

The Rev. Canon Ginny Doctor
Six Essays for the Diocese of Alaska

Alaska has a rich history of evangelism. Yet even while new ministries spring to life, we struggle to attract new people to our churches. What would you propose as an evangelism strategy for Alaska?

I think an evangelism strategy for the Diocese of Alaska needs a four pronged approach. First, leadership development for both lay and ordained ministry needs to be solidified and be consistent. In places where there is strong, healthy leadership, there is growth. There are many good teachers in Alaska and they need to be used as a resource. Ministry Teams need to be developed for every congregation where there is not ordained or lay leadership.

Secondly, music that is culturally relevant needs to be offered. Drums should be incorporated into worship. A few years ago I was told that the fastest growing churches are those that use drums in worship. With our Athabascan, Inupiaq and Tlingit traditions, this should be a natural thing to do. However, there needs to be education regarding the use of drums as many were told that they could not be used in worship, that they were “pagan.” The 1982 Hymnal needs to be used more by our congregations. To do this, a couple things need to happen. There needs to be a CD made where someone sings a collection of hymns as per the liturgical year. This needs to be done in a “singable” key. I find that most hymns in the 1982 Hymnal are too high for many voices. I believe there is a supplement with guitar chords and if there isn’t, one needs to be created. Music is a draw for both young and old. I have worked in a small mission and learned to play “Gospel songs” and hymns from both the 1940 and 1982 Hymnal on the guitar. I think it is one of the reasons that the average Sunday attendance is now 16 instead of the 4 when I first went there.

Thirdly, social and recreational ministry programs and projects need to be promoted in those churches that are able to do such. In order to do this, there first needs to be education. I was quite saddened when I heard about a church that decided to put a basketball board and hoop in its parking lot for the neighborhood kids. Many parishioners complained about having “those people” around the church. It is “those” people that Jesus wanted. If they could come and play basketball, they just might venture in the doors. And, if they are welcomed, they just might come back and bring family and/or friends.

Fourthly, there needs to be good preaching of the word. I have heard many times that many Episcopalians are getting fed by other denominations where there is “evangelical preaching.” I think a week long preaching course for both lay and ordained is needed. There needs to be an excitement created when preaching the word. There are several gifted preachers both inside and outside of Alaska that could be used to help. The key is to get the priests there but if the Bishop said they must attend, they have to!

Alaska is a young state in that its median age is fairly low. Alaska also has a heritage of honoring its elders. Describe your work with youth and elders.

As a missionary the majority of my ministry was with youth. I taught Sunday school, coached basketball and baseball, and taught confirmation classes. In order to play on my team, the kids had to live by my rules. I did not allow name calling, swearing and disrespect. There was one very negative word that the kids used as a put down. When I first heard it, I explained why I didn't want it used and that if it was used, there would be no basketball. I haven't heard that word used in a long time. I used my time with kids to teach about Jesus and being "good" citizens. My home was a safe home for the many young people who came to visit and do projects with me.

I have also chaperoned several Native Youth Events and one diocesan youth event. In 1999 I planned and coordinated the "Young Adult Mission Exposure Project" for the Diocese of Alaska. This project took a diverse team of young adults to several villages to work with the teens. As the coordinator I accompanied the team and served as their spiritual guide. I didn't tell them what to do, it was Gospel driven project, but I was there if they needed my support. I was truly amazed by their ministry and they developed bonds with the village youth that are still going on today.

I have always worked with elders. Ever since I was a child I remember having to help my grandmother with whatever she needed help with. As my Mom got older I was often pressed into action to drive her and her friends to various events. When I was Executive Director of an urban Indian center I often volunteered to drive the Elder's home after their lunch and bingo game. I have many little pieces of wisdom from those times, many that keep me strong. In Alaska I know many elders and have valued their friendship and teachings. I spent several summers on the Yukon River with an Elder's and Youth Camp. I watched the Elders teach the young, watched them cut fish with a great respect and spirituality – I watched an elder tan a caribou hide, strong hands with scars, yet beautiful.

