

The Yukon River is one of the granddaddies of the world's waterways. From its headwaters in Canada, it flows some 1,980 miles through the Yukon Territory and central Alaska, before ending at its mouth in the Bering Sea at the village of St. Michael.

Yukon is a Gwich'in word meaning "great river." And that it is. It is miles wide in some places. The massive water-flow over frequently shallow areas results in a changing topography — islands appearing one year only to be swallowed up the next.

The Yukon is known for the Klondike Gold Stampede of 1897 that brought culture shock to the native peoples living along the river. Today those Athabascan peoples still survive by subsistence living in 43 villages along the Yukon, often in very primitive conditions.



Alaska

Article and Photography
by Ken Horn

The gospel runs through America's Last Frontier

Alaska

A history of shamanism and distrust of outsiders can make ministry here difficult. But Assemblies of God minister Ron Pratt has felt directed by God to take that challenge and reach the native peoples of the Yukon River system. Pratt is the assistant pastor at Alaska New Life Outreach Center in North Pole, Alaska, a city near Fairbanks, where Dennis Huenefeld pastors. The church has a Master's Commission — a discipleship program that runs February through November, to avoid the harshest weather — with its own dormitory.

Recently I joined Pratt and 15 students and staff members of Master's Commission North Pole (MCNP) for their fifth annual outreach on the river system.

"We're focusing on about six or seven villages right now," says Pratt, "building relationships."

The team puts three boats in the river about 200 miles from North Pole at the tiny village of Circle, Alaska, then heads down the river toward Fort Yukon.

After several uneventful hours on the river the group camps at a spot they call Storm Island. Weary but eager for the next day's ministry, the

animal. Ministry in the state known as the Last Frontier has unique challenges. The bear meat is donated to a grateful fish camp and village.

This year there are four natives (a term preferred in Alaska to refer to Native Americans and Eskimoes) on the trip. Because so much relationship building is involved, native students familiar with the culture and the ways of the people are extremely beneficial.

One of the four is Keeley Kaveolook, 21, on her third trip down the river. Keeley says she feels called to eventually start Master's Commissions in the villages.

The team and I rendezvous at Fort Yukon. Fort Yukon is just above the Arctic Circle, which all of the villages on the extended outreach are near, and is located at the confluence of the Yukon and Porcupine rivers. These are "Tribal Lands," a sign proclaims, "Home of the Gwich'yaa Gwich'in Athabaskan."

One of the goals of MCNP is to plant resident ministers in the villages. Jeremiah Niemuth, 22, is an MCNP graduate who made several of these ministry trips down the Yukon River.

be a lonely pursuit, especially for single ministers like Niemuth. At the time of our trip there is daylight around the clock. But when winter comes, the reverse will be true. The days of unending darkness are a source of depression that often leads to suicides among villagers.

The MCNP students are involved in a variety of servant ministries in the village, including construction, house cleaning, and ministry to elders and shut-ins.

At the river, where the three ministry boats are tied off, a Fish and Wildlife agent pulls his boat in. He's checking with subsistence fishermen to see if they are getting enough fish to feed their families.

Living along the Yukon is a rough way of life, suitable only for a hardy people.

The cloudy, silt-thick Yukon River is a life-giver, providing water (which needs to be boiled), and salmon, the staple of the Athabaskan diet.

It is July and the king salmon are running. In Alaska, this species is aptly named. It is the king of the five varieties that migrate up and down Alaska rivers. It is the largest and tastiest of the fish, rich in fats,

and has spent his whole life in Fort Yukon, stops at the church to talk. "All my people are gone," he tells us. "Some up there [he points to the sky], somewhere I guess." This man has heard the gospel, but he needs to hear it again. This is an open door to reinforce truth he has not heard for some time.

Hours later we depart Fort Yukon. Several miles downriver we pull onto an island that has appeared since last year. Pratt and I go searching for tracks. We find bear tracks, both grizzly and black bear. The campers will be wary.

After dinner around the campfire a time of prayer and sharing lasts till after 2 a.m. One native student shares emotionally about family members who had committed suicide. She will understand best what the people in these villages are going through, and she will have opportunity to minister.

