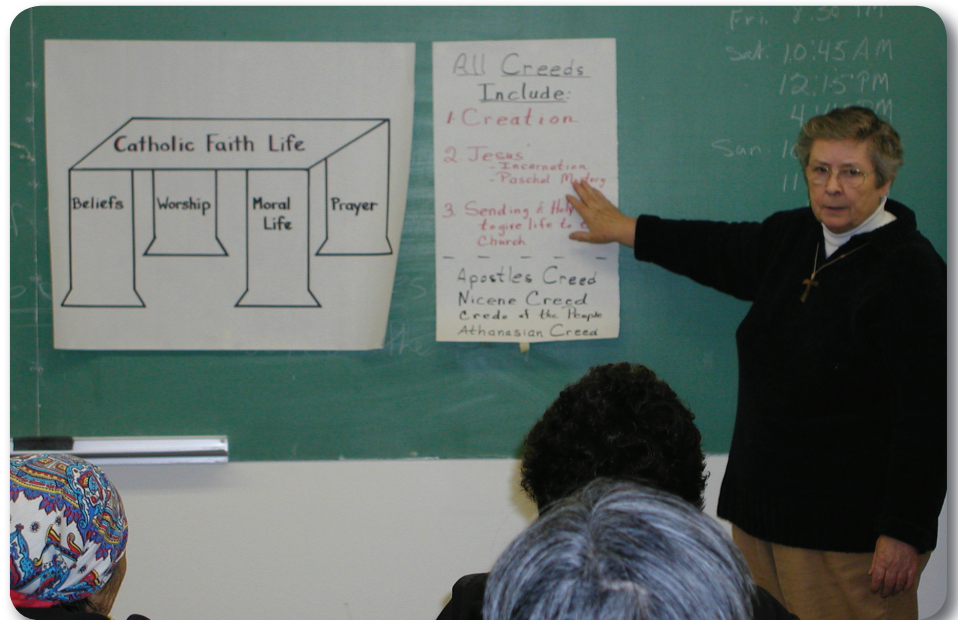
different transportation, culture, and language, they do it in one of the harshest environments on earth.”

The diocese relies on lay people and ordained deacons to provide sacraments and leadership in remote communities. They witness at weddings and preside at Baptisms, funerals, Liturgies of the Word, and Holy Communion celebrations in the absence of priests. The diocesan training program for deacons and lay leaders is a sustained success story (see article on page 4).

Historically, most of the priests in Fairbanks were Jesuit missionaries, but Bishop Kettler says the local Church is developing itself now, through both ordination and incardination of international priests from Poland and India.

Fairbanks has had four priestly ordinations in the past seven years, and one seminarian is now preparing. Bishop Kettler says vocations to the priesthood come primarily from outside the diocese.

The Diocese of Fairbanks serves more than 15,000 Catholics spread



Photos courtesy of the Diocese of Fairbanks

Top: Sr. Ellen teaching. Below: Site of diocesan Bible camp in Athabascan village of Kaltag.

over 410,000 square miles.

Alaska is an expensive place to live, and many people subsist at or below the poverty line. Parishioners in some far-flung bush villages live off the fish they catch or the animals they hunt. The steep price and limited availability of fresh fruit, packaged food, and consumer products reflect the cost and difficulty of getting supplies to isolated areas.

“We have a large number of parishes that are not able to



support themselves, so the diocese has to help them,” says Bishop Kettler. “Finances are particularly challenging, and we’re grateful to the Catholic Home Missions Appeal for providing funding to train deacons, lay leaders, and catechists.”

In Fairbanks, the faith is strong and deep, but the conditions are so extreme that Robert Hannon, the chancellor of the diocese, says, “It’s not a ministry for wimpy folks.”

“Finances are particularly challenging, and we’re grateful to the Catholic Home Missions Appeal for providing funding to train deacons, lay leaders, and catechists.”

Rural Ministries

When Sr. Ellen Callaghan organizes a weekend ministry training session in St. Mary's, Alaska, she sends a plane to collect the participants. And it's not just because she is a gracious hostess: it's the only way to span the distances and conquer the topography of western Alaska. The diocesan facility, on the site of a former mission boarding school, is the only Catholic educational training facility west of Fairbanks.

Sr. Ellen is the coordinator of the diocesan Native ministry training program. She and Sr. Kathy Radich, the diocesan coordinator of rural ministry for the Yukon Kuskokwim Region, are Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia who have served in Fairbanks since 1997.

The rural ministry office coordinates diocesan policies and rural deacon training, adult faith formation, and Native ministry programs for 24 parishes in widely scattered Yup'ik villages. "We're training local ministers to be responsible for the temporal and pastoral needs of their communities," says Sr. Kathy, adding that they support people to sustain their faith in areas where pastoral

visits range from once every eight weeks to only twice a year.

