

# **Breaking and Entering**

**The early years of the WELS mission to Alaska**

by

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## *Preface*

Just before our Savior Jesus Christ ascended into heaven, he told his followers, “go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every nation.” This has been the mission of the Christian Church ever since, the WELS not excluded.

Throughout its many years of existence the purpose of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has been to preach the Gospel of Christ to all people, those who have heard it as well as those who have not. So as we look back on the relatively short history of the WELS, 1850 – present, we hear many stories of men and women traveling to far away lands to share with new people the timeless message of Jesus.

This paper is about one such story. This is the story of how the Holy Spirit used his people in the WELS to reach out to the people of ‘the Last Frontier,’ Alaska.

This story is told by the people who were there. The same people the Holy Spirit used to first bring the WELS to Alaska. For this reason this paper is little more than a long string of quotes: memories of people who lived this adventure. These are people who took to heart the command of their Savior to “*preach the Gospel to every nation.*”

It is the prayer of this writer that all who read this might recognize the overriding zeal for the work of the Lord evident in the lives of these people. It is also my prayer that the Lord give each of us this same spirit, that we too may reach out to all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.

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This paper is dedicated to the Glory of our Triune God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. In his mercy he has called us to be his children through the sacrifice of his Son Jesus Christ. We were lost, separated from God by our sinfulness and yet in love God reached out to us and brought us back.

This is the message of the Gospel that we hold most dearly. Yet God has not given this message to us alone. He has given it to all people. This is why Christ commanded us to preach this message to all people, so that they too may know the Father's love and be brought back.

This has been our goal: to follow the command of Jesus in reaching out to the world. We as individuals have come together to form a Synod to make this job easier. Together we have the resources to make world-wide mission work possible.

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### **The Spirit of Mission Work in the WELS in the 1960's**

The 1960's for the WELS began a time of renewed emphasis on mission work. After breaking fellowship with the much larger Missouri synod, the need for the Wisconsin Synod itself to reach out into new fields became more evident. No longer was it possible to shift that responsibility to our brothers of Missouri, whether consciously or not.

Along with this responsibility came many opportunities. Doctrinal concerns which caused the break between Wisconsin and Missouri were not isolated to Synodical Conferences. These concerns were alive in people scattered throughout the country. There were people on the East Coast, in the South and in the Pacific Northwest who struggled with the differences between what they believed and what their church was

teaching. Many of these people turned to the Wisconsin Synod for help. This provided many windows through which to enter new fields of mission work. Pastor Norman Berg who served as Administrator of the WELS Board for Home Missions beginning in 1968 recalls the mission opportunities and mindset of the WELS at that time.

(In the 60's, at the time of the expansion to Alaska)...we were in an expansion time, having broken with Missouri. We made the bold offer to anybody that felt like they should come to us and we would help them out, and that opened a few doors. We were in about sixteen states at that time, and then were given these doors. Alaska probably was the heart of that because, I'm not positive that we got specific Missouri Synod requests from up there, possible but it could have been just WELS people who were up there in the service or what have them. But it was part of that expansion period that we decided we couldn't sit around like little Linus sucking our thumb with the security blanket of our good theology. But the Lord had something else for us to do. We had the opportunity and our Synod did have identity, at least self identity. Prior to that I don't think we had too much self pride or self identity. We were always the little brother of big 'MO.' It really was a shift when we headed a position. Now we knew who we were. I think with that sense of being a church body, it was going to grow. And we had the opportunities. People did start calling us. I know when I was D.P. (District President) in Michigan, man we got requests right and left. It was big out on the East Coast, things were bad. We didn't have the manpower. We had the opportunities. Finances weren't that great either, even with the lack of manpower.<sup>1</sup>

As is often the case, money was an issue. Missions cost money and rarely is there enough money to fund everything that we as a synod would like to do. For us to continue to expand to new mission fields would mean an increasing drain on an already tight budget. There was also a lack of manpower. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was not graduating enough candidates to fill the increasing number of vacancies in existing churches. Many churches would continue to survive without a full-time pastor. Even more would be burdened with vacancy if their pastors were to be sent off to new fields.

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<sup>1</sup> Pastor Norman Berg - personal interview - 4/4/98

These two factors needed serious consideration. Yet the need and the responsibility to reach out to the rest of the world was there and could not be ignored. The opportunities to spread the gospel to new lands was there and we were going to take them. Pastor Berg explains the attitudes of the Synod leaders:

I know we went to the C.O.P. (Conference of Presidents) and asked, “should we stop expansion?” – this was about eight-ten years later – and of course the situation got worse, as bad or worse than it is now, with pastoral manpower, and they said, “no go ahead, we’ll somehow live with the vacancy problem.”<sup>2</sup>

The problem of too few pastors is a problem our synod has faced throughout its existence. In the early years, late 1800’s, there were nearly twice as many congregations as pastors. Sending pastors into the mission fields may have seemed like a bad idea, simply perpetuating the problem. Yet as in all things we put our concerns and our prayers at the Lord’s feet as we sought to carry out his will in reaching out to others. This is something we as Christian people ought always to remember as Pastor Berg again explains:

A similar situation is happening now, because there are people saying, “how can we expand when we have all these vacancies?” well somehow the Lord answers the prayers of his people when he tells us to pray for reapers. Not too many years ago we had excess. Of course we’ve always had that rollercoaster, supply and demand. When the demand is great the supply falls, when the supply’s too great the demand goes down. So I think it was part of the expansion move and the desire to take care of our people wherever they are. It was a double thing. Of course the purpose of home missions has always been to take care of our own but above all to reach out.<sup>3</sup>

As was stated before, during this time there were many requests for assistance from the WELS by people who were dissatisfied with the teachings of their church. Serving these people was a great concern. Serving these people also gave us footholds in places

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

we had never been. The Lord used these requests to encourage us to make leaps we may not have otherwise made. It had been the common practice for mission work to slowly creep out from established areas. Now with requests coming in from places like Florida and Alaska geographical boundary lines could be hurdled. Pastor Berg:

Then we added a third objective in those days and that was to assist those who ask us to help, for confessional reasons. And so all of those probably came into play when you ask, “why did we go to Alaska?” Prior to that the Synod had finally decided to scotch the rule that districts could not expand beyond the adjacent state. Michigan violated that as a district and went down to Florida. My dad was involved with that *‘illegal’* venture – to help raise money to get them down there. He was a pastor too. So that helped.<sup>4</sup>

Also in an effort to more efficiently administrate these new missions and explore new opportunities, the WELS created two administrative positions out of just the one. This divided a quickly increasing work load and allowed more work to be done with each individual mission. With all of these previously mentioned factors coming into play at the same time, it was a very fruitful era for mission expansion as Pastor Berg explains:

Then they divided home and world missions. They had been together in the fifties. Then they finally went to a full time executive position. I don’t credit the expansion to that, other than that up to that time a lot of things were not getting done because part-timers just can’t do what needs to be done. There is just no way. As District President I knew that. So everything came together at the right time.<sup>5</sup>

Other changes were taking place with the WELS mission mindset as well. Not only were we reevaluating the places but also the people to whom we could reach out. The WELS before this time had consisted primarily of farmers and other people of the lower-middle economic class. It was among this social-economic class of people that the majority of mission work was being done. This thinking was similar to the prevailing

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

thought of the 1800's and early 1900's when the majority of the church still spoke German. Eventually we began to conduct services in English in an attempt to serve a new class of people. Such was also the case here. No longer would we look only to areas where the lower-middle class of people were the majority, but to areas consisting of all economic classes. Pastor Berg comments:

For a while unfortunately before the expansion period we had the feeling we couldn't do work other than in the lower-middle class neighborhood. That's what most of the WELS people were; farmers, a heavy agricultural population. Small town population. In fact we did very little work in big cities, for almost a hundred years. Finally we decided the city had souls too. And your English speaking people have souls, cause in 1920 only 2% of the congregations had only English, 9% had English and German. The influence of World War 1 still hadn't taken effect. In fact they considered starting English home missions back in 1901,2,3 something like that but they made the decision that the few English speaking people could be served well by the German Pastor. So they put it off for a while. But it's demographics, what type of people there are there. But I got into this because we were staying away from the suburbs where there are wealthier people. Pastor Edgar Hoenecke always used to say, "rich people have souls too." Abraham was one of them.<sup>6</sup>

