



Photo by James DeCrane

A Native Choir sings an opening hymn before an Anchorage Faith in Action – Congregations Together (AFACT) meeting with Anchorage School District Superintendent Carol Comeau Feb. 4 at Central Lutheran Church in Anchorage.

Reaching Alaska Natives **Native ministry builds bridges from the church**

By James DeCrane
Anchor Writer

For years, Gemma Gaudio wanted to return home to her Catholic faith, but the Alaskan Native woman struggled with that first step.

"My right foot wanted to go to church, but my left wanted to keep going," Gaudio recently told the Anchor.

That all changed one day, when she felt called by God to attend Mass at St. Anthony Church in Anchorage. After Mass, several people extended warm greetings, including one woman who invited Gaudio to get involved as a greeter herself.

She took up religion classes at the church and within six months was back in church fulltime.

"I've been involved ever since," she said.

Gaudio now serves as a Eucharistic minister and as a member of the church's pastoral council.

Gaudio also assists with the Native Alaska Ministry of the Archdiocese of Anchorage and is active with the interdenominational and interreligious outreach called Anchorage Faith and Action – Congregations Together (AFACT).

AFACT employs a faith-based approach to address many problems in the city, including issues pertinent to the Alaska Natives.

Native ministry vital

Gaudio's story is a perfect example of why the Anchorage Archdiocese's Native Alaska Ministry is so important, said Anchorage Archbishop Roger Schwietz.

"The Alaska Native community is a significant part of the archdiocese," he explained.

Archbishop Schwietz praised AFACT, of which many local Catholics are members, for bringing so many different faith groups together to address social concerns from a faith-based position.

"AFACT has raised to the consciousness certain concerns and needs of the Native community," he said.

Sister Donna Kramer, from the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, heads the Alaska Native Ministry office for the Anchorage Archdiocese and works closely with AFACT.

The archdiocesan ministry serves as a bridge from the church to the Native community, Sister Kramer explained.

"They come to us to talk," she said. "They'll share some of their pain which makes them stronger to help out more."

Listening is key

Sister Kramer said listening is a crucial part of Native outreach, especially since it is usually taboo to talk about certain issues – like alcoholism.

People are learning, however, that it is important to address the tough issues, Sister Kramer said. Once they do, huge barriers come down and healing begins.

"My listening time is in the car," Sister Kramer added. "They shed years of grief. It is a grace-filled moment to let people share stuff."

And while it can be a painful process, healing strengthens people and can inspire them to help others, she explained.

Invitation to greater participation

One key aspect of Alaska Native ministry is the Kateri circle. Named after Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, the first beatified Native American, Kateri circles are faith-sharing groups that meet on a regular basis – typically once a week.

"We pray together, sing, do faith formation and sharing," Sister Kramer explained.



Photo by James DeCrane

From left, Gemma Gaudio and Lydia Wilson serve as moderators at an Anchorage Faith in Action – Congregations (AFACT) meeting with Anchorage School District Superintendent Carol Comeau Feb. 4 at Central Lutheran Church in Anchorage.

In addition to prayer, the gatherings also help plan other ministries and events, such as special liturgies, potlucks and other events.

The idea of a recent reunion for St. Mary's School (in the Yukon) came from a Kateri group.

"We are trying to attract our Native brothers and sisters back to the church through these events," Gaudio explained.

Special Alaska Native Masses take place on the third Saturday of the month at St. Anthony Church in Anchorage.

Hope for the future

Archbishop Schwietz expressed great hope for the Native community. He mentioned that Alaska's bishops plan to continue with regular listening sessions in rural Alaska to better understand the pressing issues in those predominantly Native regions.

"Then we will reflect together about what we can do for the rural villages and the native community in general," Archbishop Schwietz explained.

He hopes to address issues like subsistence and the influence of modern culture — especially technology. Education and domestic violence are other areas that concern Alaska Natives.

Gaudio said she is proud to be a part of helping meet the spiritual and material needs of her fellow Alaskan Natives. She is already seeing some fruit from her labor and points to the fact that her sister is becoming more interested in the church again.

"She called me one day, expressing interest in going to the Mass," Gaudio said. "I told her I would take her to the Native Mass and she perked up. She is all excited about the reunion and ministry and she is drawing others in." For more information about the Anchorage Archdiocese Native Alaska Ministry, contact Sr. Donna Kramer, DC at (907) 297-7777.