

# A Missiological Profile of the Alaska Native Diaspora

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## Abstract

*In recent decades, Alaska's indigenous population has become increasingly urbanized. A growing rural outmigration has resulted in an urban diaspora community of Alaska Natives that reflects many trends also observed in international diasporas, including chain migration, circular migration, and transnational identities. This case study explores the factors contributing to this urban migration and concludes with a consideration of the missiological implications of this trend. Featured heavily in the discussion is the threat of climate change to Alaska's rural communities, including the Church's historic role in exacerbating this threat through colonial activities, and the emerging opportunity for a sort of "environmental missions" modeled on the church's response to the 2013 flooding in the community of Galena.*

## I. Introduction

Migration has shaped and reshaped Alaska's demographic landscape since time immemorial. Archaeological anthropologists generally agree that humans entered Alaska from Asia via the Bering Land Bridge during a global ice age that lowered sea levels to

reveal an isthmus of dry land spanning the 50-mile gap that is today's Bering Strait.<sup>1</sup> In what is increasingly becoming understood as a series of migrations "by different competing peoples from scattered parts of the world," people fanned out across the American continents forming what are now generally referred to as the "Indian" cultures of North and South America, including the contemporary tribes of interior and southeastern Alaska.<sup>2</sup> More recently, a series of oceanic migrations by the seafaring Inuit peoples populated the arctic coastline of North America from the eastern tip of Siberia across Alaska and Canada to Greenland.<sup>3</sup> More recently still, Western imperialism and contemporary geopolitical developments brought waves of Russian and American migrants.

Though urbanization had long been a characteristic of indigenous cultures further south, including the Mississippian, Aztec, and Mayan civilizations, Alaska's Native peoples had long thrived as semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer societies broadly dispersed in rural settlements based on kinship. Early Russian and American settlement, too, was predominantly rural, focusing on trapping, gold mining, and whaling. It was not until World War 2 that urbanization emerged as a defining demographic trend in Alaska.<sup>4</sup> Naske and Slotnick describe the immense shift that has occurred since:

Today the overwhelming majority of Alaskans are urban dwellers. According to 2009 estimates, more than 286,000 Alaskans live in the town of Anchorage, and more than 98,000 reside in the Fairbanks North Star Borough. The rest live in small urban centers from Ketchikan to Barrow and from Seward to Kodiak and in the approximately 220 villages scattered throughout the state. Thus most of Alaska's

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<sup>1</sup> Claus M. Naske & Herman E. Slotnick, *Alaska: A History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2011), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Naske & Slotnick, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Naske & Slotnick, 28-29.

<sup>4</sup> Sandberg, Eric, *A History of Alaska Population Settlement* (Juneau: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, 2013), 13.

current inhabitants are urbanites. Newcomers from the contiguous states settle mostly in the urban centers, and many Natives are leaving their villages for the towns as well.<sup>5</sup>

In both popular and academic thought, a false racial dichotomy often exists between Alaska's urban and rural areas, with cities being understood as the epicenter of Caucasian "civilization," and the villages representing "authentic" indigenous culture. The assumption has been that rural subsistence-based living is the "norm" for indigenous peoples, and the only authentic expression of their culture.<sup>6</sup> Native urbanization, then, has usually been equated with assimilation into the dominant culture, and "urban locales have been understood in the academy and more broadly as places where Indigenous culture goes to die."<sup>7</sup> Peters & Anderson explore how this mindset has shaped the political and sociological discourse of indigenous affairs, in which urbanized indigenous communities often tend to be overlooked and disregarded.<sup>8</sup> The missiological community has largely followed suit, with most of the Church's resources and strategies for Alaska Native ministry efforts being focused on rural areas.

Nevertheless, Alaska Natives continue to migrate in increasing numbers. Moreover, they have not followed the neocolonial narrative of assimilation through urbanization. Rather, through a host of factors including chain and shuttle migration, urban Natives have tended to retain and affirm their indigenous identities even while becoming conversant in

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<sup>5</sup> Naske & Slotnick, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Evelyn Peters & Chris Andersen, *Indigenous in the City: Contemporary Identities and Cultural Innovation* (Vancouver: UBC, 2013), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Peters & Andersen, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Peters & Andersen.

their new host culture. As “peoples on the move...who take up residence away from their places of origin,” Alaska’s urban indigenous population represent a genuine “diaspora people.”<sup>9</sup> Contemporary sociologists have indeed begun referring to the urban indigenous community as a “Native diaspora,” and the missiological community should take note.<sup>10</sup>

This case study will describe the phenomenon of the Alaska Native diaspora, explore the “push” and “pull” factors that influence people’s decision to migrate, and draw specific missiological implications. If the church is to minister effectively “to, through, and by” Alaska Natives in the coming years, then the trend of the Native diaspora must be understood and engaged.

## II. The Phenomenon of Alaska Native Diaspora

According to 2017 estimates, the state of Alaska is home to 737,080 individuals, of which 147,752 (20%) identify as Alaska Native (either alone or in combination with some other race).<sup>11</sup> In 2017, 80% of the total state population lived in the five most “urbanized” boroughs: “Municipality of Anchorage (40 percent), Matanuska-Susitna Borough (14 percent), Fairbanks North Star Borough (13 percent), Kenai Peninsula Borough (8 percent), and City and Borough of Juneau (4 percent).”<sup>12</sup> These same five “urban” boroughs

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<sup>9</sup> Enoch Wan, *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology, and Practice* (Portland: Institute of Diaspora Studies, 2011), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Peters & Anderson, 213.