It never gets dark and the next morning we are back on the river. Soon we spy a fish wheel, a method

From left to right: Ron Pratt meets villagers; Grandma Mary Sar; Two of chief Paul Williams' sons work on their fish wheel; Editor Ken Horn (back row, middle hat) and the MCNP team

Feeding the Needy in Anchorage

Eldon Hicks and his wife, Gloria, love people. They have four grown children of their own and have had 78 foster children over the years, including one now.

Hicks is the pastor of Anchorage Native Assembly, a church with committed laypeople that feeds the needy — physically and spiritually.

It is Saturday night in downtown Anchorage and, like every Saturday night, Toni Yovino is passing out meals from the back of her van in front of city hall, where many homeless and inebriated residents regularly congregate. Anyone who comes is welcome to a hot meal.

When she hands a meal to a woman who is so intoxicated it is difficult for her to walk, Yovino leaves her post to walk the woman to a safe place where she can partake of the needed nourishment. Those in line wait patiently until she returns. Yovino is known and respected among those she ministers to.

Yovino's ministry is part of Anchorage Native Assembly's major thrust to reach the needy with the love of Jesus. On other days of the week, Pastor Hicks and his congregation conduct the largest feeding program of any native assembly, reaching hundreds of destitute and needy.

Prior to the Sunday feeding in the church, Richard Mercer teaches a class called "God's Way," a class for deliverance from alcohol, addictions and compulsive behaviors.

Mercer is well qualified to teach the class. He was an alcoholic for 28 years who began drinking at 10. Jailed six times, during his incarceration he read the Bible through four times. Mercer gave his life to Jesus and was delivered from drinking in 1984. He has been part of this church since 1988 and feels called to be the pastor's "armor bearer."

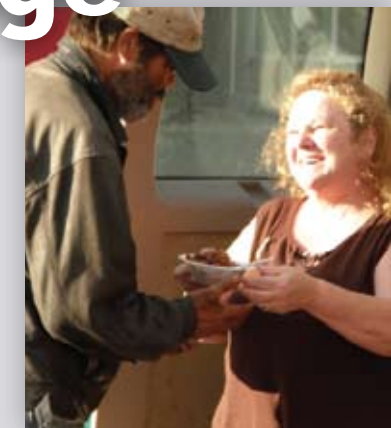
People are not required to attend the class to receive a meal, but many do, including at least one who is clearly intoxicated. Mercer does not react to the occasional disruption.

"You don't need to accept who you are today," he says gently. "God cares about everyone. God can make you a new person."

About 300 people are fed each Sunday. Many stay for the service afterwards. Salvations are seen most weeks, and people are frequently filled with the Holy Spirit and healed.

Hicks is heading into his 10th year of pastoring Anchorage Native Assembly. The ministry here has challenges not common to many churches. But Hicks looks forward to every opportunity to share the great love of Jesus.

— Ken Horn



Toni Yovino joyfully feeds the homeless every Saturday night.



Pastor Eldon Hicks greets a guest at a church-provided meal.



team pitches camp. But soon, they face an intruder. A black bear boldly ambles into the camp and slashes through the brand-new Cabela's tent they just pitched.

Pratt tries to spook the bear but it turns aggressive and refuses to leave. Fearing for the safety of his 15 young people, Pratt is forced to shoot the

In October 2006, Niemuth answered the call to pastor the church in Fort Yukon, starting with a core group of only three people. Now there are about 20 worshippers. Ministry in the villages is about the long haul. Explosive growth is rare.

Pastoring in remote villages can

oils and nutrients that are highly beneficial to native diets.

On our way back to the village, we pass a villager staggering down the road with a bottle in his hand. Some villages have been voted "dry" by their populace, but Fort Yukon is not one of them.

One man, who tells us he is 64

of harvesting salmon only natives are allowed to use, and stop at the camp to talk to the family, who are from a local village.

Before we leave, Pratt presents a Buck knife and other gifts to the family. A relationship is built that may open the door to sharing the gospel in the future.