As a missionary in Tanana, I visited the Elder's residence two to three times per week. Sometimes I just visited, other times I played Gospel songs on my guitar. I also provided care to two elders that came home to die. That was a hard but rich time for me. I remember watching the sun come up and listening to tales of childhood living on the Yukon.

There was one time when I volunteered to drive a van full of elders to Minto for a Potlatch. I'll never forget that time. The stories they told were filled with laughter and tears. Each one had a special teaching. There is so much to be learned from our Elders. I can't imagine life without them. My Grandparents were very influential in my spiritual journey. In every elder, I see the faces of my Grandparents. I make them my own; they are a strong part of my family.

Based on your reading of the profile: What do you see as your greatest challenge as the Bishop of Alaska? What excites you most about the position? How have you discerned the possibility of your call to be Bishop of Alaska?

The greatest challenge I see for the next bishop is identifying and recruiting young adults for ordained ministry. Our non-stipendiary priests are getting old, some way past retirement age in the secular world. In the past recent months we lost two long time priests. While this is the biggest challenge, it is also what excites me. I think there are things that can be done to attract young adults to the ministry. In the past ten years there has only been one ordination of a person under thirty. He left the diocese. As a bishop I would ask our abundance clergy to help identify someone in their congregation to take their place, or as the Lakota say, someone to pass their medicine on to. As a bishop, I would always be looking for young adults who show promise. I have been mentoring two young women outside of Alaska. One has discerned a call to the priesthood. I'm still working on the other one! I would also look at what North Dakota is doing. Last summer they ordained three young Lakota to the transitional diaconate. I can see ten or more young adults gathered around a table studying the seven canonical areas; being taught by folks like Anna Frank, Luke Titus, Mark Boesser, Norman Elliott and others. When the Rt. Rev. Mark MacDonald Major Gifts Campaign reaches its goal, there will be enough money to make this happen. Until that time, I may have to start a little smaller.

My call has been discerned through much prayer. Gospel Based Discipleship and talks with key people in my life. I have lost count on how many people both inside and outside of the diocese have encouraged me to let my name stand. God's call often comes through others. I think the person who really made the call come into my heart is a bishop from the outside. He told me that I needed to put my name in. I asked him why and he said, "Because I can see that you love the people of Alaska and I would like working with you in the House of Bishops. Love of the people you are serving is the most important attribute that a bishop needs." Early on, shortly after Mark announced his resignation, Father David Salmon said to me, "Are you going to be bishop?" I laughed and said I didn't know, that was up to the people of the diocese." Then he said, "No, I said you are going to be bishop, I saw it in a dream." If my name is not put forth I will still love the people. If it is put forth, and I am not elected, I will still love the people.

The Bishop of Alaska serves the largest area of any bishop in the United States. How do you currently maintain a healthy mind and body while balancing the demands of your vocation with relational and personal needs?

I have done much work to maintain balance. I write, listen to music and read. I take time to go to Tanana, my sacred place, for refreshment and renewal. Sometimes I just sit by the river and pray. Other times I ride my bicycle around town and visit with people. I have a strong group of women and men who I can call upon when things get tough. The other thing is that I am good at delegating tasks. The bishop's staff is key in helping to maintain balance. They can tell when I am getting out of balance and they tell me so and I listen. Keeping boundaries is also critical. If it's my day off, then that is what it is unless, of course there is a great emergency. I also advise people to make an appointment if they need to see me. Presently, I do not like people dropping by expecting to see me; because I may be doing something to do that is time sensitive. I also think it is important to really weigh travel outside of Alaska. Currently, when I do travel outside, I always ask myself, "What will I get for Alaska?"

Most of our clergy are non-stipendiary and work in isolation from other priests. How would you provide pastoral care and support for these disciples?