<sup>11</sup> Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, *Alaska Population Overview: 2017 Estimates* (Juneau: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, 2018), 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Alaska Population Overview: 2017 Estimates*, 41. Notably, these five “urban” boroughs do not include any of the smaller regional “hub” cities, such as Bethel, Dillingham, Nome, etc. If these were included, the urbanization figures would be even higher.

were home to 52% of the state’s Alaska Native residents. In other words, just over half of Alaska’s indigenous population is urbanized, and just over one third of all Alaska Natives in the state live in the Anchorage Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) alone.<sup>13</sup>

*Table 1: Population of Alaska and its Urban Areas, 2017<sup>14</sup>*

Region	Total Population	Alaska Native Population (Alone or in combination)
<b>Alaska</b>	737,080	147,752
<b>Anchorage</b>	297,483	39,273
<b>Matanuska-Susitna Borough</b>	104,166	12,221
<b>Fairbanks North Star Borough</b>	97,738	11,481
<b>Kenai Peninsula Borough</b>	58,024	7,125
<b>Juneau, City and Borough</b>	32,269	6,236

From a synchronic perspective, then, it is clear that urbanization is a significant characteristic of the contemporary Alaska Native community. Taking a diachronic view, it becomes clear that this trend has emerged particularly within the last thirty years. To be sure, Alaska Natives have been a part of Alaska’s urban landscape from its inception, and World War 2 played an important role in jumpstarting their movement towards the cities just as it did for Alaska’s population as a whole.<sup>15</sup> Nancy Yaw Davis was one of the first to formally observe, in 1978, a “growing urban Native population” that was “siphoning off” from Alaska’s rural villages.<sup>16</sup> However, the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development notes that the trend has become especially prominent in the last thirty years:

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<sup>13</sup> The Anchorage MSA is defined by the US Census Bureau and consists of the City of Anchorage and the neighboring Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

<sup>14</sup> *Alaska Population Overview: 2017 Estimates*, 82.

<sup>15</sup> Peters & Andersen, 176.

<sup>16</sup> Nancy Yaw Davis, “Historical Indicators of Native Culture Change,” Bureau of Land Management, Technical Report no. 15, August 1978, 109.

An important population change in Alaska since 1990 is the migration of rural residents, particularly Alaska Natives, to the urban centers of the state. Though it's often perceived as a one-way emptying of rural Alaska, the truth is more complicated. It's true that the Alaska Native majority areas of the state have continual net migration losses. Between 2000 and 2010, 2,364 people moved from Native majority areas each year and 1,513 came in, for a net migration loss of 851 people per year. For those moving within Alaska, most go to Anchorage though large numbers resettle in Fairbanks and Mat-Su as well...The percentage of Alaska Natives who live in the five most urban boroughs—Anchorage, Fairbanks, Mat-Su, Kenai, and Juneau—jumped from 42 percent in 2000 to 49 percent in 2010.<sup>17</sup>

If the 2017 data from the previous paragraph is factored in, then the number grows to 52 percent. So from 2000 to 2017 alone, the urban percentage of the Alaska Native population has jumped 10 percent. Notably, this demographic change cannot be attributed to birth rates, since as the report notes, "Native majority [i.e., rural] areas have a higher-than-average birth rate that has allowed them to generally keep pace with statewide growth."<sup>18</sup> In other words, the data suggest that one in ten Alaska Natives has moved to the city in the past twenty years.

This rapid and recent trend towards urbanization cannot be ignored. As the Alaska Department of Labor notes, "Though it's often perceived as a one-way emptying of rural Alaska, the truth is more complicated...The effects this urbanization will have on the Alaska Native community remain to be seen."<sup>19</sup> This is just as true for the missiological community as it is for the economic. Looking more closely at the trend, several distinct phenomena emerge that provide a more nuanced understanding of the Alaska Native

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<sup>17</sup> Sandberg, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Sandberg, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Sandberg, 18.

diaspora community. An understanding of these phenomena will help the Church in its ministry to urban and rural Alaska Natives alike.

#### A. Female Migration

One significant feature of the Alaska Native diaspora is that it is disproportionately female. On average, a significantly higher proportion of Alaska Native women than men are leaving rural areas for the cities. A report by the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of Alaska Anchorage summarizes this trend:

U.S. Census Public Use Microsample (PUMS) data show that from 1980 through 2006 more Alaska Native women than men migrated from rural to urban areas. The SLiCA [Survey of Living Conditions in the Arctic] survey asked people if they had considered leaving their community and why. The SLiCA data show that more Inupiat women (46%) than men (38%) had considered leaving their community.<sup>20</sup>

Sociological research has revealed two factors contributing to this gender imbalance. The first has to do with gender roles and expectations and is summarized by Marie Lowe:

Young men often continue to reside in their home regions and exhibit a preference associated with participation in traditional lifeways and activities, such as hunting and fishing. Out-migration and the pursuit of higher education increasingly characterizes the path of the young women.<sup>21</sup>

Essentially, community ideals tend to differ for men and women. Much like in the past, a young Alaska Native man's success is gauged by his skill in hunting, fishing, and providing for the community. His personal significance and ultimately his success as a leader is

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<sup>20</sup> Stephanie Martin, Mary Killorin, & Steve Colt, *Fuel Costs, Migration, and Community Viability* (Anchorage: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 2008), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Marie E. Lowe, "Localized Practices and Globalized Futures: Challenges for Alaska Coastal Community Youth," *Maritime Studies* 14, no. 6 (2015), 4.

directly linked to the local environment and community.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, young women find more opportunity through education and jobs that are more readily available in the cities.