People were excited about reaching the lost, and calls were coming in from all over the country asking for assistance. The question was not at all where can we go? But how can we get there and when? With the advent of these new opportunities, combined with a new emphasis on mission outreach and zeal for the lost, whoever they may be, the stage was set for the WELS to enter Alaska.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

## Expansion in Practice: Alaska

In the mid 1960's a window was being opened into Alaska. There was a small group of people living in Alaska who were transplants of WELS congregations from elsewhere in the country. These people were looking for a pastor. No one can remember exactly who got the ball rolling, and although no one will confess to it, most fingers point to Miriam and 'Shorty' Schultz. In the early sixties the Schultz's had moved to Alaska from Montana. There was no WELS presence in Alaska at that time. Allegedly, these people spoke to their former pastor concerning their problem and he in turn contacted Synod. This would have given Synod a reason to consider Alaska as the next mission field. Pastor Berg explains:

First we need to ask why are we considering entering an area. And I assume there were requests from people, because we did have people up there, for business reasons or service reasons. And therefore the first step is of course the district mission boards. These people contact a pastor, the pastor contacts the mission board. And they say, "okay should we go in there?"<sup>7</sup>

Whether or not it was the Schultz's who first contacted Synod is debated, but someone did. In 1966, Pastor Lee Sabrowski, chairman of the Pacific Northwest District Mission Board, began flying into Anchorage on a periodic basis to serve these people. His home church was in Seattle, Washington. He along with others would hold services in Anchorage approximately once a month. This was a common practice says Pastor Berg:

As I mentioned earlier that on occasion we will serve isolated areas like that on a hit and miss or an irregular or periodic (*basis*), but just to preserve what's there.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid



Even before WELS had decided whether or no to begin a mission in Anchorage, outreach had already begun. Friends were telling others about the services they were having and inviting them to come along. Jerry Zolldon, who had recently moved to Anchorage from Minnesota remembers how this happened to him:

I believe it was Miriam Schultz who contacted me. I didn't know that they were meeting but somehow she got my number, I don't know how. And she contacted me and told me they were having exploratory services. Pastor Lee Sabrowski was coming up from Seattle and holding exploratory services.<sup>9</sup>

The people involved were not content with this setup and rightly so. They wanted a pastor and a church. So the request was made to make Anchorage an exploratory mission. This would bring a full-time pastor to this little group of people. Before this could happen though, before Synod would be willing to start an exploratory mission, certain considerations needed to be made as Pastor Berg explains:

Then you have to assess the field of course. And there not only the size of the nucleus comes into play, but also the demographics of the area. Because if we have only the desire to serve our people on a *reiseprediger* approach or by mail, we can do that. Which we do in a lot of isolated situations. But if it also has the potential for outreach then it takes a deeper look.<sup>10</sup>

Anchorage showed great potential for outreach. It was a growing city with a steady flow of people moving up from the south looking for work. The oil business was beginning to become a monumental part of the Alaskan economy. High paying jobs in the arctic oil fields and working on the trans-Alaskan pipeline lured thousands of people to Alaska. Also the people here were showing a great eagerness for outreach. Now all they needed was someone to lead them.

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<sup>9</sup> Jerry Zolldon - personal interview - 3/30/98

<sup>10</sup> Pastor Norman Berg - personal interview - 4/4/98

there. But that of course is not very effective for outreach. Even though the people there may be eager for outreach. And on their own they do a great deal but without some leadership it seldom takes off. And of course what they can do is build interest and some statistics, which will say, “hey the potential is here. All we need is someone to assist us and guide us and lead us.”<sup>11</sup>

It doesn't take a Seminary graduate to practice evangelism. Anyone can share the love of Christ with a friend, and the people in Anchorage were doing that. Still, so that they themselves might be served, and so that they might be guided and encouraged in their outreach efforts, they needed a spiritual leader. Pastor Berg gives his insight on what this leader, or a leader in any era, would need to be:

I think we have to admit that the Pastor has to be the leader. Now in the Wisconsin Synod we tend to downplay that. After all we don't want to be a little pope and so on, but people want leadership. They don't want a dictator but they do want a leader. And I don't think we should be shy about being leaders. Obviously we are the leaders in spiritual matters but I think they're also looking for leadership in temporal matters. I have not hesitated to make my voice heard in these areas. I'm not trying to convince people to do it my way but I think they deserve the benefit of what I've learned through the years or what I know about church architecture, you name it. And I think we can be too shy about that. The other side is worse of course, when I want my way no matter what. I understand our reluctance but we still are leaders whether we want to be or not. It's like say, “I don't know if I can be a witness.” Jesus says “you are a witness.” I don't have a choice in that. And with a pastor I think it's the same thing. He's a bishop, and a pastor.<sup>12</sup>

If this little group of believers in Anchorage was going to grow, they needed a pastor. They needed someone who could lead them in doing what they wanted to do: begin a church in which to worship their Lord and reach out to others with the message of their Savior. So they followed the proper channels to make this happen. Pastor Berg explains what these channels are:

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

The District Mission Board brings its requests to the Home Mission Board. They have to because they control the funding. Therefore they are the ones who will determine whether the field merits exploratory status. Then they will either give an okay with existing manpower, meaning it would be served by someone in the area or they'd send the most power with a newly called man, because otherwise the job's not going to get done.<sup>13</sup>

So the District Mission Board brought its request to the 1966 Synod Convention and laid it before the Synod Home Mission Board. It was now up to them to study the area and decide whether or not there was enough potential in Anchorage to allocate the needed funds to start an exploratory mission. As to what the Home Mission Board looks at to determine potential for growth, Pastor Berg elaborates:

How much demographic studies were done in Alaska I don't know. I have a sneaking suspicion not too many. Other than looking in a census report or something and knowing that it's growing. But later years, now, they do some rather in-depth demographic studies to determine the nature.

They also do look at the caliber of the nucleus. Do we have the talent? When we're looking at resources we're not only looking at the resources of the Pastor and the availability of one, but as far as the ability and motivation of the nucleus. Is it a strong nucleus?<sup>14</sup>

As it turned out, the Home Mission Board did feel Anchorage had enough potential to warrant exploratory mission status. The families that made up the nucleus in Anchorage were determined to grow. Anchorage itself already was growing, and with a wide diversity of people steadily moving in, it promised to keep growing. So the Pacific Northwest District Mission Board was given the go ahead to extend a call for a missionary. This decision was not reached hastily though. With all of the opportunities that were arising, requests were coming in greater numbers than could possibly be filled.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

The Home Mission Board needed to weigh their decisions carefully, but once they gave the nod, they stood behind their decision.

If the mission Board decides to go someplace then it's a priority decision. Because you almost always have a lot more requests than you have resources. So that becomes discouraging for some people. But you can't do everything.<sup>15</sup>

Even though Anchorage had to contend with various other mission fields for the necessary funds needed for work exploratory, there was little or no objection for making Alaska the WELS' next mission.