Providing support to non-stipendiary or our abundance clergy is important to the well being of the diocese. I would call them regularly and perhaps initiate a twice per year retreat for them. When visiting their congregations I would take time to talk with them. I would also make sure that each abundance clergy has a ministry support team in place. When John Starr was getting ready to be ordained in Tanana he told the people that he needed their help, he couldn't do it by himself. People stepped forward to be lectors, psalmists, bookkeeper, altar guild, chalice bearers. They even raised money for his vestments. Too often, once someone is ordained, that person is expected to do everything. That is the old model but now we need to move further into total or shared ministry.

It is also important to solidify the plan for providing pensions to the abundance clergy. This is a way of giving honor to their many years of service. There also needs to be an honoring, perhaps at diocesan convention. I would find the money to buy jackets for them with the diocesan shield.

Our Diocese is highly diverse in culture. Many of our heritages are unique to Alaska. What leadership experience do you have with diverse cultures?

I was raised on the Onondaga Nation (reservation), a segregated community. However, my grandfather always told us that there was a big world around us and that we needed to learn how to get along with all kinds of people. It is all about harmony, living the way the Creator wants us to live with everything. He told us to watch and learn, then take the best from that culture/people and use it wisely. He knew that God, created every person, therefore every person needed to be respected. How can we disrespect what God has created? Equipped with these teachings, I set forth into the "big world."

When I was living in Syracuse, NY, I was a member of the Syracuse Community Choir, a choir that models diversity. I joined because I wanted to sing harmony. Soon I found myself on the leadership team with gay, black, physically challenged and white folk. I had to watch and learn before I became effective. I coordinated transportation for those who needed it, helped raise money and wrote scripts and poetry for our concerts. The Choir had a spiritual peace that I could not find elsewhere. Promoting diversity is difficult work but the rewards far outweigh that work, one of them is coming together to create beauty and seeing the gifts from God in all of that diversity.

I have also led diverse women's groups, not only here in Alaska but around the lower forty-eight. At one point I was involved with the now defunct "Creative Journey," a project of the now defunct Office of Women's Ministry. I traveled with two others across the United States providing the Creative Journey to many women's groups, including one in Vancouver, Canada that involved almost one-hundred women. As one of the leader's

of the program, I led work sessions, music and worship. We did about dozen Creative Journeys and only two were not diverse - the one in South Dakota (Pine Ridge Reservations) and the one in Pittsburgh (all white). I am also a Women of Vision trainer and have had the opportunity to share this Women's leadership with women in Alaska and outside of Alaska, in fact I was part of the team that went to Kenya, Africa. When I am moving into other cultures I do as much research as possible about that culture before arriving there. For example, Swahili is the common language for Kenyans. I learned some Swahili words and when I introduced myself I announced that my name was Ginny Daktari (doctor in Swahili). The women loved it and from then on they called me Daktari. That trip was almost ten years ago but I can still see their faces and hear their singing. And, I remember what they taught me - I never go someplace thinking that I am the only teacher and I expect to be taught much. I have also modified the Women of Vision training to "People of Vision" and have provided the training to several groups of both women and men.

In the Diocese of Alaska I am one of the Anti-Racism trainers and have trained around the state, usually to diverse groups that include both male and female. To me, it's about making relationships. I come from a very relational culture and find ways to make people feel comfortable. This is especially true for Anti-Racism training where the comfort level is low to begin with. I have a sense of humor that helps me develop relationships and am equipped with a "bag of tricks" that has been give to me from many people, people from whom I have watched and learned.

In 1999 I led a project called the Alaska Mission Exposure for Young Adults. Seven young adults from all walks of life came to Alaska for eight weeks. They traveled to several villages to work with the youth. I was their guide not their leader. We took our leadership from the Gospel of the Day. We had no plan for program but rather relied on what the Gospel was telling us to do that day with the youth. It worked in astounding ways! To this day, at least four of those young adults are still in contact with several of the youth they met. I end with this little piece because I see my leadership as being guided by the Gospel. I also need to say that I am a firm believer in circular leadership. I don't always have to be the leader, this gift is given to many and depending on the situation there are others who can better lead. I believe a good leader knows when not to lead and empowers others to lead.

Thank you for your time and consideration in this important ministry!

Blessings,

Ginny Doctor