

## Alaskan ministry is relying on airplanes, radio, translators

By Gerald Korson  
Catholic News Service

HELENA, Mont. — Arranging resources to teach religious educators, parish staff and deacons may be tough enough in any area, but the Native Ministry Training Center in southwestern Alaska has to do it with aircraft, translators and radio broadcasts.

Designed to prepare Yupik Eskimos for ministry throughout the region, the training center in St. Mary's, Alaska, combines weekend workshops, field education, combined meetings of parish and mission staff and sensitivity to Yupik traditional spirituality.

One of the center's founders, Jesuit Father Charles Peterson, recently discussed his 18 years of work in Alaska during a trip to his hometown of Missoula, Mont., to celebrate his 25th anniversary as a priest.

He told *The Montana Catholic*, newspaper of the Helena diocese, that by adapting the church's ministry within the Yupik culture, the program seeks to affirm the Yupiks' identity and help them adjust to an increasingly modernized society.

"What we're trying to do is to help the people discover that they have whatever skills are necessary to meet the challenges of our times," he said.

Each monthly weekend workshop focuses on a particular ministry — parish councils, Scripture studies or marriage preparation, for instance.

The 30 to 50 workshop participants must be flown in because of the few roads in the area. Some hitch rides on the mail plane, others are picked up by a pilot hired to bring them in.

In another component of the program, faculty mem-

bers travel to the various villages to tutor local ministers.

And those who still can't be reached in person can hear Father Peterson's lessons on a twice-weekly radio program, "The Lord Be With You," in which he discusses weekly Scripture readings. That program is designed to help deacons prepare their homilies and give lectors a greater understanding of the passages they will read.

Lilly Afcam, a Yupik woman who helped found the program, is responsible for ensuring that the training center's work is sensitive to Yupik spirituality, Native customs, spiritual practices and prayers are included and classes by non-Yupik speakers are translated for those who don't understand English.

"All of our ministries are grounded in their way of life," Father Peterson explained.

As the center has become established, directors have stepped up efforts to recruit qualified native people to teach and Father Peterson has continued his efforts to learn the Yupik language.

His first success was achieving "liturgical competence" in the difficult language.

"I learned the prayers by rote, by listening to the liturgy, taping it and practicing it over and over again," he said.

The Yupik liturgy was "one of the first gifts of the deacon program," which he started in 1970, and has helped the Fairbanks diocese become the only U.S. diocese with more permanent deacons than priests.

His experience with the Yupik deacons also taught Father Peterson about simplicity.

"The deacons taught me to use plain words, not high words," he explained. "I have learned how to limit my teaching vocabulary to about 800 words so they can be easy to translate."

Father Peterson was asked

to help establish the center after his success in opening the deacon training program for the Fairbanks diocese and a short-lived effort at establishing a diocesan seminary.

In 1974, he started a seminary, which remained open two years and had only two seminarians when it closed.

The problem was the seminarians had to leave their villages to study. And in Yupik culture, one who leaves the community comes back as a stranger, he explained.

The seminary experience taught him that "before we develop a native priesthood, the people have to see ministries emerging from themselves."

The seminary was followed by a native ministry program, the Center for Theology and Spirituality in Fairbanks, which he directed for seven years.

"I wanted people to have a limited ministry that they could succeed at and feel good about rather than start with something that was overwhelming — like zero to priesthood," he said.

Before starting the program in St. Mary's, Father Peterson was stationed at a parish in Nome, where his responsibilities included traveling to one community 60 miles north by snowmobile and to Unalakleet, about 150 miles across Norton Sound by airplane. He also flew regularly to Little Diomedede, a tiny island in the Bering Strait located two miles from the International Date Line and the Russian community of Big Diomedede.

As he returned to his home state to celebrate his anniversary, Father Peterson reflected on the course that had brought him to Alaska.

Even as a seminarian, he felt drawn to the state. "There's a romance to it. You're out there in the toughest of all missions," he said.

## ETS study

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Catholics that bishops, pastors and diocesan education directors hope to see.

The top priorities expressed by church leaders — a sense of personal worth, a clear faith identity, an active eucharistic life, a sense of being a disciple of Jesus, participation in church life, personal spirituality, witness to charity and the Gospel — were the qualities exemplified by adult Catholics who were involved in adult formation programs.

In addition, those adults reported that those programs had a positive impact on their understanding and practice of their faith and their involvement in church life.

"Something is working! It could be that everything is

working," the report concluded.

Educational Testing Service is the largest education research and testing organization in the United States, known mainly for its national pre-college tests of student achievement.

It conducted the catechetical study under a grant from Lilly Endowment, with the cooperation of the U.S. Catholic Conference Department of Education, the National Catholic Educational Association, the National Conference of Catechetical Leadership and the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry.

A 21-page summary report, "Toward Shaping the Agenda: A Study of Catholic Religious Education/Catechesis," was published in late May. A 78-page supplementary final report, providing more detailed

data and analysis to back up the conclusions of the summary report, was completed the following month.

Father John Pollard, USCC representative for catechesis and leadership development and an adviser on the study, said the study highlights the importance of providing more resources, training and support to the huge corps of volunteer catechists who are teaching the children.

"These are priority challenges," he told Catholic News Service. "The church is relying on almost 450,000 volunteer catechists to teach and proclaim the Gospel to millions of children."

"These are mostly lay people and mostly women. They feel isolated and without institutional support, that appropriate resources are not available to assist them."

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