(there was) Not a word (of objection) at all, because, I think they were turned on by the potential. After all Anchorage is a growing place. And it was much in the news and I'm sure we had a goodly number of people up there because of the service, the airlines, business in general and so on. Oil came later but that was also a factor. So it was a booming area. In fact when we bought the property. We were on a swamp, out on the edge of that scrub growth. It looked miserable. Right across that main street (Lake Otis Parkway). You can see what happened. So they saw that coming. So I doubt whether there was (any objection.)<sup>16</sup>

The Home Mission Board had given their support. The ball was rolling so now it was up to the District Mission Board to call a man for the job. Because there was no formal congregation as of yet, the District Mission Board served as the calling body. After much prayerful consideration, it was up to them to call a man to fit the needs of this mission. Although it was the responsibility of the District Mission Board to chose and call a man for the job, the Home Mission Board still signed the checks. All decisions first needed to pass through the Home Mission Board so that they could be fit into the budget. Pastor Berg gives his insights into the inner workings of the two boards:

The District Mission Board calls. After all they are the people who are there. They know the field the best. And you've got to have a calling body. They get

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

a call list from the District President, and if he's smart he consults with the (Home) Mission Board ahead of time, to see if they have some suggestions. Then they put it in their budget. The budget has to be approved by the Home Mission Board. But we have an expansion item in the budget for new fields. So then they plug in the right number in the computer and go from there. The exploratory missions are funded totally by the Board for Home Missions. The district mission boards don't fund anything. They approve, they call, but all fundings come through the home mission budget. But the home mission budget is divided into district budgets but the control is the Home Mission Board.<sup>17</sup>

So the District Mission Board after receiving approval from the Home Mission Board sent the call to serve as missionary to Alaska to a young missionary in Montana. That missionary was Pastor David Zietlow. Pastor Zietlow at that time was serving a congregation in Winnett, Montana with his wife Carole and his six children: Carrie, Peter, Hans, Todd, Tom, and Jane. Zietlow was only nine years out of the Seminary at that time and had shown himself to be a very zealous missionary. As well as serving the mission in Winnett he helped to start missions in three neighboring counties: Melstone, Sand Springs and Grassrange. The Lord had used Zietlow to reach out to many people in the plains of Montana when he decided to call him to the frontier of Alaska. Dave Zietlow remembers receiving his call:

I got my call in August of 1967 - from the Pacific Northwest district mission board... They told me that I was to start a mission in Anchorage and that the city was about fifty thousand people, which was only forty-five, and they had maybe two or three services up there just for the nucleus, in somebody's home or someplace else.<sup>18</sup>

The call was pretty straight forward: start a mission, preach the Gospel. Dave Zietlow had shown this to be a great love of his, and yet a move to the frontier of Alaska was no small step, especially with six children.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Pastor David Zietlow - personal interview - 3/22/98

Many factors come into play when deciding on a call. The impact on a man's family is a considerable one but there are many others. One such factor is the impact on the congregation he would be leaving. The welfare of this group of people needs to be considered. The pastor still holds the call to serve these people and their feelings on the matter need to be kept in mind as well. Dave recalls some of his thoughts, as well as the response of his congregation in Winnett regarding this new call:

I was concerned about the big family I had and I was very content in Montana, and I had received quite a few calls, eight or ten calls while I had been there, in the nine years I had been there, I enjoyed it there and everything was going great, and the congregation always had advised me to return the call. But I was also very excited about Alaska and starting a new mission and a church in a state where we hadn't had any churches. And of course the wilderness concerned me, I was happy in one respect that I could go there. On the other part I was a bit apprehensive about taking my family and six kids up there, and not knowing what was going to happen. But I brought the call to the congregation and explained my feelings and they looked at each other for a long time, and they said "Pastor we are not going to advise you on this call."<sup>19</sup>

As Dave Zietlow recalls, the congregation in Winnett would have liked him to remain, but they sensed their Pastor's excitement about this call. They would leave it up to him and the Lord.

They thought that I was inclined to take it already at that time and I probably presented a pretty strong case of going. So they just said "we are going to leave it up to you. We're not going to bind your hands in this call" and so that left me kind of free to make the decision to go. And I'd asked my neighboring pastors and they said "Oh boy jump at it" you know, and I asked my district president and he said "That would be a great opportunity for you but we'd like to have you stay in Montana."<sup>20</sup>

Dave's wife Carole was of course an important part of his ministry. Not only did she take care of him and their six children, but she served in a wide variety of ways. She

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

played organ, opened her home to the people of the congregation, and gave her husband the invaluable support that he needed. What she felt in regards to this call was very important. Carole had proven over these years though that her spirit was much the same as her husband's. She was a very strong woman and was adventurous. She also knew that wherever Dave had the opportunity to reach out to new people with the Gospel of Christ was where they needed to be. Carole remembers her thoughts in this matter:

I thought it sounded really exciting. And I just went along with whatever dad wanted to do. I don't know how I ... you know... it was a long time ago, and I was a lot younger, and our kids traveled well. Now I look back and think, how did I ever do it?<sup>21</sup>

By the grace of God though, and a couple of pioneering spirits, they did do it. Following the advice of his friends and colleagues in the ministry, and with the strong support of his wife, Dave Zietlow accepted the call as missionary to Anchorage, Alaska.

## **A Missionary Comes to Alaska**

Now a new set of concerns came to mind. Again, moving three thousand miles with six small children and everything you own is no small feat. A move like this could test the metal of the strongest homemaker. The trip alone would require some very strategic planning on the part of Carole. Carole remembers how it all played out:

We left Winnett on the third of December, no, on Tom's birthday, the second. And we didn't get up here to Anchorage until the twelfth so I had to have clothes. I mean I had to pack suitcases for six kids, and dad and I, and have clothes to wear. Then we traveled. We spent a couple of nights at motels I think. Then we spent about five days in Washington, with one of the ministers there who was a classmate of dad's and mine.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Carole Zietlow - personal interview - 3/22/98

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

The week long road trip was only part of the adventure though. Once they made it to the coast the next leg of the journey began. The Zietlow family would board a plane to a place they had never before seen. Most of their belongings were being shipped up on a boat and would catch up with them later, after they settled into their new frontier home- wherever that might be. Carole recalls the excitement of both them and of the flight crew:

We drove to Seattle, then we shipped the car up and then flew up. I can still remember when we got on the plane, the stewardess says, “have any of you ever flown before?” – “nope.” and they’re like, “oh my goodness.” They thought they were going to have a bunch of sick people on the plane, but everything went fine. We got into Anchorage at three o’clock in the afternoon, December 12<sup>th</sup> and it was a blackout. The power was out. And the Hahn’s showed up. I think it was kind of neat because I knew Lee Hahn before. She was in college at New Ulm when I was in High School. So I knew who she was. So I knew one person, but they’re the ones who picked us up.”<sup>23</sup>

Alaska is a land that gets very little sunlight in the winter. So when they landed in Anchorage in the middle of a power-outage, it was a literal ‘black-out.’ This of course added to the concerns and nervousness of the situation. But as Carole mentioned they were met at the airport by some friendly faces: the Hahn family. This family was part of the nucleus of people Pastor Zietlow would be serving, and they helped to ease the shock a little.

Another great concern that had been on the minds of Carole and Dave was what they would do once they got to Alaska. They had no idea where they would live. Carole remembers:

You know, I guess busy with six kids, and a house – we had a house, that was probably the biggest concern. We didn’t know where we were going to be staying when we got to Anchorage. We didn’t know if we were going to be living with somebody, or what. But they had rented a house for us.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid



It is always difficult to move one's home and family, especially to a place as remote as Alaska, but their new Christian family made the transition easier. The people who would become their new 'extended family' took care of them by renting them a house, supplying them with a car and even bringing groceries and toys for the children. Dave and Carole both remember fondly their new friends and their new home:

They (*the Hahn's*) had two cars. They needed both of them really but they got by with just one – until our car arrived which was about two weeks later - or maybe it was one week. Our household belongings came up too at the same time. Up till that time we slept in sleeping bags and people brought stuff over for us. We had a house with a stove and a refrigerator, washer and dryer. They brought chairs and I don't know if we had a sofa but we had a dining room set or some place to eat there. And then the next week I think our stuff came.<sup>25</sup>

Possibly the most comforting thing for this young family was that they had a home. They had a place where they could be a family, without intruding or imposing on the hospitality of others.

