

Faith groups, city launch after-school program

By Maia Nolan
Anchor Writer

Faith-based community organizing celebrated a major success last week when Anchorage mayor Mark Begich announced the birth of a new program in West Fairview to provide free after-school care for 26 children from Denali Elementary School.

The program is the direct result of an action by Anchorage Faith and Action — Congregations Together, a multi-faith union with a membership that includes four Catholic parishes.

Lutheran Bishop Michael Keys called the collaboration between AFACT and the Municipality of Anchorage "an extraordinary event."

"We engaged in the conversation and posed the question to the city, and the city responded with 'yes' when we said, 'will you be our partner in creating after-school programs for low-income children in the West Fairview community?'" Keys said at an Oct. 11 press conference at Central Lutheran Church. "This is a very exciting time for us, both as a church community, but also as a neighborhood community, to understand that we have created something brand new that has never been done before."

A May 17 AFACT meeting, or "action," at Central Lutheran drew nearly 200 participants and focused on the problem of affordable, accessible after-school activities for children in the West Fairview area.

"This is an example of that where the city government and the faith community and community leaders can get together and figure out what we can do to make a better life for our young people, not after the fact when crimes are involved, and youth violence, but now, when it's in the early, formative ages," Begich said. "This is a very unique collaboration to meet a need that is critical in our community."

In addition to the new program, which is being staffed by Camp Fire and funded through a donation from Municipal Light and Power, six slots in the existing Camp Fire program at Denali have been set aside for West Fairview children.

The partnership between AFACT and the city is an ideal way to help meet the needs of the community, the mayor said.

"Every neighborhood has a church or some sort of meeting place. Every neighborhood has a school that has kids that are in need of programs like this. Melding that together can create these types of efforts," Begich said. "This church is reaching beyond its boundaries and its borders of the facility. They're reaching out to the neighborhood that is adjoining them, which I think is a powerful message."