

AFACT

ANCHORAGE FAITH & ACTION • CONGREGATIONS TOGETHER



FALL 2008

Celebrating the Five-Year Anniversary of Congregation-Based Community Organizing in Anchorage

A time to be silent. . .

Listening to the hopes and dreams of Anchorage residents began in 2003, when St. Anthony Catholic Church launched a one-to-one listening campaign. Listening, the AFACT leaders quickly learned, meant intentional silence on their part as they attended to the words of the other. St. Anthony leaders initially conducted more than 250 one-to-one visits to ascertain the hopes and dreams, as well as the concerns and fears, of congregants. Since 2003, leaders in fifteen Anchorage congregations have conducted more than 1,500 visits—visits that have crossed socio-economic, ethnic, geographic, and denominational boundaries.

A time to speak. . .

In February 2004, St. Anthony Catholic Church introduced AFACT to the community at a public meeting attended by more than 450 people. Those gathered shared significant concerns about public safety. In a one-hour meeting they addressed two Anchorage Assembly members on the need for a policing model built on relationships and communication between residents and police officers. Residents shared their stories of break-ins and shootings. *The Anchorage Daily News* reported on the meeting, comparing it to other gatherings in the community, noting, "...at St. Anthony, something a bit different was happening—the residents themselves raised the issues."

A time to mourn. . .

Beginning in 2003, concern for Anchorage's youth permeated listening campaigns in every AFACT congregation. Seeking to shed community-wide light on the myriad of youth issues, more than 200 people from AFACT congregations

presented a "Vision for Anchorage Youth" in November of 2007. Addressing Mayor Mark Begich, Police Chief Rob Heun and Superintendent Carol Comeau, those gathered remembered Johnny'ee Barney, a victim of gun violence whose funeral had been held in St. Anthony's church just weeks earlier. An opening slide show presented 79 headlines from the previous 18 months, each representing an incident of youth violence.

The mood in the church was somber but hopeful.

A time to laugh. . .

AFACT leaders have found no greater joy than seeing children engaged in healthy and productive recreational activities. A significant victory for AFACT's leaders has been the expansion and improvement of youth recreation programs in Anchorage.

Central Lutheran Church first brought this issue to the public's attention in a May 2006 meeting with Mary Jane Michael, the Executive Director of the Municipal Office of Economic and Community Development. More than 200 people filled the sanctuary at Central Lutheran and raised the deplorable lack of opportunities for the children living in their West Fairview neighborhood. A celebration followed four months later when Campfire, Central Lutheran leaders, and Mayor Begich announced a free after-school care program for the neighborhood's elementary-age youth.

Leaders at St. Anthony Catholic Church rejoiced in June of 2007, when the Parks & Recreation Department followed up on Mayor Begich's commitment to AFACT to create recreation opportunities in underserved neighborhoods. Sixty children participated in the summer three-day PLAY program in Russian



The faces of AFACT

Leaders gather for faith sharing, retreat and training.



Jack and in 2008, Parks & Recreation expanded the program to five days.

Bethel Chapel, in Mountain View, held a community meeting in January 2008, when leaders learned that the Mountain View Community Center was underutilized, sometimes serving as few as 20 children a day in its Boys & Girls Club program. Bethel Chapel members and Mountain View residents secured an agreement from the Municipality and the Boys & Girls Club to address the low participation numbers. By the summer of 2008, a resident advisory board had been appointed, neighborhood recruitment had begun and participation exceeded 100 children a day.

A time to weep. . .

The public expression of grief and anger by Alaska Native youth, parents and grandparents filled the air at Central Lutheran Church in September of 2005. School Superintendent Carol Comeau sat quietly in the front of the church as one by one Alaska Native people stood to share their stories and lament the inability of the School District to stem the tide of Alaska Native



children dropping out of school. Some cried, as they shared their stories in a whisper. Others raised their voices in anger and frustration. More than 300 people sat attentively in the sanctuary and most shared Comeau's assessment of the meeting as "compelling" and "impassioned."

AFACT's Alaska Native leaders sought a commitment from Comeau to begin a project that would provide active outreach to Alaska Native families,

many of whom felt uncomfortable and unwelcome in the Anchorage schools. Three years later, the Lutheran and Catholic Alaska Native leaders remain convinced that outreach to Alaska Native families, many who have only recently arrived from rural communities, is essential to the success of the students.

A time to heal. . .

Over the past few years, families raised the issue of a lack of children's health care again and again in one-to-one visits and AFACT leaders began to research the concern in earnest. The research confirmed the leaders' experience: since 2003 there



had been a decrease in the number of children eligible for the State Children's Health Insurance Program, Denali KidCare. Children were falling off the health care rolls, even as the cost of private insurance rose dramatically. In April of 2007, Central Lutheran church filled with families to tell the stories of how a lack of health insurance was adversely impacting their children. Commissioner Karleen Jackson, Alaska Health and Social Services, listened intently, offered encouragement for future changes, and agreed to share the families' concerns with Governor Sarah Palin.