The second contributing factor pertains to social problems that disproportionately impact women in rural villages. Namely, “SLiCA data show that, for women, being a victim of abuse is statistically correlated with wanting to leave a community.”<sup>23</sup> The unusually high rates of domestic violence and sexual assault against Alaska Native women are well-attested in sociological literature and do not need to be repeated here.<sup>24</sup> Suffice to say that the “push” factor of violence at home and the “pull” factor of education and economic opportunity in the city combine so that more women than men are prompted to migrate.

## B. Chain Migration

A second notable phenomenon that characterizes the Alaska Native diaspora is known as “chain migration.” Chain migration has long been recognized as a feature of international migration in both sociological and missiological literature. Joseph Vijayam offers a fitting definition: “Pioneer migrants make early connections and cause others within their circle of influence in their homeland to follow in their footsteps. People tend to migrate to places where they have contacts.”<sup>25</sup> Considering the extensive kinship networks that have long characterized Alaska Native society, it is not surprising that chain migration

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<sup>22</sup> John Ferch, *A Relational Model of Leadership Development for the Inuit Church* (DIS Product, Western Seminary, 2019), 7-9.

<sup>23</sup> Martin, Killorin, & Colt, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Harold Napoleon, *Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being* (Fairbanks: Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1996), 15.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Vijayam, “Technology and Diaspora,” *Scattered and Gathered: A Global Compendium of Diaspora Missiology*, eds. Sadiri Joy Tira and Tetsunao Yamamori (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 272.



plays a significant role in the internal movement of indigenous peoples within Alaska.

Marie Lowe's research affirmed this pattern in her survey of families that moved to the Anchorage school district from rural areas in the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 school years.

She concluded,

Families are moving to Anchorage, but a considerable number of children are moving independently to the city from rural areas, a trend particularly noticeable among Alaska Native families. Migratory chains established through kin and other close social relations appear to play a major role in facilitating the movement of both families and children.<sup>26</sup>

People move along kinship lines, and relational networks do not disappear upon migration.

What emerges is a complex web of connections that transcends the urban/rural divide.

### C. Circular Migration

The feature of chain migration and its resulting statewide relational network influences a third migratory pattern that characterizes the Native diaspora, "circular migration." Also known as "shuttle migration," this term describes the impermanent and transient nature of Alaska Native urbanization:

Migration is not a one-time event. It tends to be a self-perpetuating process as people move back and forth several times over a lifetime. People move to places where they have friends and family. In turn, their move creates more social ties and job contacts connecting people in the sending community with people in urban areas.<sup>27</sup>

Marie Lowe provides statistics that help to quantify the phenomenon:

Using Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend data, the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development reports movement from Alaska's most rural or "Majority Native" areas (which include approximately 30% non- Alaska Native residents) has increased since 2004 and averaged 1,400 people in both 2008 and 2009 (Williams

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<sup>26</sup> Marie E. Lowe, "Contemporary Rural-Urban Migration in Alaska," *Alaska Journal of Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (2010), 76.

<sup>27</sup> Martin, Killorin, & Colt, 4.

2010:6). Williams qualifies these figures with others, however, which suggest there are an average of 800 return migrants per year moving back to Majority Native Areas.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, the urbanization rate of the Alaska Native community would be much higher, were it not for the fact that 60% of those who migrate to the city eventually return. This circular pattern of migration may repeat itself many times over in a person's life.

Such transience is not inconsistent with the semi-nomadic patterns of traditional Alaska Native culture. Settlements were often seasonal, and communities would move between winter villages and summer hunting and fishing camps according to the availability of different local resources. In this same vein, Anchorage may be understood as an economic "resource" that can help sustain local community life in villages across the state.

#### D. Transregional Migration

The ultimate result of these chain and circular patterns is that there is rarely a dichotomy between "urban" and "rural" Alaska Native identity. Rather, "families and children appear to be living a dual existence between their home communities and the city for many years."<sup>29</sup> Lowe suggests that this "dual identity" provides "a strategy to address economic pressures but also one that sustains important ties to family, culture, and sense of place."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Lowe 2010, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Lowe 2010, 76.

<sup>30</sup> Lowe 2015, 20.