Sr. Kathy says the people "recognize they are being asked to do more than most Catholics."

The rural deacon program in Fairbanks was one of the first permanent deacon programs in the United States when it was instituted 40 years ago. Sr. Kathy says half of the villages have Native deacons, who are chosen by the community and undergo up to five years of training before they are ordained.

Training of deacons and catechists takes longer in rural Alaska than in other places, because classes are convened only four weekends a year. Some classes are supplemented with one-on-one learning, but distance education, common in the rural areas of some of the lower-48 states, is not available because Internet access and electrical service are unreliable.

The Native ministry program began in 1990 to train lay leaders to take on pastoral roles and to assist the visiting priests. To date, more than 50 people have completed the rigorous training program for certification as minister of the Word, head catechist, or parish administrator. Sr. Ellen says she has seen an amazing growth in



Fr. Case, previous director of the Native diaconate program, and Sr. Kathy board the Cessna 172 for a trip to Tununak.

confidence, as lay ministers lead services, such as funerals, without calling for help. "They're taking responsibility and making it happen."

Sr. Ellen says people who complete the training ultimately recognize their vocation. She describes a woman who initially felt unworthy but who came to understand God was calling her to lead prayers and proclaim the Word. "She said, 'I now believe God has really called me and I feel like I can teach the children,'" Sr. Ellen relates.

Sr. Kathy says the goal of the rural ministry program is to develop parishes whose faith life is self-sustaining. "This is an exciting time," says Sr. Ellen. "This is the cutting edge of where the Church is moving—to a new dependence on tremendously qualified lay leadership and ordained deacons."





The Diocese of Fairbanks covers 408,849 square miles, which is roughly one and a half times the size of Texas.

It encompasses the northern two-thirds of the state of Alaska.

The northern tip of the diocese is 12 miles from the North Pole; from the western edge, Russia is less than three miles across the Bering Strait.

Eight of the 46 parishes in the diocese are financially self-supporting. Most parishes are in small villages of 300 to 900 people, where inhabitants make their living by fishing, hunting, and trapping animals.

The 15,560 Catholics represent 9 percent of the population of the diocese. The diocese is served by 1 bishop, 18 priests, 24 ordained deacons, 12 religious sisters from five congregations, and 2 Franciscan brothers.

The diocese has one Catholic elementary school and one Catholic junior-senior high school.

Eight parishes are in communities that lack running water.

Most of the Catholics in the diocese are Native peoples and include Athabaskan Indians and Inupiat, Central Yup'ik, and Inuit Eskimos.

Seventeen of the ordained deacons are Native people, but there are no Native clergy or religious in the diocese.

In the depth of winter, the temperature can reach 65 degrees below zero, and the sun shines for three hours each day. But in the summer, the mercury can hit 90 degrees, and there is only two hours of darkness across much of the Land of the Midnight Sun.

Mass was first celebrated in Alaska in 1779 by a Spanish Franciscan priest. In 1847, the territory became part of the jurisdiction of the bishop of Vancouver Island. The first mission in northern Alaska was founded in 1887. The Diocese of Fairbanks was established in 1962.

Planes are integral to bush travel, but fuel costs are a limiting factor. A five-seat plane that rented for \$120/hour 12 years ago now costs \$500/hour.



Little Diomedes of St. Jude's mission parish sits on the Bering Strait, directly across from Russia.



neighbors

Non-Profit
Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 61
Hyattsville, MD

Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions

Office of National Collections

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

3211 Fourth Street NE

Washington, DC 20017-1194

Spring 2010

In this issue . . .

In the Diocese of Fairbanks, only a handful of the 46 Catholic parishes are accessible by road. To reach the others, the 18 diocesan priests have to travel by boat, airplane, or snow machine, and sometimes can only make it twice a year to some locations.

The diocese relies on lay people and ordained deacons to provide sacraments and leadership in remote communities. In this issue you will meet Sr. Ellen Callaghan who brings Alaskans to ministry—sometimes by private plane.

Subcommittee on the Catholic Home Missions

Chairman

Most Rev. Michael W. Warfel

Members

Most Rev. Peter F. Christensen

Most Rev. Paul S. Coakley

Most Rev. Curtis J. Guillory

Most Rev. Basil M. Schott, OFM

Most Rev. Robert F. Vasa

Most Rev. Joe S. Vasquez

Staff

Dr. David J. Suley, Director

Mr. Ken Q. Ong, Grants Specialist

Strengthen
the Church
at Home

Support
youth ministry, evangelization,
and religious education
where the **faith is strong** but
resources are few . . .

Be generous to the
Catholic Home Missions Appeal
in your parish.

Catholic Home Missions Appeal
Office of National Collections
202-541-3346 • www.usccb.org/nationalcollections

Copyright © 2010, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C.
All rights reserved. Illustrations: St. Michael McGroth, OFS, and Stock.