They had rented a house for us. I think Miriam Schultz did it. It was a big house. That was a four bedroom house I think, because dad used one room for an office. And it was all on one floor, just a cement slab, but I mean it was a big house. And they had everything there we needed. They had sleeping bags there, they had towels, toys for the kids. They came up with a TV later. They had a table and chairs and groceries. We were a family and we were by ourselves. We didn't have to live with somebody else. So it was ... you know, I look back and I think, "oh man, I couldn't do it now," but at the time it was just part of the life. You know? Here's what you do. When we moved to Montana it was not much different. Was it dad? Ha ha ha. Only well yea it was, we only had one kid.<sup>26</sup>

Alaska was a unique place to live. Even with the warm welcome of the people and a house to call home, life in Anchorage took some getting used to. One of the more

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Pastor David Zietlow - personal interview - 3/22/98

<sup>26</sup> Carole Zietlow - personal interview - 3/22/98

difficult things to become accustomed to, as Carole remembers, was again the long hours of darkness.

I think often of ... I had to watch the clock because I had not a clue what time of the day it was. Because it was dark! – middle of winter. I had no idea what direction was what, and I didn't realize that the inlet was right over the hill – because we lived out in Rabbit Creek. All we had to do was go up over the hill and there was the inlet. I didn't know it was there.<sup>27</sup>

Another challenge they faced in this rugged country was the roads. Anchorage in the winter got its fair share of snow and ice. This made winter driving treacherous at times, especially when you consider that in those days most of the roads were still gravel. Yet through all this, conditions daunting enough for the most weathered pioneer, Carole recalls that it wasn't all that hard.

I really can't think of any hard parts about it. Probably the hard part was the driving from out there (Rabbit Creek area) and there was only the Old Seward highway, and it wasn't even blacktopped. And then in the winter it was all ice. It made me very nervous driving in, because dad would be working on the parsonage. He'd work all day and I'd go in there, you know, and sometimes help and sweep or I'd have to go to town and get groceries or something and oh, I just hated driving that road. It was just a little narrow road. A lot of times I'd just stop at old George's there and buy groceries. That George's is still there. That used to be the Post office. He had a Post office in there too.<sup>28</sup>

Dave concurs:

...I had gotten stuck in the snow and had to have a wrecker pull me out. Of course wreckers were driving back and forth along the Old Seward Highway lickedy-split whenever we had a snow. They would pull people out for twenty-five dollars cash. So anyway I got pulled out once and after that I was very cautious about driving.<sup>29</sup>

The Zietlow family adapted to their new habitat fairly quickly. The Lord watched out for this young family. He provided what they needed to make this monumental journey.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Pastor David Zietlow - personal interview - 3/22/98

He blessed their transition to their new life and so he allowed his servant David to focus on the job at hand: reaching out to the people of Alaska.

## **Mission Work in Alaska**

Perhaps the best place to start in regards to the early mission work done in Alaska, is with Dave Zietlow's philosophy of ministry. If it can be summed up in a few words then I think they would be the words I heard him say so many times while I was growing up. These words he quoted from the apostle Paul, "I will be all things to all people so that I might win some."<sup>30</sup> And if there is anything I would add, having grown up watching him, it would be - "all things to all people... *all the time.*" Dave Zietlow showed a zeal for outreach that permeated his entire life. Wherever he was or whatever he was doing he always seemed to be on the lookout for opportunities to witness his faith in Christ.

I can still remember one occasion when I was a small child. I was tagging along with dad one day while he was taking care of some business around town. I believe I was five or six years old. One of the stops we made was at the bank. I remember we were sitting and he was talking to some man who worked there, about what I don't know. I do remember dad shifting the conversation and telling this man that of all the great things in his life his first love was his Lord. I don't remember anything else of that day, but that conversation stuck with me. Dad's first love was his Lord and it showed. He never seemed to miss an opportunity to share his Savior with others. But I'm not the only one who remembers this side of my father. His long time friend Pastor Roland Zimmerman shares similar memories:

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<sup>30</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:22

Evangelism was his life. If he went to the lumber yard, he was talking to the lumber guy about religion and church. He invited people hunting and fishing. He got to know them and they trusted him. It was a total dedication to spreading the word in all forms of life and circumstance.<sup>31</sup>

Pastor Berg, in his role as Administrator of Home Missions, worked with Pastor Zietlow from time to time. He speaks of another similar impression he got from Zietlow:

I was always impressed by your dad because of his evangelism spirit, which of course carried through forever. And despite his business connections, which turned out rather profitably, he never neglected the church work. I'd call up there and he was always in adult class or something like that.<sup>32</sup>

Dave Zietlow was tireless. There was always time to do one more thing. He didn't sleep much and when he was awake that time was rarely wasted. That combined with an intense zeal for outreach is what it takes to be a missionary in Alaska Zietlow explains. Pastor Zietlow presented a paper at an ACPAT (Alaska Conference of Pastors and Teachers) Conference in May of 1984 entitled – A Handbook for the Young Pastor Coming to Alaska. In this paper he elaborates on his belief:

Of first importance is an over-riding zeal for the work of the Lord. This love for God's work must take a priority over family and self. Now, everybody in the work of the church has a zeal for the work of God. If he doesn't, he had better get out! I'm not talking just of zeal - but, of an over-riding zeal.

Let's talk about that zeal a few minutes. That zeal permeates your thinking; - how can I get him interested in church? What can I do to involve her and her teenagers in the church? Does that new family in the apartments next door have a church? I had better find out! I've got two adult classes going now, but there's time for one more; how about Monday afternoon? Maybe I can call on that family on my way to the airport... you're looking for that new face you met this week, the old faces that never showed up, and the ones you've never met... and be a friend, - friend to everyone. I can't like everyone, but by the grace of God I can love him.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Pastor Roland Zimmerman - interview by N. Seiltz - 3/2/94

<sup>32</sup> Pastor Norman Berg - personal interview - 4/4/98

<sup>33</sup> Pastor David Zietlow – A Handbook...

This was his philosophy, that there is always something more you can do to share Christ's love with others. But if you ask him how it's done, he'll tell you there's nothing to it at all.

I think the best way is just to go out and meet people and talk to them and sell yourself and then tell them about the Word of God.<sup>34</sup>

This was the philosophy of mission work that Zietlow put to practice in Montana, and he didn't waste any time putting it to practice in Alaska either. Already before he got there Dave had a plan. It wasn't an elaborate plan, but it was a plan he jumped into with both feet.

I was going to build a church and get people. So we just did... The first week all I did was make calls – make calls on people I had names of and names of people they suggested, because I just did not want to be installed in a congregation, where we were going to start a new mission, with nobody there. And I can remember that first week, we got there probably on Tuesday and then I made calls that Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, in the Volkswagen that the Hahn's had brought in. Anyway I had gotten stuck in the snow and had to have a wrecker pull me out. Of course wreckers were driving back and forth along the Old Seward Highway lickedy-split whenever we had a snow. They would pull people out for twenty-five dollars cash. So anyway I got pulled out once and after that I was very cautious about driving. But on the day of my installation I think we had a turnout of about forty five...I was installed the following Sunday (*after they arrived*).<sup>35</sup>

Jerry Zolldon, who is still a member of Faith, as this congregation would come to be named, remembers being contacted by Pastor Zietlow already that first week.

Pastor Zietlow called on me, on a Saturday. He had only been there three or four days. And he came knocking on the door and invited me and my family to come to church. So we did and we've been there ever since.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Pastor David Zietlow - personal interview - 3/22/98

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Jerry Zolldon - personal interview - 3/30/98

In an exploratory mission there is always the question of where to meet for services. If you are going to invite people to come to church you need a place to which they can come. So, until a church building could be constructed, an alternative worship facility was needed.

... we had secured the rental of the Seventh-day Adventist church down on seventh and A because they didn't use it on Sunday, and I had had previous experience with them in renting a church and it worked out real good. Then we held church there until of course we built our own.<sup>37</sup>

They had found a place to worship, now they just needed to find people. The two families who made up the nucleus, the Hahn's and the Schultz's, were already there of course, and Zietlow had also been given other names to follow up on. Anchorage, Alaska's largest city was situated right next to two military bases: Elmendorf Air Force Base and Ft. Richardson Army Base. These were two fairly good sized installations which were both transferring soldiers in and out on a regular basis. Occasionally a family was transferred in who were members of a WELS congregation down below (as Alaskans often refer to the lower 49 states.) Dave of course contacted these people, who along with his two core families, were able to give him more names. "Everybody knows somebody" as Dave explains, and these somebody's were the targets of Pastor Zietlow's energies.