Missiologists have explored the implications of “trans-nationalism” in the context of international migration quite extensively. Trevor Castor argues that “the perception of an immigrant uprooting herself from her homeland, family, culture, and learning a new language in order to make a new life in her country of settlement is no longer adequate.”<sup>31</sup> Increasingly, through the assistance of easy travel and global communications technologies, international migrants are able to keep one foot in their country of origin and one in their country of settlement, developing the same sort of “dual identity” described above by Lowe. Here we see that this same dynamic is at work on a regional level between Alaska Native villages and urban centers. Observing a similar dynamic in internal Russian migration patterns, Anne White coined the term “transregionalism.”<sup>32</sup>

Alaska’s hub-based aviation network and modern telecommunications infrastructure have allowed a “transregional” identity to develop, linking urban and village life in a constant back-and-forth cycle. Urban centers provide education, economic resources, and modern amenities to the villages. From the villages comes a constant flow of subsistence resources, local handicrafts, and dance performances to be shared on a regional stage. I remember quite clearly being asked by a student of mine to meet a “friend of a friend” on the streets of Anchorage to pick up a bag of seal oil (a coveted Inuit culinary ingredient) for delivery to another friend in our town of Palmer. This extensive network of

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<sup>31</sup> Trevor Castor, “Transnationalism, Identity, and Virtual Space: A Case Study of One Woman’s Attempt to Negotiate Two Worlds,” *Scattered and Gathered: A Global Compendium of Diaspora Missiology*, eds. Sadiri Joy Tira and Tetsunao Yamamori (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 487,

<sup>32</sup> Anne White, “Internal Migration Identity and Livelihood Strategies in Contemporary Russia,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35, no. 4 (2009), 569.

kinship links to facilitate the sharing of cultural resources across the state illustrates clearly the transregional nature of the Alaska Native diaspora.

### III. Factors Influencing the Alaska Native Diaspora

Having described the Alaska Native Diaspora as a disproportionately female, chain-based, circular, and transregional phenomenon that encompasses 52% of Alaska's indigenous population at present, attention now turns to the reasons that lie behind the phenomenon.

My family experienced the reality of Alaskan migration firsthand when we began ministry with Alaska Bible College in May of 2012. We initially settled into one of the family housing units on the college's remote Glennallen campus. Housing was in short supply in Glennallen, and we would not have been able to live affordably without the college's subsidized staff housing. My wife was pregnant with our second child, and we quickly became familiar with the four-hour drive to Anchorage for prenatal visits—monthly at first, and increasing to weekly as the due date approached. These trips always included a visit to Costco to stock our freezer (Glennallen had its own small grocery store, but a gallon of milk cost \$6). One month before the delivery, we temporarily moved into a bed and breakfast in the community of Palmer—standard procedure for all rural childbirths, since the insurance companies would rather pay for short-term housing than an emergency medevac. Thankfully, Alaska Bible College had recently opened an office in Palmer that I could work from, otherwise our family would have been separated during that time (as is common for many rural Alaskan families at childbirth). My daughter was born without incident and we eagerly prepared to move back home. However, her

pediatrician was concerned about a possibility of hip dysplasia and ordered additional tests at a larger hospital in Anchorage. We stayed for another week, and the diagnosis of hip dysplasia was confirmed. The doctor prescribed a leg brace, with weekly visits to his Anchorage office for checkup and brace adjustment. It was now late October, and we happily but wearily returned to our Glennallen home. A blanket of snow now covered the ground and temperatures had dropped below zero. We were glad for a warm, well-insulated house, but at the end of that month we were hit with our first heating bill of the season—\$500! Knowing that we faced another seven months of winter and that our salary would not sustain these heating bills for that long, we began to explore our options. For the next month, we continued our weekly trips to Anchorage for our daughter's brace adjustments. We celebrated Thanksgiving "in diaspora" with the family of one of my students. During our visits to Anchorage, we began looking for rental housing in Palmer, knowing that Alaska Bible College was seeking to expand its Palmer campus and that I could easily fulfill my duties from there. In December, we packed up our trailer as the temperatures in Glennallen hit 50 below, and made the drive to Palmer one last time. We had joined the growing number of Alaskans migrating from rural Alaska to the city.

To be clear, we are not an Alaska Native family, and Glennallen, though rural, is not an Alaska Native village. Nevertheless, we did experience *some* of the same socioeconomic factors that are influencing the Alaska Native diaspora. Healthcare was a primary motivator for our own move, but energy costs, housing, employment, and education (through my job at Alaska Bible College) all impacted our decision.

## A. Healthcare

As my own family experienced, rural areas have limited access to healthcare. Most areas have local clinics that are able to handle basic first aid and routine visits. Hospitals in the regional hub cities provide more advanced care, including childbirth. However, travel to Anchorage, and occasionally even Seattle, is routine for most types of specialty care. The Alaska Native Medical Center (ANMC) in Anchorage provides healthcare services to all Alaska Natives. They report that “60 percent of ANMC patients...travel to Anchorage for care,” which according to their 2018 statistics would equate to approximately 28,500 inpatient days, 924 births, and 103,446 specialty clinic visits by non-local medical “migrants.”<sup>33</sup> To accommodate these traveling patients, the ANMC operates a Travel Management Office that oversees 258 of their own on-campus guest rooms, and coordinates with Marriott hotel properties in Anchorage to provide overflow housing.<sup>34</sup>

Healthcare, then, is one major “pull” factor towards the city in the daily lives of most Alaska Natives. Though most of these visits do not involve long-term relocation, they do contribute to the “culture” of regular “shuttle migration” to and from the city. Naturally, it is often the elderly and the seriously ill who require long-term relocation for medical reasons, and these movements impact the entire community. Honor and respect towards the community’s elders is a major cultural value that is shared by all Alaska Native cultures. These family and kinship obligations dictate that when a relative is receiving long-term

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<sup>33</sup> Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, *Connecting Tribal Health: 2018 Annual Report* (Anchorage: ANTHC, 2018), 11.

