



“A Missionary Report”

Submitted by Mary Ann Khoury, Coordinator – August 2012

Once again I traveled to Kodiak, Alaska to participate in the Commencement activities at St. Herman Theological Seminary. This was the 10th year for me to make this trip. Since 1999, I have traveled to America’s Holy Land more than 13 times – have lost count.

The “**Outreach Alaska**” mission has taken several turns since we first started as a line-item on the St. Mary Orthodox Church in Wichita, KS budget listed as “St. Sophia”. The focus for this mission in the beginning was to rebuild the St. Sophia Russian Orthodox Church in Bethel, AK – a major hub on the Kuskokwim River in SW Alaska. The Yukon-Kuskokwim Region is compiled of many small villages – major to Orthodoxy in Alaska. This is also one of the many regions where the saints of Alaska ministered to the natives resulting in the spreading of the faith to thousands of native peoples. It took 10 years for the parish of St. Sophia to build a new church – but it has been accomplished. Many steps brought this to fruition – selling fry bread, berry jellies, and dried fish for years. In addition, contributions from village parishes to be able to have a church in this hub where they all shop and receive medical treatments, etc. brought them all together in this new church for Orthodoxy. Building for several years in various steps due to the weather challenges in Bethel, and just being able to raise the funds as well as acquire the land to make it all happen was a dedicated effort by many in this area of Orthodox Alaska. They do not build like we do. They build with their own hands and with the sweat of their own brow and bending of their own backs. I know each and every one of these men who put the hammer to the nail – and each woman who sold the bread, picked the berries, and dried the fish. My visits to Bethel were mostly to teach them how to do it – raise the money. They learned and they revised the teaching to do it their way – but it is accomplished. **Outreach Alaska** provided the funds for the sand pad that was needed for the church to be built on – necessary in the Tundra. Putting them in touch with OCMC helped them build the final stages of the church. In September, 2011, the new altar was consecrated by His Grace, Bishop BENJAMIN of the OCA Diocese of the West, Locum Tenens for the Diocese of Alaska. It is accomplished. St. Sophia Russian Orthodox Church is viewed from every boat that approaches Bethel, Alaska on the Kuskokwim – leading all by the shining Russian domes. Thank you all at St Mary Orthodox Christian Church, Wichita, KS for that line-item for St. Sophia Russian Orthodox Church that began this vision in 1999.

It has been several years since Alaska has had a ruling bishop. This has caused **Outreach Alaska** to be more focused on the projects for St. Herman Theological Seminary rather than other areas of the mission. The Adopt a Seminarian project currently provides \$200 a month for the qualifying seminarians during the 2nd-4th years of study. These sponsor funds are contributed by selected churches/individuals wanting to be a part of the life of a seminarian and his family. Several years ago, it became traditional that when I travel to Kodiak, **Outreach Alaska** sponsors a Ladies’ Luncheon for all of the seminary wives and women staff as well as special guests in Kodiak. This began at a very difficult time in the diocese when it was felt something for the

ladies would be very helpful – and it was. It gives them a special time to share what their time at seminary has meant and what difficulties they have transitioning their children from the villages. We laugh together – and sometimes there have been tears. During my time in Kodiak, meetings are scheduled with each seminarian to update on how they are doing as well as to determine what their needs may be for the upcoming year. There never is anyone one of them who do not express their great appreciation for their sponsor and for the St. Julianna Food Pantry. This was funded years ago when Paul Sidebottom was there and he realized how important this would be for the students to supplement their meals and other needs for their children. **Outreach Alaska** remodeled a room for the pantry and furnished it with refrigeration, freezers, and shelving for the food to be stored. The staff usually shops every other month during the seminary year and spends an average of +\$600 each shopping trip. **Outreach Alaska** pays the invoice for the shopping from donations that are given annually for this project. It was an emotional time for me to be there. This year was so inspiring by just seeing the quality of students that are now attending seminary. This year I participated in the commencement of 2 seminarians Father Michael Nicolais and Deacon Andrew Wassillie. These 2 seminarians have grown to be treasures for Holy Orthodoxy in Alaska. Fr. Michael was someone I truly did wonder about in the beginning – thinking this person will be a difficult one to work with. But – the Lord makes them good and I am so proud to say that this class and the ones who will follow them in the next 2 years – are outstanding. Deacon Andrew is the father of 5 children and his wife was expecting another child in August. He suffered a stroke about 10 days before Commencement. This saddened the entire seminary and Kodiak church community. Deacon Andrew is only in his mid 30s and is very much loved. He was hospitalized and had some paralysis in his left leg and left side of his face. Our Lord healed him well enough that he walked up the stairs to the stage to receive his presentation from Bishop BENJAMIN – a wonderful sight. He also was able to participate in a speech during the reception regarding his hopes for what he will be to the diocese and to Holy Orthodoxy in Alaska. He waits a neurological appointment in Anchorage at this time. These two men will grow the church and be a blessing to any parish where the Lord gives them assignment. It was hard this year. I became ill in Kodiak and the weather was bad. But – it was a blessing. There will be a new project – Remodeling the Refractory. It will be expensive – but it is badly needed.

As I look toward the future of the **Outreach Alaska** mission, I see much ongoing work there. It has been 13 years since I first traveled to this beautiful land and felt called to try to help these beautiful, simple people to maintain and grow their faith. For those of you who have participated and assisted with so many things that have been accomplished, may you be blessed and may you not forget that Alaska is your own. The issues continue and the need is great. But many have seen it now and want to be a part of the building up of the holy church in this great frontier. Please pray for me and for **Outreach Alaska**, as the mission continues.