The mission board had given me some names of soldiers that were Wisconsin Synod and we had two families, the Schultz family and the Hahn family and then the rest were Military families. And then I asked the Hahn's and the Schultz's for other names that they knew of, neighbors or other people they knew of who might be inclined to come. So that's where we got them all. I called on these military people and a lot of them were married and a lot of them had their children, and a lot of them had friends and they brought them

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<sup>37</sup> Pastor David Zietlow - personal interview - 3/22/98

too. Like the Fiddler's, I confirmed their whole family later on. They were there on that installation day.<sup>38</sup>

That installation service, the first service Pastor Zietlow held in Anchorage told the story. There were about forty-five people there that day and each one of those people was either a prospect or a resource. If you didn't have a church of your own yet than by the grace of God and a few visits from Pastor Zietlow, you soon would. If you already were a part of this family, then you knew someone who wasn't and it was your job to bring them, or at least bring their name to Pastor. This was a team effort, and Zietlow had no shortage of names to call on.

Pastor Zietlow also tried calling people out of the blue. He would simply pick a street or a neighborhood and begin knocking on doors. Although this was another way of meeting new people, it wasn't quite as effective as meeting them on equal footing. Pastor Zietlow shares his feelings on this method of evangelism:

I'd just go down the street and call on them, I'd say "I'm Dave Zietlow, I'm new here and we're starting a Lutheran church and I'd like to invite you to come." I can't really say that I got anybody that way except maybe on later I met them in a different way, and they said, "Oh I know you," and I got them that way. I think that's a very hard way to get people to come to church. I think the best way is just to go out and meet people and talk to them and sell yourself and then tell them about the Word of God. Also members of the congregation would invite their friends. Everybody knows somebody. They could just give you some names. All I'd have to do is say, "I met some friends of yours and I'd like to talk to you about something that is very important in their life." That's the way it worked. Especially with the military people. They knew people, you know - they worked with people, they lived with people. So getting the military was good, but it was always the thing that in three years they'd be gone. They really financially didn't have any money to help support the church very well, but at least we hope that they became Christians and stayed Christians. In fact I think Selma Fiddler was up here for my farewell. And she was one of the first adults I confirmed.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

Selma Fiddler was one of those people who was a friend of a friend. Often military people are looked upon as poor prospects because they are constantly being transferred. Zietlow looked upon them as an influx of possibility. Military people need their Savior as much as the next person, and there were new groups of them coming into contact with him and the members of Faith all the time. Zietlow remembers how the Lord used this situation to reach Selma Fiddler and her family:

I met her because she was the neighbor of another military family and they said, “these are our neighbors,” and they brought them to church the first time, and then I went to see them right away. I think they had four children.<sup>40</sup>

Almost his entire ministry in those early years was simply calling on people and sharing with them the Word of God. Yet of all the contacts Pastor Zietlow made through house calls, possibly an equal or even greater number of contacts were made in other ways. Pastor Zietlow talks about the various efforts they made to meet and bring in new people:

I had some prospects there (the installation service), yes. And from then on, boy, it was everybody trying to bring somebody and that’s about all I did was spend time calling on people. A lot of those were cold-calls but that didn’t really pay too much. I had to kind of get referrals from friends, or, like in Spring we started Little League and then I got to know their parents and got to know the people that were in Little League. I got some from there. Just the things we did with other people, we got some of those people to come to church.<sup>41</sup>

An expression I’ve heard my Father say a hundred times is “there’s more than one way to skin a cat.” He applied this saying to just about everything, and he meant that there’s always more than one way to do something. This saying could easily be applied to the ways Dave met people. In addition to calling on names he had been given, and

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Ibid



meeting people on a social basis, Pastor Zietlow was able to meet people through business. The Lord had opened another door for Dave in an electrical contracting company called Safeway Electric. Although it's unusual for a Pastor to have a business on the side, many people including Pastor Berg recognized the blessings that came with it, namely in terms of outreach. "Of course he made a lot of contacts through that (*his business*)."<sup>42</sup>

Safeway Electric was a business that Dave Zietlow just sort of fell into. He had never planned on starting a business, let alone becoming an electrical contractor, yet the Lord saw fit to put this on his plate. Dave explains how it all started:

I started Safeway Electric the same day I started building on the house. The framers I hired for the church, they got about halfway framed when they started framing up a house. They saw me laying up rock around the house and wiring the house, and they wanted to know if I'd come over there and wire their house and put brick up the fireplace inside and put artificial rock on the outside. That happened to be Dell Black's house. Well, then Dell Black turned into a builder and I became his electrician and his rock layer. After a while rock took too long to lay up so I just became his electrician. Then finally the word via mouth spread that, "hey this guy works for nothing." And I just was using my old pickup that I brought up from Montana and put everything into the back end of that and worked as I could. Of course in those days things weren't going as fast as they are now. There were no inspections or anything like that, no permits to buy and then after a while other contractors asked "hey can you do this and do this?" Pretty soon I'd get behind and I'd have someone coming to church who didn't have a job and I'd say "you want to help me?" So I had everyone, like Dick Wilson, helping me or whoever, you know? Larry Baker. These people got their feet on the ground, then they went and did their thing. I still had that part time work, finally then it got to be more and more, and more and then I had a family at church that came up. They became partners, that was the Wasmers. That's how it got started. But it got started right off the bat. Didn't even get the church up before I was wiring the house.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Pastor Norman Berg - personal interview - 4/4/98

<sup>43</sup> Pastor David Zietlow - personal interview - 3/22/98

This business helped Dave to support his family of nine in an expensive economy such as Anchorage had. It also allowed these concerned parents to send their children to one of the Synod's Prep schools down below. In addition to all this though, it put Pastor Zietlow in contact with a multitude of people he may otherwise never have met.

Once Dave Zietlow had gotten to Alaska he was pretty much on his own as far as what he did. He received little guidance from Synod as to how he should begin or how he should reach out. Neither did he receive many resources for teaching and training this already growing group of believers. Fortunately he had done this same type of work during his years in Montana. No doubt this fact was one of the reasons the District Mission Board had extended him the call, so that he would already have an idea of how to proceed.

I didn't get any assistance from synod other than the adult confirmation manuals I bought but I paid for those too out of my own pocket, or else the congregation later on had money to buy them. But, no they didn't have any filmstrips or anything like that at that time. Fortunately I had been in Montana for nine years and had done raw mission work there, and that was just getting out and meeting people, they all knew me but I didn't know them, and then just let them know you're a common Joe. And they finally started coming to church. I think most people have a little fear of going to church the first time.<sup>44</sup>

Virtually no time had passed before a regular worship schedule had been established. In addition to the weekly Sunday services and Sunday School, Pastor Zietlow held numerous teen and adult confirmation classes. Often these classes were done individually to cater to the differing schedules of these new converts. Pastor Zietlow explains the rationale behind this system:

I had Sunday school on Sunday at 10 o'clock and church at 11. I had no other Bible classes or anything and then I just had confirmation classes. I think already the second week probably I started adult classes and then I'd have

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid

those in the individual homes. That way they wouldn't skip classes because I was there at their house. I would usually have a man and a wife, or a wife, or a man, and once in a while the neighbors would come over. Sometimes I'd have one family come over from another place and then we'd swap houses. But usually it was just individual families. I had sometimes as many as four adult confirmation classes going at one time – teaching the lessons four different times a week. Then I had one girl in the teenage confirmation class: Pam Hahn.<sup>45</sup>

People continued to bring new friends to church. Also there were those acquaintances Dave had made who for one reason or another decided to give this church a chance. With this healthy stream of prospects coming through the doors, Pastor Zietlow stayed very busy making calls and holding his various adult instruction classes.