<sup>34</sup> *Connecting Tribal Health* 11.

care in Anchorage, there will be a steady flow of visitors to and from the city surrounding that individual. ANMC has become a central gathering place for the Native community in Anchorage. On one occasion when scheduling a meeting with an Alaska Native pastor, he asked me to meet him “at the Native hospital.” He himself was not sick, but it was a natural and convenient place for us to meet. As we sat together in the café area, I observed him greeting many acquaintances as they passed by unexpectedly. In this way, medical migration impacts entire communities, and not just the sick.

## B. Education

Education presents a second major “pull” factor towards Alaska’s cities. In her survey of families moving into the Anchorage school district from rural Alaska, Lowe found that 21% of them cited education as a reason for their relocation.<sup>35</sup> As noted earlier, young Alaska Natives—particularly women—feel a certain expectation to leave their communities in order to receive a college education. In her focus groups with youth in Alaska’s coastal communities, Lowe found, “Coastal youth feel pressure to go to college from parents, friends’ parents, and teachers.”<sup>36</sup> In addition to this external “pressure,” she found that rural youth also have an internal motivation to experience urban life after high school:

Most of the high school students interviewed had plans to leave their home communities, at least in the short term for college. Similar to youth in many places, Alaska coastal youth demonstrate a restlessness and desire for new experiences away from home and look forward to these experiences after high school that now almost always include college or some kind of post-secondary training—even if they don’t actually end up going or if they eventually return within the first year.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Lowe 2010, 82.

<sup>36</sup> Lowe 2015, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Lowe 2015, 17.

The University of Alaska Anchorage reports an enrollment of “over 2000” indigenous students.<sup>38</sup> This amounts to over 1% of the statewide Alaska Native population, and 5% of Anchorage’s Alaska Native population, enrolled at a single university.

Though post-secondary education is perhaps the most obvious draw, with nearly all of Alaska’s accredited colleges and universities being located in urban centers, a significant number of families also seek better educational opportunities for their young children by moving to the city. It is notable that the majority of the individuals who reported “education” as a motivator for their relocation in Lowe’s 2010 study were not seeking education for themselves, but rather for their children. She found that “many survey respondents voiced concern about the inadequacy of rural schools to prepare their children for the future.”<sup>39</sup> Lowe was surprised to discover a high rate of “independent migration” among her survey respondents:

The 349 respondents enrolled 407 students in Anchorage schools. Of those students, 43% moved but their families did not; 57% moved together with their families. Student movement independent of families was unanticipated in the survey design but the level of its occurrence is a key finding.<sup>40</sup>

Of these, she found that “Alaska Native respondents accounted for the most independent migrants; forty-one families reported these independent migrants as having been sent to Anchorage to live with them.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “Alaska Natives,” *University of Alaska Anchorage*, [uaa.alaska.edu/alaska-natives/](http://uaa.alaska.edu/alaska-natives/) (Accessed 16 April 2019).

<sup>39</sup> Lowe 2010, 86.

<sup>40</sup> Lowe 2010, 83.

<sup>41</sup> Lowe 2010, 84.



As with healthcare, academic migration often impacts extended kinship networks as students leave their families to live with relatives while attending school in the city. Moreover, it often reflects circular patterns, as Lowe's survey "revealed both children and families moving back and forth between rural communities and Anchorage."<sup>42</sup>

### C. Economy

Healthcare and education are both clear examples of "pull" factors that draw people to the city for positive reasons. Economic factors influencing migration are more complicated. From an economic perspective, negative or detrimental situations in Alaska's rural villages combine with more positive economic opportunity in the city to create a sort of combined push/pull factor. Alaska's villages face high fuel and commodity prices, limited housing options, and few regular employment opportunities. Granted, many of these "push" factors are mitigated by a subsistence-based economy that relies much less on market-driven economics. Nevertheless, the city presents a continual draw towards a different standard of living that woos young people, in particular, away from the subsistence lifestyle.

Rising fuel costs are often cited as a major factor influencing Alaska's urban migration.<sup>43</sup> My family in particular experienced this firsthand. However, among the Alaska Native population, there is little evidence for a link between energy prices and migration. A 2008 study concluded,

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<sup>42</sup> Lowe 2010, 84.

<sup>43</sup> Alaska Energy Authority, *Alaska Energy: A First Step Toward Energy Independence* (Juneau: State of Alaska, 2009). 28

Despite the high burden of fuel costs, it does not appear from existing data that fuel costs have been an important cause of migration through year 2007. In surveys since 2002, when people were asked open-ended questions about why they left their community or intended to leave, no one cited "fuel costs" as a reason.<sup>44</sup>

The same study went on to observe, "Because migration appears to be related to earnings, the people who are hardest hit by high fuel costs may be least able to afford to move."<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, for those who embrace the subsistence lifestyle, high energy costs can be offset through reliance on local sources of food and materials.