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U.S. Missions is reaching Alaskan Natives

Alaskan Natives have been reached by Russian Orthodox, Catholic and Mormon groups. Now is the time for Assemblies of God U.S. Missions to reach them through one-on-one evangelism, kids' centers in the church, evangelistic literature, the *Jesus* video, and family camps.

The ReachAmerica Coalition is partnering with Intercultural Ministries missionaries to reach Alaskan Natives through hub villages. These villages have landing strips, docking facilities and a medical clinic. From these hubs missionaries do the work of circuit preachers. With more than 200 Alaskan Native communities, the need is great. Far North Bible College trains pastors and other workers for ministry.

— Intercultural Ministries brochure:
"Reaching the Culturally Distinct
Groups of America"

The longest stretch of this trip will be spent at the Village of Beaver, camping on property belonging to Paul Williams, the traditional chief of the village.

Winters frequently find the residents huddled together around the best wood-burning stove in the village. When it dips to 65 below zero, it's not a matter of comfort; it's a matter of survival.

The village has running water available to the residents in only one location, at the Beaver Washeteria.

The relationship Pratt has built with Chief Williams has provided an open door in Beaver.

"I'm glad you're here," Williams tells Pratt, "because our village needs healing, and you're doing a healing work."

Grandma Mary Sam is a follower of Christ. A 93-year-old resident of the village who lives near the one tap, but still prefers river water, she's lived in villages her entire life, the last 63 years here in Beaver. "It's a hard way

of life," she tells me, "but it helps to know Jesus."

The hard way of life takes its toll, and suicides — often fueled by alcohol — are a persistent problem in these villages.

After camp is pitched, most of the team members charge out to minister. There will be spiritual ministry, but there will also be a lot of physical labor, showing the love of Jesus in concrete ways. The door to the gospel opens when the love of Jesus is shown without any motive except giving and serving.

Wednesday morning teams are off to do prayer walks around the village and some of them take Communion to shut-ins who are Christians. There is no regular church in the village, although there are church buildings, including a long-unused Assembly of God.

Later in the day, John Maracle, chief of the Native American Fellowship of the Assemblies of

God, and Pastor Huenefeld join up with us.

Maracle is especially interested in the distribution of the *Native Book of Hope*. Every resident of the village will receive one. Maracle and I accompany two of the students.

"The *Native Book of Hope* was created by native people for native people," he tells me, "to meet the issues that native people face. It goes from the story of hope, or the trail of hope, which is the plan of salvation to ... the actual *Book of Hope*, a harmony of the Gospels, the chronological life of Christ."

"It tells stories about how Jesus changed people's lives," Keeley Kaveolook explains to a young person as she hands him a copy.

"He changed my dad's life," the teen responds. "He used to be really bad."

Most of the reactions are positive, but some are not. Some of the group enter a home where the residents are drinking and smoking

marijuana. Angela Sergie, a native, shares her testimony. But the residents are not responsive. Maybe they will be later.

On Friday night a Christian concert is held outdoors and further relationships are built. There are a few people visiting from another village. One man tells Tim Opperman, Pratt's second-in-command, his mother was beaten to death, his father got drunk and froze to death, and it still troubles him. The team has an opportunity to minister to the newcomers.

Maracle, Huenefeld and I fly out on Saturday. The team stays through Sunday, and leaves after holding services, moving on to their next stops — Stevens Village, Rampart Village, Tanana Village and Minto.

It's true that spiritual progress moves slowly in the villages. It takes time and dedication to make an impact in such remote and challenging areas; and there are not

many Christians making the effort.

"We have communities that want churches and we don't even have a building," Pratt says. "We have villages that say, 'Bring your team and stay here all year.'"

In one village, the woman who runs the post office wrote Pratt a note saying, "Please don't leave. Your team makes a difference in this village."

The team cannot stay, but it can train ministers, like Jeremiah Niemuth, who will.

"Like going anywhere else in the world," Pratt says, "we need missionaries. We need people who will be sold out to the native people."

tpeextra

Ken Horn provides a behind-the-scenes podcast and photo feature.

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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

Alaska

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