As he looks back on it all, he admits that one thing he may have done differently would be to organize an evangelism committee to assist him in making calls. Although the people he served did play an important part in the outreach effort, theirs was more of an indirect role as Pastor Zietlow explains:

As far as the growth of the church, I think the only thing I didn't have then that they have now and probably utilize now more is an evangelism committee that could help me. I didn't have any of that, I just took it on myself. I didn't have any lay workers calling on people except, well their job was too bring me names – bring me people.<sup>46</sup>

While David Zietlow played a fundamental role in God's plan for outreach in Alaska, we would be wrong to forget all the others who contributed so greatly to this ministry. Pastor Zietlow would not have been able to put in the long hours of calling and teaching that he did if it had not been for the strong support of his loving wife Carole, often affectionately referred to as Momma. As well as riding herd over seven spirited children,

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

she also served as organist and was always there to make sure things went smoothly.

Dave comments on the invaluable support his wife Carole gave:

Yea, I was pretty busy. But I didn't know enough to quit you know? I didn't spend enough time with the family and the kids. Momma did a great job there. That was a great credit to me that I had such a good wife. She played the organ you know, and got everything going that way too.<sup>47</sup>

Even being as capable a mother as Carole was, keeping a rein on six, soon to be seven spirited children while playing the organ was sometimes too much. But there was never a problem too great for Carole to handle. Jerry Zolldon fondly remembers one of the systems that Dave and Carole had come up with to handle this dilemma.

I remember Tom sitting in the front row because he talked really loud. And any time he needed to go to the bathroom or something like that he wouldn't hold back. He'd just say it really loud, but if he sat in the front pew than your dad could keep a rein on him. Carole was chances are playing organ trying to handle the other kids.<sup>48</sup>

As hectic as this picture may seem, Sunday morning worship in a frontier mission was not always even this simple. Usually it took a precise schedule of carpooling just to get everyone to church. Then when any variable got thrown into the mix, such as a sick child, no organist, or both, things got a little dicey. Yet in all of this Carole was there to fill in where she was needed and to quell any potential disasters if she could. Carole recalls one such incident:

Usually, I'd go in to church with dad. I think Tom was in Sunday school, but I had Janie, so I'd take Janie and I'd go over to Zolldon's and pick up Darlene, because Jerry had probably taken Gretchen to Sunday school and the I'd bring Darlene and Peter because Jerry was probably working. I can remember one time though, I think Todd was sick. I think he had an ear infection or something so I had stayed home from church and he was like five. Jane was a year. And dad had gone in and he didn't have an organist. He got to church and

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Jerry Zolldon - personal interview - 3/30/98

he had no organist. So he calls me, "Can you come in?" So what do I do? This is the good wife I am, no maybe not a good mother, but I was a good wife. I said "Todd, would you be all right with Jane?" Jane was in the crib, she was sleeping. "Oh sure mom." He's five right? I go into town to play the organ with the pick-up. I had to drive this pick-up. So dad would have an organist, and I left my five year old and my one year old home alone. Now you wouldn't do that these days, would you? You know, Tom was in Sunday school. Dad took Tom, he was three already. Todd had an ear infection and the others were all with dad in Sunday school. So I left Todd home with Jane. I turned out okay, ha ha, I know, but dumb. Boy, I mean if somebody caught you doing that this day and age, they'd take your kids away from you.<sup>49</sup>

As the saying goes, 'hindsight is always twenty-twenty.' Maybe she would have handled that situation differently if she were to do it over, Carole admits. But there is no mistaking the dedication she had to her Lord and the support she had for her husband's ministry.

As the Pastor's wife, Carole also showed her self to be a fine hostess and always a friend to everyone. Carole remembers the many times this family of believers would gather for work and fellowship. There was a definite appreciation for her and all she did among the people of Faith. In fact, if you look in her house today you will see a plaque on her wall entitled "To the First Lady of Faith" given to her by the congregation. Carole was indeed a blessing to the ministry, and her love and excitement for it showed.

I remember all the pot lucks that we had, well not pot lucks, but bringing food over to the workers at church. It was always fun. We took the kids along and they played. We ate outside. We set up sawhorses and then sat on stumps. Darlene and I used to do a lot of that, taking food over there. We were just really close. Close friends, close relationships. Of all the people, nobody had family up there. So we all became one big family. I was the Godmother. The first lady. The first lady of Faith, and I got a plaque to remind me. That was pretty special. So it's all very exciting.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Carole Zietlow - personal interview - 3/22/98

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

Pastor Berg had mentioned earlier that one of the things the Mission Boards take into consideration when deciding on a new mission field is the strength of the nucleus. Whether or not the core group of people in the area are dedicated to outreach is an important factor. This small group of believers in Anchorage had showed that they were indeed motivated. They were ready and willing to reach out into their community with the good news. Even before a pastor had been called to serve Anchorage, some of these people had taken it upon themselves to invite others to their monthly services. This was how Jerry Zolldon was first introduced to this family of believers as he remembers:

I believe it was Miriam Schultz who contacted me. I didn't know that they were meeting but somehow she got my number, I don't know how. And she contacted me and told me they were having exploratory services. Pastor Lee Sabrowski was coming up from Seattle and holding exploratory services. Except for every time they had a service I was down in Minneapolis which is where my family was, in Minnesota. Actually it was Stillwater. They hadn't come up yet.<sup>51</sup>

Even though they soon were blessed with a leader in Pastor Zietlow, these people didn't leave the outreach to be done solely by him. They remained dedicated to the work of the Lord. As was mentioned before, people were regularly bringing friends to worship and supplying Pastor with promising names. Along with these efforts Pastor was always suggesting new ways that they as a group might attract new people. Often they were little things, yet things that sent a message to anyone watching. This message said, *'hey, why don't you come and join us. We'd love to have you.'* Jerry recalls one such thing that Pastor often encouraged them all to do:

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<sup>51</sup> Jerry Zolldon - personal interview - 3/30/98

I remember standing outside of church on the steps. Everyone at church would stand out there and talk before church and after church, because Pastor said if we stand out here everyone will see us and maybe they'll stop in.<sup>52</sup>

All this goes back to Dave's philosophy that if people see you as real people and get to know *you* as a real person, they will be more apt to listen to you when you share with them God's Word. It starts with making people feel comfortable, comfortable with you as a person and comfortable with you as a congregation. If they're afraid to come through the doors or afraid to even listen, they will never hear the wonderful message we have to share. If standing outside could send the message that real people went to this church and that this church might even be friendly, then they would stand outside.

The people of that young congregation were ready to work, regardless of whether that work was bringing a friend to church or swinging a hammer. So when the time came to build a church and a parsonage, the people were ready to go. Some of the construction was hired out to professional builders, but much of the work they did themselves as Zietlow explains:

All we had to do was hire a crew to frame up the church and then we took over ourselves...on a Saturday probably we would have six, eight guys out there and the wives would come and bring lunch. Everyone was willing to help, you know, if they could get the day off.<sup>53</sup>

Starting a mission takes much hard work and dedication both on the part of the Pastor and the people. Pastor Zietlow showed that dedication and so did the people who would make up Faith Lutheran Church. The Lord blessed their many efforts and in the following years he caused his church in Anchorage to grow.