Rather than energy costs, the economic drivers of the Alaska Native diaspora seem to be more closely related to the availability of employment, housing, and "creature comforts." Through her ethnographic work in the village of Shishmaref, anthropologist Elizabeth Marino concluded,

I believe the lack of modern conveniences and housing is leading to the resettlement of talented, educated young *Kigiqtaamiut* [indigenous residents of Shishmaref] to other cities. Outmigration is likely to increase if educated men and women who are poised to become local leaders are forced to live in overcrowded conditions. This is especially true for returning students with bachelor's degrees, jobs, and money to pay for apartments or houses—but without the infrastructure available on which to spend their money. I saw two exceptional young leaders move out of the village while I was there, and at least one expressed that this was directly tied to the lack of conveniences and overcrowding.<sup>46</sup>

Marie Lowe's survey of coastal youth revealed similar findings:

Alaska coastal youth want to keep up on the fashions, movies, and electronics crazes, go out to eat in restaurants and drink fancy coffee, and they'd like to have access to services that are "open 24/7" which seemed to be the ultimate mark of

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<sup>44</sup> Martin, Killorin, & Colt, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Martin, Killorin, & Colt, 14.

<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Marino, *Fierce Climate, Sacred Ground: An Ethnography of Climate Change in Shishmaref, Alaska* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska, 2015), 55-56.

modernity. They want to be able to participate in a wide range of sports, arts, and other activities.<sup>47</sup>

#### D. Incarceration

If economic factors provide an example of combined push/pull forces influencing the Alaska Native diaspora, then the role that Alaska's criminal justice system plays in moving individuals toward the cities is a clear example of an exclusively "push" force. Alaska Natives are represented disproportionately in Alaska's state prisons, as illustrated by statistics reported in the Anchorage Daily News:

[Greg] Razo and groups such as the Alaska Federation of Natives cite the fact that the state imprisons Alaska Natives and American Indians at a disproportionate rate: They make up 15 percent of the state's residents, but represent 35 percent of the people in state custody. On July 1, at Nome's Anvil Mountain Correctional Center...122 of the 125 prisoners were Alaska Native, according to Department of Corrections data. On that date in 2014, the prison's population was 120 Alaska Natives, and no one else.<sup>48</sup>

According the Alaska Department of Corrections, 1,792 out of the state's 5,034 inmates in 2015 were Alaska Natives (238 of these were female, and 1,554 were male).<sup>49</sup>

Since Alaska's prisons are located predominantly in urban areas (only three out of fifteen are located in what might be considered "bush" communities), incarceration displaces a significant concentration of Alaska Natives—particularly males—into urbanized areas. Moreover, the criminal justice system makes no provision to return these individuals to their home communities upon their release. The *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*

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<sup>47</sup> Lowe 2015, 16-17.

<sup>48</sup> Nathaniel Herz, "Alaska Native Groups and Leaders Double Down on Criminal Justice Reform, Citing Over-incarceration," *Anchorage Daily News*, 28 October 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Alaska Department of Corrections, *2015 Offender Profile* (Juneau: Alaska Department of Corrections, 2015), 11.

describes the process: “When an inmate is released from prison, a bus drops him off in the parking lot of the Anchorage Jail. He's free to go. Many walk away broke, homeless, without even basic clothing items.”<sup>50</sup> In response to the question, “What types of resources are available in Alaska for reentrants?” The Alaska Department of Corrections website simply mentions “a wide range of community nonprofit organizations, state departments and community coalitions who collaborate to provide resources, programming, housing, employment assistance, referrals and case management.”<sup>51</sup> The end result is that a significant number of Alaska Native men are forcibly transplanted onto the streets of Anchorage on a regular basis, with very few resources and little assistance to facilitate reconciliation to their communities or transition to urban life.

#### E. Climate Change

A final “push” factor influencing the Alaska Native diaspora that requires consideration here is that of climate change. As the world debates the causes of and necessary responses to global climate change, Alaska has had a front row seat to its unfolding ramifications. The U.S. Navy’s Climate Change Task Force summarizes the region’s recent meteorological developments:

The Arctic is warming faster than the rest of the globe. In the past 100 years, average Arctic temperatures have increased at almost twice the global average rate...In 2012, Arctic sea ice reached its smallest extent in recorded history, 1.3 million square miles...With less sea ice cover, the ocean absorbs more heat from the sun during summer, increasing the temperature contrast between the warm ice-free

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<sup>50</sup> Michelle Theriault Boots, “Alaska Program Helps Ex-inmates Reenter Society,” *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, 8 December 2012.

