

## Church group, city vow effort to fight crime

**By John Roscoe**  
**Anchor Editor**

Patty Jacobus has always considered herself shy. Yet there she was, in front of more than 400 people, "signing," or dancing, to the words of the "Yup'ik Our Father" song.

The 59-year-old Holy Family Cathedral parishioner overcame her trepidation about large groups when she was asked to lead the community in prayer at the start of a meeting March 9 between city officials and people from at least 10 church congregations around the city.

"I was shaking a little, but I got through it," she said.

As with a number of other emerging leaders at the meeting that night at Anchorage's St. Anthony Church, Jacobus has been organizing members of her faith community and other neighbors, talking with them in one-to-one visits about their hopes and troubles.

More than 500 such meetings have taken place since 2003, when eight Christian churches formed AFACT, or Anchorage Faith and Action — Congregations Together, a community organizing group that now includes 10 congregations as well as the Anchorage Archdiocese's Catholic Native Ministry program.

The most common concern people have identified in those one-to-one visits is neighborhood crime, AFACT leaders said. And the solution that the group has decided to focus on is community oriented policing, an approach to police work that focuses on building relationships between officers and the individuals in the neighborhoods they patrol.

That was the focus of the meeting that Jacobus led in prayer.

AFACT called the meeting with Mayor Mark Begich and Anchorage Police Chief Walt Monegan. The congregation members of the group encouraged their people to attend, and the individuals conducting the one-to-one visits asked those they visited to come.

The result was a big crowd of people from neighborhoods across the city, according to the sign-up sheet people were handed as they walked in.

Turnagain. West Dimond. Huffman-O'Malley. Downtown. Midtown. Mountain View. Russian Jack. Eagle River.

"We stopped counting at 420 people!" said the Rev. Michael Keys, pastor of Central Lutheran Church and the meeting facilitator. "When do you go to a community meeting and have more than 25 or 30 people there?"

He said the large crowd sent the message that a lot of people are serious about pursuing community policing.

At the meeting, two AFACT members presented a report on community policing, asserting, among other things, that the city needs another 93 police officers in order to "adequately serve a community of Anchorage's size."

The figure came from the Anchorage Police Department's own internal assessment.

The report also referred to a federally funded three-year community policing program that was implemented in the Mountain View neighborhood in the late 1990s.

"Despite its success," AFACT researcher Donna Gum told the gathering, "the program was not integrated into the local budget and when federal funds ceased so did the program. The crime rate has since increased to previous levels."

Gum, who is a pastoral associate at St. Anthony, later told the Anchor that New Orleans had the same experience: When community policing was implemented in the early 1990s, crime fell, but when the funding was cut, crime crept back up.

Gum said that as AFACT researched the Mountain View program, everyone they talked to agreed it had been a success, reducing crime and restoring a sense of safety to the neighborhood.

"Our biggest concern in this has been, if it was successful, why wasn't a successful thing integrated?" Gum said.

Begich told the gathering at St. Anthony that when he came into office two years ago, he found the police department was "literally under siege."

Part of his response was to renegotiate the department's contract, which resulted, he said, in being able to hire more police than retired that year for the first time in a long while.

"We recognize there's a lot to do, as we're trying to correct years of political inaction, to be quite frank," he said.

He later told the Anchor that his current budget adds 28 police and that he intends to add more each year to "grow the police force to the optimum level."

Right now, there are about 350 officers on the force, according to Monegan. But only about 22 officers are on patrol at any one time citywide, he said. Community policing is impossible when police have to race from call to call, he said.

At the meeting, Monegan and Begich pledged to commit to community oriented policing, though they emphasized that it will take at least four or five years and a big financial commitment from the community to make it happen.

Getting the city to take the principles to heart is an important first step, AFACT members said.

The first step in constructing a building is having an architect draw up plans, Gum said.

She said AFACT will continue pushing the issue; in fact, at the March 9 meeting the mayor and police chief agreed to meet again with the group sometime in the next two months.

"What's really going to help us succeed is what we saw tonight by the commitment of the community to get involved," Monegan told the Anchor. "Apathy is crime's best friend."

Yup'ik signer Jacobus echoed that sentiment.

"We need to do something about the problems," she said. "This is what the Lord did when he was on earth, making peace with his people."