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<sup>52</sup> Jerry Zolldon - personal interview - 3/30/98

<sup>53</sup> Pastor David Zietlow - personal interview - 3/22/98

## The Church Grows

Not long after Dave Zietlow arrived in Anchorage they decided they were ready to build a church. They picked out a five acre parcel of land on Lake Otis Parkway about a half mile south of Tudor Road. At that time the land bordered on a large swamp and was still pretty remote. Tudor and Lake Otis were two sizable thoroughfares though (for Anchorage at least) and in time it proved to be a good location. Again, the Board for Home Missions controlled the funding for this and all other missions so before they could buy they needed their approval. The Mission Board felt that five acres was more land than they needed, so they settled on half of that, as Zietlow recalls:

As soon as we got up there, why, I started looking for land. By next spring we had bought land, and I brought the chairman of the mission board up there. I had this five acres picked out and one two and a half acre parcel was on one side of the trail and one two and a half acre parcel was on the other side of the trail. And they wanted twenty five thousand for the one parcel and twenty thousand for the other. Which would have given us five acres and all the land we needed for a school and parking lot and church and anything else. Anyway in those days we in the Synod thought little. We didn't think big. The mission board chairman came up and talked to the Realtor I had lined up, and he says, "we'll give you twenty-two five for the parcel that cost twenty five thousand." And the guy said "sold." So we ended up with the one parcel.<sup>54</sup>

Once they had purchased the land no time was wasted in laying out where the parsonage and the church would be. The ball was in motion and it would stay in motion until everything was done. Everyone rolled up their sleeves and got a little dirty, including the Administrator for Home Missions. Pastor Berg has fond memories of his time 'in the trenches.'

In 1968 I was out there, that's when we bought the property out there, in Anchorage. When I was there they had laid out the lines for the parsonage, and

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid



I knew your dad was itching to get out there and start on the work. They were having services somewhere else. They didn't have the chapel at that time. So I was there over Sunday and I was not leaving till Monday night. So I said, "get some old clothes for me and I'll help you." Well they finally found my place in home missions. That's what Jeb Schaeffer said when I came back. Because they had decided that day they were going to build the septic tank, and they made it out of logs and made a ten by ten foot crib. And your dad got me to notch logs. And I hadn't had an ax in my hand for years. So I had the blisters! So then the neighbor came over with a backhoe and covered it up and so on. – He had all kinds of connections then already. And he's had many many more since. – But that's when I came back and Jeb Schaeffer said "you finally found your place to really work in home missions, digging septic tanks!"<sup>55</sup>

Dave Zietlow was never one to sit around debating whether or not he should do something. So, just as soon as they had purchased the land he appropriated some plans for building the parsonage. They had the land, so they might as well build. Everyone was pretty optimistic and willing to pitch in, so instead of hiring a builder they purchased a pre-cut home. All the lumber was cut and all the hardware was included. All they needed to do was put it all together. Before they material had even arrived they had begun laying the foundation for the house. Things were coming together quickly. Dave explains how it all went:

As soon as we bought land – I don't even know if I had permission from the mission board – I wrote to Cap Homes and got them to send me some plans on some pre cut houses. Then we picked one out of that and they cut it all out and sent it up, and while they were sending it up I had the foundation and the floor of the house built up with cement and blocks. Then we finished the garage which was done on the original plans as part of the house, on the end of the house, and used the footing lumber for trusses for the garage roof and then just covered it with tar paper and tar. Then when the house came, why, all the perishable products: the insulation and wiring and plumbing and kitchen sinks and stuff I put in the garage. I installed the garage door and everything that was perishable and of greater value was under lock and key.

Then we started framing up the parsonage. I'd have a work-day every Saturday and then during the week I'd work over there myself. We didn't hire

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<sup>55</sup> Pastor Norman Berg - personal interview - 4/4/98

anybody except the mason who laid the blocks and a plumber to help me finish up the plumbing. Otherwise everything else we did ourselves, except laying the linoleum and the carpet, but by that time we got to know Karen Paulson (who owned a carpet and flooring business) and so they did that. The carpet and the linoleum came with the parsonage but she sent someone over to help lay it. It took us all that summer and all that winter to build the parsonage. We finished it about the fifteenth of May, 1969.<sup>56</sup>

It took them a while, but eventually the parsonage was done, and the people of Faith had done it with their own hands. It turned out so well even, they decided that they would build the Church as well. Again, they wasted no time.

The day we finished the parsonage we broke ground on the church. Then I had the Cap Home people design and pre-cut the church. The windows and the doors were all sent up, and the lumber for the trusses and stuff were all cut but not nailed together. It came up in a flatbed and then they unloaded it and left it there. Then of course when the church came, why, before the materials got there I had the basement all built and so all we had to do was hire a crew to frame up the church and then we took over ourselves.<sup>57</sup>

Pastor Zietlow, who served as the foreman of this rag-tag group of builders, was a pretty handy individual, but, he admits that he pretty much learned what he was doing as he went along. He had ambition, all he needed was instructions.

That's where I learned to do all the wiring and plumbing, because they sent books on how to put it all together. They even sent nails and sheet-rock cement, everything you needed.<sup>58</sup>

With this insight into the limited construction experience that Zietlow had, one might assume he must have had some experienced helpers. This was not the case. The people were more than eager to help, but none of them had any real construction know-how. They followed Pastor's instructions, which of course were the book's instructions, and

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<sup>56</sup> Pastor David Zietlow - personal interview - 3/22/98

<sup>57</sup> Ibid

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

learned as they went. Dave shares a humorous memory and gives us a little insight into this ambitious group of builders.

I was the only one who knew what they were doing, because I remember when we were putting up a wall on the parsonage, I laid it all out for them, and they were supposed to nail the plate down or just hold onto it and then nail the studs to the plate and then put the sill on it. I said it'd be easier if they just laid it all on the floor so they did that and I went to do something else. Then when I came back, here they had nailed it just like I said but they had started nailing the wall to the floor! I said "what are you doing?" they said "well we thought it belonged there." That's how much they knew about it.<sup>59</sup>

Building a church and a parsonage is no small accomplishment. Given the total talent and experience involved, no one could possibly deny that the Lord was watching closely and blessing their efforts the whole way. Pastor Zietlow is the first to give credit to the Lord's guiding hand.

The Lord sure watched us. I would say, on a Saturday probably we would have six, eight guys out there and the wives would come and bring lunch. Everyone was willing to help, you know, if they could get the day off. And I worked over there a lot. If I didn't have meetings at night I worked over there, if I had time off during the day I worked over there. We got her done. We got the church done and dedicated that the following...well we started in May and we dedicated it the next April.<sup>60</sup>

Not only had the Lord blessed the physical growth of the church but he had greatly blessed the spiritual growth as well. Jerry Zolldon remembers how the Lord blessed his church. What began with just a few families quickly took root and began to grow.

The church just grew and grew and grew, starting with those four families; us, the Zolldons, the Schultz's – Miriam and 'Shorty', the Perham's – Jim and Sandy, and the Hahn's and then all their kids. And from there it just grew.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid

<sup>60</sup> Ibid

<sup>61</sup> Jerry Zolldon - personal interview - 3/30/98

The size and strength of the congregation had grown to the point where they could consider organizing. Up until this point, they had not technically been considered a congregation. They were still an exploratory mission and so were not recognized as a 'congregation.' In order to be accepted into membership in the Synod and be considered a full-fledged congregation a group of believers must meet certain requirements. Pastor Berg explains what these requirements are:

Sufficient numerical strength, sufficient financial strength. In other words that there is a sign of permanence – continuing permanence. Really the Home Mission Board would recommend that they get mission status, which in turn goes to the District Convention. The District Convention grants membership. To do that they have to have a congregation. Really the mission board has to be convinced that they're financially stable. Otherwise they'll say, "hey you're on your own. If you don't think you can make it we're not backing you." But technically it's the district that okays membership.<sup>62</sup>

About the same time as they were preparing to purchase land, the group in Anchorage requested official membership in the WELS. They had become a fairly good sized group of Christians by this time. The exact numbers are unknown but probably somewhere in the mid forties. They had also shown a strong potential for continued growth and were financially stable enough that the Synod Convention granted their request. In 1968 they were organized and were officially recognized as Faith Lutheran Church – Wisconsin Synod member.

Pastor Berg explains what organization means for an exploratory mission:

You get mission status. In other words, now we consider you to be a full-fledged congregation. And we will support you fully – until you can support yourself fully. During the exploratory stage they do not organize. They have a treasury and so on, but they don't ask for membership in the synod. And the district would direct this request to the Synod, depending on which year it is, either at the District Convention or the Synod Convention. And they request

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<sup>62</sup> Pastor Berg - personal interview - 4/4/98

congregational status – membership in the Synod. That’s when we talk about there organizational date. So they were going in 1967 but were organized in 1968.<sup>63</sup>

Many exciting things happened these first couple of years. What seems to be remembered most fondly by the people I’ve talked to though, are the close relationships that were formed. In a number of his letters, the Apostle Paul speaks of Christians as members of one body, with Christ as the head. This Christian fellowship is a wonderful blessing, as it was for those early Alaskan Christians.