<sup>51</sup> “Reentry,” *Alaska Department of Corrections*, [www.correct.state.ak.us/rehabilitation-reentry/faq](http://www.correct.state.ak.us/rehabilitation-reentry/faq), accessed 16 April 2019.

ocean and cold ice surfaces in autumn. This increase in temperature contrast could lead to the development of more frequent and more intense Arctic cyclones.<sup>52</sup>

A 2003 report from the U.S. General Accounting Office concluded, “Flooding and erosion affects 184 out of 213, or 86.4 percent, of Alaska Native villages to some extent.”<sup>53</sup> Though flooding has always been a seasonal phenomenon in Alaska’s coastal regions, the risk to communities has increased for two reasons: (1) a warming regional climate that thaws the ground, intensifies storms, and decreases the ice cover that previously offered protection against erosion, and (2) colonial policies that transformed seasonal hunting camps in flood-prone areas into permanent settlements.

The warming climate impacts rural communities in many different ways. Since Alaska’s highway network does not reach most rural communities, most local transportation depends on a solid base of ice and snow during the winter months. As temperatures rise, travel between villages and to hunting sites can become impossible. I was invited to participate in a ministry trip in 2014 to visit and encourage rural pastors along the coastline of Norton Sound. Unfortunately, this trip never materialized due to the unusually low amount of snow cover that characterized the winter of 2014. For me, this meant a lost ministry opportunity. For many in rural Alaska, it meant famine and hunger due to difficulty in accessing traditional hunting grounds. For example, the Native Village of Gambell sought disaster relief in 2015 after a lack of sea ice interfered with the annual

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<sup>52</sup> Climate Change Task Force, *U.S. Navy Arctic Roadmap, 2014-2030* (Washington: U.S. Navy, 2014), 10-11.

<sup>53</sup> *Alaska Native Villages: Most are Affected by Flooding and Erosion, but Few Qualify for Federal Assistance*, GAO-04-142 (Washington: United States General Accounting Office, 2003), 13.

walrus hunt—while the community usually harvested 600 or more of the animals, only 30 were taken that year.<sup>54</sup>

The villages of Kivalina, Shishmaref, and Newtok have become some of the most prominent examples of communities impacted by climate change. Due to their geographic location on low-lying river deltas and barrier islands, these communities are particularly threatened by coastal erosion, and migration is the only long-term solution for their residents. Elizabeth Marino's ethnographic work in Shishmaref describes the reality of the situation:

As flooding events increase, Shishmaref residents face two distinct possibilities: they must either successfully petition government agencies or private donors to fund the rebuilding of essential infrastructure—including an airstrip, a barge landing, and a school—on nearby, tribally owned land on the mainland and along the coast; or they will eventually be forced into diaspora, scattering away from traditional homelands before, during, or after a major disaster.<sup>55</sup>

The residents of Shishmaref have been proclaimed “the world’s first climate change refugees.”<sup>56</sup> Alaska human rights lawyer Robin Bronen coined the term “climagration” to describe this trend.<sup>57</sup>

As the government agencies debate the economics and liabilities of village relocation, some have questioned whether the government bears any responsibility at all

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<sup>54</sup>Suzanna Caldwell, “Alaska Village Ponders Next Steps as Walrus Harvests Decline Drastically,” *Anchorage Daily News*, 8 July 2015.

<sup>55</sup> Marino, 15-16.

<sup>56</sup> Stephanie J. Fitzgerald, *Native Women and Land: Narratives of Dispossession and Resurgence* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2015), 108.

<sup>57</sup> Lawrence C. Hamilton, Kei Saito, Philip A. Loring, Richard B. Lammers, & Henry P. Huntington, “Climagration? Population and Climate Change in Arctic Alaska,” *Population and Environment* 38, no. 2 (December 2016), 115.

for these traditional villages that were built in vulnerable locations to begin with. As

Marino observes,

Changes in the landscape, including unstable sea levels, fluid coastlines, and the destruction of village sites, have been reoccurring conditions, and communities for thousands of years have adapted to social and ecological shift by making selective changes and maintenance to social and cultural habits, technologies, and customs. Traditional mobility patterns throughout the northwest coastal region of Alaska demonstrate the fluidity of change and tradition.<sup>58</sup>

If the coastline has always experienced occasional flooding, why should the government intervene today, simply because that flooding is becoming more frequent?

When I shared with one of my Inupiat friends that I was researching how climate change might impact rural ministries, she responded with a degree of measured skepticism: “The Inupiat (only speaking for the people in my area) have always adapted to any change, whether it is weather, animal (land, sea, and air) migrations, new technology, etc...my curiosity comes from why that would affect any ministries in any capacity.”

My friend’s perspective aligns perfectly with Marino’s observations:

Labeling certain groups as “vulnerable” can be stigmatizing and can result in the re-creation of outdated and racist stereotypes of indigenous peoples needing the help of white outsiders. The label can imply a lack of agency and competence. My experience in Shishmaref has overwhelmingly shown the opposite: I constantly witness competent, flexible, and resourceful individuals. The community of Shishmaref may be pushed to its limit, but the skills the community demonstrates for resilience under those circumstances are truly remarkable.<sup>59</sup>

Resilience and adaptability are indeed key cultural values of the Inupiat and Yupik peoples.

For this reason, it is clear that climate change and flooding are not, in and of themselves, the major source of threat to these communities. Rather, Marino demonstrates that it is the

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<sup>58</sup> Marino, 46.

