

Native Christians find their voice in AFACT community group

Editor's Note: Second in a two-part series on the struggles of Alaska Natives in the Anchorage School District and the work of AFACT (Anchorage Faith and Action — Coming Together) in finding solutions.

**By Kelly DuFort
Anchor Writer**

Jacqueline Agnew, an Alaska Native mother, said she is pursuing a master's degree in public health "in spite of" the education she received in Anchorage public schools.

She dropped out before finishing a single semester of high school more than 20 years ago.

"I hated going to school, not because I didn't like the school work," Agnew said, but because she was taunted by classmates who called her "salmon cruncher" and other racial slurs.

Her memories of kindergarten include frequent time-outs in a bathroom, wondering what she had done wrong. By the time she was in second grade, she was skipping school to avoid "feeling like crap for being Native," she told the Anchor. "It was misery."

Since she dropped out for good in the ninth grade, she's obtained a GED (General Equivalency Diploma) and earned an associate's degree and a bachelor's. She is now mother to a four-month-old son and is on track to complete a master's degree from the University of Alaska Anchorage next summer.

When Agnew's mother, St. Anthony (Anchorage) parishioner Gemma Gaudio, first told her daughter about efforts by local Catholic and Lutheran groups to improve the experience of Alaska Native students in the Anchorage School District, Agnew was surprised.

"What? You mean you're still having to go through that?" she remembered asking.

Gaudio, originally from Hooper Bay, is part of AFACT (Anchorage Faith and Action — Congregations Together), a conglomeration of Christian groups who utilize community organizing to address social problems.

Since January, Gaudio and about 15 other Alaska Native AFACT organizers have met with their neighbors and fellow parishioners to surface community concerns. What they discovered listening to more than 100 Native families and individuals is that Native students aren't succeeding in the school system and that their parents feel ignored by educators.

Last month, about 300 people, predominately Alaska Natives, filled Central Lutheran Church on a Wednesday night to share their concerns with Anchorage School District Superintendent Carol Comeau.

Comeau listened as AFACT leaders presented research findings on Native student performance and about two dozen others told of hardships in dealing with school district officials.

Comeau agreed to institute pilot programs in two schools to train staff members about cross-cultural communication and to reach out to the families of Alaska Native students.

Faith-based organizing

The lower achievement levels among Native students is a "justice issue," said Sister Donna Kramer, a Daughter of Charity who heads the Anchorage Archdiocese's Native ministry efforts. "People are not being heard. People are being ignored. People are allowed to drop out of the system and that's not acceptable."

Acting on concerns about others is "our moral obligation as baptized people," she said. "We're called to be disciples: You don't just read the word of God, you act on it."

AFACT has proved an effective way to put faith into action solving community problems, according to people involved in the effort.

"AFACT got us talking to our people, doing one-to-ones, (which) makes us learn something about our community," said Patty Jacobus, a Yup'ik Catholic woman.

She said she would not have known the extent of struggles that Alaska Native students have in Anchorage, nor would she have been able to do much about the problems by herself.

Community organizing "brings us together, and we build relationships with other congregations and the school district and police," Jacobus said.

Father Fred Bugarin, pastor of St. Anthony Parish, where many of the Native ministry leaders are parishioners, said that speaking about pain to someone who may be able to do something about it is empowering, and "empowerment is the work of justice."

He said he's proud of the transformation he's seen in parishioners who were once "in the background" and who now "claim their voice and speak."

Transforms communities, people

Gaudio, a Yup'ik grandmother, is one of those people, Father Bugarin said.

"It does something to your life when you become a member of AFACT," Gaudio said. "You want to go out there and reach out to more people."

Learning the AFACT organizing process has developed her speaking and listening skills, she said.

In addition to the changes she's felt in herself, Gaudio said she feels like the group is "doing something great and giving people a chance to speak out too, when otherwise they couldn't."

"We emerged from under," she explained.

Aimee Aloysius, a Catholic Yup'ik woman originally from Bethel, said that because the community organizing effort is centered in faith, people trust it and believe it can work.

If the organizing lacked a faith basis, "we would never have had the response that we had," she said.

Being free of politics also helps, according to Kathy Willie, a Holy Family Cathedral parishioner who is also Yup'ik.

"We've never really had someone say, 'What are the issues among your people in the Native community?' " she said. "No one really asked us without being political and now there's AFACT that comes and says, 'OK we want to work together and what can we do?' "

However it happened, the organizing has created strength and momentum.

As a group, the organizers have identified and begun to address a community problem instead of "just hearing it in the wind," Aloysius said.

"Finally, it's not one person crying in the dark," she said. "Everybody is there and that's where the strength of our faith comes in."