Those were very exciting times. Everyone was very close. Everyone up there was from somewhere else, we were from Minnesota, the Hahn’s I believe were from Arizona, the Perham’s I think were from Minnesota, and I think the Schultz’s were from Montana. No one up there had a family, and we all became very close, sometimes too close. Anytime anything happened, if someone got sick or something like that it was very hard.<sup>64</sup>

Carole Zietlow also remembers how they had all become one large family. Things may have been a little overwhelming for Dave and Carole and the children but as she explains, “then you meet the people:”

Then you meet the people, and everybody is so close. I mean we had more parties out at that parsonage; pot-lucks, we had kids running from one end of the house to the next. I remember one pot-luck especially, when we named the church. We had a pot luck out at the parsonage first. Then we voted on what we were going to name the church. I think Faith stuck because I think dad wanted Faith. I don’t remember why – that was a long time ago! But certain things stick in your mind. It had to have been the Spring of sixty eight. Because we left in December of sixty seven<sup>65</sup>

As it sometimes is with families, members move away. As sad as this can be, this opened up even more doors for mission work in Alaska. God had blessed his church in Anchorage and was blessing it still, but God’s love knows no bounds and always seeks to

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<sup>63</sup> Pastor Berg

<sup>64</sup> Jerry Zolldon

reach out farther. In the same way that areas had opened up to the WELS in the sixties, with people asking to be served, areas were opening up in Alaska. Members from Faith in Anchorage, or from other WELS churches below, moved to other cities and towns in Alaska. Many of these people called to Pastor Zietlow, hoping that he might serve them also. In this, Dave Zietlow recognized new opportunities to reach out to new areas. Dave recalls how one of these opportunities led to the forming of a church in Fairbanks:

...by that time, people I had in my church started moving to little towns away from here like Wasilla or Homer, Kenai or Fairbanks. And the people in Fairbanks started calling down, saying "hey..." They didn't even know me but they were Wisconsin Synod, and they said "would you come up and serve us." They were the first ones that I really served. So I went up there and met them and got a little nucleus together and then we had to find a place to hold church. So I was driving down the road one day. After I had held church in the homes I stayed there. I went up there Sunday afternoon to have church at night and then stay there for probably Monday; come back maybe Monday night or Tuesday, and then make calls on people – the names they'd give me. And I was driving down the road I think Monday afternoon looking for a place to have church and I came by a funeral home called Valley of the Chimes, and I figured I'd stop in there and see if I could use their funeral home. So I walked in there and he said, "yes sir can I help you? Gonna have a funeral?" and I said "Well I'm Pastor Zietlow, we're starting a Lutheran church up here and I was wondering if I could use your facilities on Sunday afternoons for a church service. We won't mess it up and if we do we'll clean it up." "well..." he said, "I'll be damned! Nobody else has ever asked me to use my funeral home for a church. You can have it for nothing!" Those were his exact words. So from then on we got along pretty good. We used that till we had called another Pastor, that would have been Norb Meyer, and he of course went ahead and built a church and a parsonage.<sup>66</sup>

This was not an isolated incident. Soon other areas opened up. As Pastor Zietlow traveled from place to place serving people who had no church, new missions soon sprouted up and began to grow.

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<sup>65</sup> Carole Zietlow - personal interview - 3/22/98

<sup>66</sup> Pastor David Zietlow - personal interview - 3/22/98

As I got out, I got to know people too, people in Eagle River. Eagle River was the second place we started. Then they started down in Sitka, and that was guys that came up from Washington first of all. They would just come up there on weekends, about once a month. They'd fly in there. They got that thing going and then I went down there and wired the parsonage, and wired the church. (then we started one in Kenai)<sup>67</sup>

As these 'missions' grew, Synod began to take notice. Steps were then taken to make these full-fledged missions. Pastor Zietlow speaks of his efforts as well as Synod's involvement in the formation of these new missions:

Things were going so great down here that the mission board down in Washington said hey we'll just take that over as a mission. That's going too good. You just can't start a daughter congregation up there like that you know. So they took that over. So then we started a mission in Wasilla and also in south Anchorage that same year – 1984. And the mission board with the success we had in Kenai they said sure, we'll take those two over as missions too. So they called two other Pastors right away and I found places to worship in Wasilla and a place to worship in south Anchorage. In Wasilla we used Karen Paulson's furniture store and in south Anchorage we used a school. And we got those missions started. Then the last one was Juneau. That one got started by Vicki Bassett and the Diane Ostrom. And they both were from my old church back in Montana. So we started having services in the airport because Dianna worked at the airport at the car rental, and we could use it there, so I'd fly down there and have services and stay over night, and have classes too. Then I traded off with the Pastor from Sitka he would go up there too and have services when I wasn't there. That worked out pretty good. Now old Hans is the resident Pastor there. They became a mission in 1991.<sup>68</sup>

Reaching out to these new areas was a substantial drain on pastor Zietlow's time. Yet the congregation at Faith in Anchorage didn't mind a bit. They remained dedicated to the work of the Lord. They were excited about starting new missions in Alaska and even wanted to begin another in Anchorage. They were behind their Pastor's efforts all the way. Pastor Zietlow describes the attitude of his congregation:

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

Well they were all for it, they were all gung-ho. They were all just mission minded. And they're the ones who wanted to start in south Anchorage, and wanted to build a church in the four corners of Anchorage. In south-west Anchorage we had synod buy land which they still own there and really a nice subdivision out by Klatt road. They wanted to start a church there. Then they wanted to have one on the northwest corner and northeast corner of Anchorage. Then the present church – Faith, would be turned into an educational unit. We'd have a great big grade-school there and maybe someday a high-school. And that would service all four of the congregations. We'd have buses and so on too. So I mean that was the plans.<sup>69</sup>

Dave Zietlow and the congregation of Faith took Christ's commission seriously. They were excited about reaching out to the lost in Alaska and the Lord greatly blessed their efforts. There are currently nine churches in Alaska, most of which are daughter congregations of Faith. Not all of the plans of Dave Zietlow and the congregation of Faith came to fruition. Many did. Yet we remember that the Lord has his own plan in mind and we rejoice in the parts of that plan that he let's us live. The Lord certainly blessed his servants in the Alaskan Mission Field: Dave Zietlow, his wife Carole, those founding families and the ones who came later. It is my prayer that the Lord continue to bless these his servants and that he continues to bless his mission in 'the Last Frontier.'

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid



## Closing Thoughts

Carole Zietlow – the First Lady of Faith:

Those were great years. Everybody at one time needs to be in a new mission, starting from the ground up. I mean there is nothing more ... you know. You get so close to everybody. You don't stay close. But at the time you still have that feeling, that closeness. Like the Hahn's and the Schultz's, and the Perham's. They're long gone, but you still remember those names like the Fiddlers. Because they were the one's that were out there; the Zolldon's. I think the nicest thing that could happen to you is that you would get an exploratory where you could start a church. It really is exciting. But you gotta have a wife! Ha!<sup>70</sup>

As I sit, a Senior at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary less than a month away from a call that by the Grace of God I will receive, I look to the example set by my Father. Dad carried out his ministry with the attitude, "In Christ I can do anything." This attitude and the truth behind is evident as I look again at all that the Lord accomplished through him. So as I await my first call in to the public ministry and look to my father for support, he gives me this advice:

"Now you just go out and do the same thing."

May the Lord grant us all the strength to follow this advice.<sup>71</sup>

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*To God alone the Glory*

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<sup>70</sup> Carole Zietlow - personal interview - 3/22/98

<sup>71</sup> Pastor David Zietlow - personal interview - 3/22/98

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