A time to build up. . .

Empowerment is a journey. That journey in AFACT has meant walking together and grounding the work of community organizing in the faith of the leaders. Since 2003, 47 individual leaders from 15 congregations have attended extended leadership training outside of Alaska. Each year since 2004, AFACT leaders have spent one weekend in August in retreat, sharing their faith and their journey, and strengthening their relationships.

As AFACT has grown, so has the vision of its leaders. In October 2008, 21 people from Anchorage, Fairbanks, Wales and Brevig Mission gathered for four days in Willow, for the first AFACT Statewide Leadership Training. Rural and urban divisions dissolved during the training. Members of Lutheran congregations in Wales and Brevig Mission and members of Anchorage congregations recognized that the principles of empowerment remain the same, whether one lives in a remote Alaska village or in its largest city.

A time to dance. . .

An AFACT planning team is making the arrangements for a five-year anniversary celebration and "choirfest" to be held on November 14, from 6-9pm at Our Lady of Guadalupe Lunney Center. *"To everything there is a season,"* and the season to celebrate AFACT's five years of leadership development, empowerment and public policy achievements has arrived. 

AFACT Updates....

AFFORDABLE & ACCESSIBLE YOUTH RECREATION— Both **Central Lutheran Church** and **St. Anthony Catholic Church** celebrate as safe, affordable youth recreation programs continue to enhance Anchorage neighborhoods for yet another year. Housed in Central Lutheran Church, the after-school Campfire program for West Fairview youth will continue, fully funded in the Municipality's proposed FY 09 budget. Additionally, St. Anthony Catholic Church eagerly anticipates another summer of the Neighborhood PLAY program. The quality recreation program will continue next summer and may expand to offer a preschool morning program to serve the many families with younger children in the Russian Jack neighborhood.

CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS— **Holy Family Cathedral** leaders have continued to work with community partners since the March meeting seeking to address chronic homelessness in Anchorage. In partnership with various social service agencies, Holy Family leaders created a job description for a Homeless Coordinator and funds for that full-time position have been secured for 2009. Additionally, an outreach worker in the Pathways to Sobriety program is funded through most of next year in the Municipality's FY 09 Budget. The Anchorage Coalition on Homelessness, sharing Holy Family Cathedral's leaders support for Housing First programs, will continue their efforts in the 2009 legislative session to secure Housing First funding. In addition, an Anchorage detox center will open its doors with ten beds in January 2009.


PUBLIC SAFETY— Public safety continues to be a pressing concern among Anchorage families. **Gloria Dei Lutheran Church** leaders have listened to families share their worries about crime and safety in the neighborhood around the church. In an effort to assure that all concerns are heard in the Jewel Lake neighborhood, the Gloria Dei organizing ministry has begun house meetings with congregation members and neighborhood residents.

CHILDREN'S HEALTHCARE— AFACT leaders continue to work on the issue of children's healthcare in Alaska, a concern expressed in nearly every congregation. Leaders have met with Alaska Department of Health and Social Services Commissioner Bill Hogan to discuss regulatory changes that would streamline the Denali KidCare enrollment process. AFACT leaders will continue to work for both regulatory changes and legislative adjustments to eligibility criteria. In 2007, the Alaska Health Care Strategies Planning Council appointed by Governor Palin recommended the short term strategic goal of raising the eligibility criteria for Denali KidCare from the current 175% to 200% of federal poverty limits.

AFACT WELCOMES NEW MEMBER— **Immanuel Presbyterian Church** in east Anchorage joined AFACT in August. Congregation members will hold three meetings in November to further explore congregation-based community organizing and begin a listening campaign.

NEW HOPE BAPTIST HOLY FAMILY CATHEDRAL IMMANUEL PRESBYTERIAN
 AMAZING GRACE LUTHERAN OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE GLORIA DEI LUTHERAN ANCHOR PRESBYTERIAN
 CATHOLIC NATIVE MINISTRY ST. MARK'S LUTHERAN CHRIST OUR SAVIOR LUTHERAN BETHEL CHAPEL
 CENTRAL LUTHERAN ALASKA NATIVE LUTHERAN ST. ANTHONY FIRST CME

**MANY
 PEOPLE
 MANY
 VOICES
 ONE
 HARMONY**

**A Five-Year Anniversary Celebration
 November 14 from 6 to 9 p.m.
 Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church
 Lunney Center  3900 Wisconsin St**

AFACT Member Congregations

- Alaska Native Lutheran Church
- Amazing Grace Lutheran Church
- Anchor Presbyterian Church
- Bethel Chapel
- Catholic Native Ministry
- Central Lutheran Church
- Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church
- First CME Church
- Gloria Dei Lutheran Church
- Holy Family Cathedral
- Immanuel Presbyterian Church
- New Hope Baptist Church
- Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church
- St. Anthony Catholic Church
- St. Mark Lutheran Church

For more information contact:

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