<sup>59</sup> Marino, 29.

legacy of colonialism that has magnified the threat of coastal erosion and that places residents in harm's way today:

In Shishmaref, residents point out that permanent settlement in the village is linked to the construction of the school and legislation that mandated school-age children to attend. Western infrastructure development was explicitly used by missionaries and US government leaders to promote colonial institutions and to discourage traditional infrastructure, traditional patterns of mobility, and traditional institutions.<sup>60</sup>

Traditionally, Shishmaref, Kivalina, and Newtok were not permanent, year-round settlements. Though Shishmaref provided ideal winter hunting grounds, local oral traditions demonstrate that residents always knew it would eventually erode away.<sup>61</sup>

Marino places the blame for today's plight squarely on the colonial policies of the U.S.

Government, which built a school on the site of the seasonal hunting camp in 1906 and required all Indigenous children to attend school or face removal from their families.<sup>62</sup>

Sadly, the government has thus far been ineffective in coordinating any type of solution, and Marino concludes, "Shishmaref demonstrates how the negative repercussions of climate change are predicated on the gross inequity present in the world today and constructed historically across time."<sup>63</sup>

As climate change pertains to the greater Alaska Native diaspora, it is important to emphasize Marino's findings regarding local sentiments towards relocation:

Diaspora and dispersal out of traditional subsistence territory is the single greatest fear of residents I interviewed in Shishmaref. *Kigiqtaamiut* people themselves see removal from subsistence territory as a mechanism of cultural disintegration and

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<sup>60</sup> Marino, 45.

<sup>61</sup> Marino, 43.

<sup>62</sup> Marino, 52.

<sup>63</sup> Marino, 17.



the possible disintegration of the landscape as well. There is a complex relationship among people, society, and landscape in Shishmaref. Regardless of the academic understanding of this relationship, it is unequivocal that residents see the dispersal of Shishmaref residents as *increasing risk* to themselves and their cultural heritage. This position should be taken seriously.<sup>64</sup>

Unlike Alaska's economic, academic, and medical migrants, those experiencing relocation due to climate change are being forced out of their communities against their wishes. Their preference is to resettle in a relocated village rather than be transplanted into an urban environment. Sadly, unless a local solution can be found, urbanization in some form will likely be an inevitable consequence as the forces of global climate change collide with the legacy of U.S. colonial policy.

#### IV. The Missiological Implications of Alaska Native Diaspora

With a basic understanding of the complex set of interrelated factors that contribute to the growing Alaska Native diaspora, a framework is in place to discuss the missiological implications of this phenomenon. These factors present a number of promising avenues for ministry to, through, and by Alaska Natives in diaspora. In response to the trends of academic and medical migration, hospitality ministry can prove especially effective. Local churches can enter relationally into statewide kinship networks simply by visiting and caring for families that are temporarily displaced for medical reasons. By mirroring the cultural practices of honor and hospitality, urban congregations can develop a statewide outreach. It is worth noting that many of Alaska's earliest healthcare facilities, both rural and urban, were founded by Christian missionaries and churches. Though most care today

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<sup>64</sup> Marino, 94.

has been secularized, spiritual care for the sick and dying—including their displaced family members—continues to present one of the most immediate opportunities for the Church to show the love of Christ to Alaska’s Native peoples.

In a similar vein, hospitality and friendship towards students can be quite effective. The experience of a rural student relocating to Anchorage for college parallels in many ways the experience of an international student studying in a foreign country. Similar strategies of student-focused ministry can provide a welcoming atmosphere in which Alaska Native students can gather for culturally-relevant fellowship, encouragement, and Bible study. Aarigaa Young Adult Ministry, a division of Covenant Youth of Alaska, provides such opportunities in Anchorage, Palmer, and Fairbanks.<sup>65</sup> On an even broader level, Alaska Christian College is a 2-year school that was specifically founded to help rural Alaska Native students navigate the gap between rural high schools and urban universities.

The economic factors of migration call attention to the widening gender gap between rural and urban Alaska. Young men who model “good character” as defined by the culture will often remain home to provide for their relatives through subsistence activities, while young women of “good character” will more often go abroad to equip themselves with job skills. This is a trend that needs to be recognized by the Church, especially as today’s Great Commission efforts shift their focus from evangelism and church planting to the final step of leadership training. If leadership training efforts are centered in the cities, they will naturally draw more women than men into positions of Christian leadership. If

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<sup>65</sup> “Aarigaa Young Adult Ministry,” *Covenant Youth of Alaska*, [www.cyak.org/aarigaa-young-adult-ministries.html](http://www.cyak.org/aarigaa-young-adult-ministries.html) (accessed 16 April 2019).

the Church desires to strike any sort of a balance between male and female leadership, then rural leadership training efforts should be explored in order to develop the naturally-recognized male leaders.

A powerful opportunity for ministry also exists among those brought to Anchorage by the criminal justice system. It is easy to joke about a “captive audience” for evangelism through prison chaplaincy. Chaplain Russ Bevan is one such minister, who initially came to Alaska to serve Alaska Natives, and found that he could do so quite effectively within the prison system. Beyond prison evangelism, the challenge of reentry provides an enormous untapped opportunity to walk alongside young Alaska Native men as they are released from prison and to disciple them for mature Christian living. Great Commission Alaska is currently developing one such discipleship program in cooperation with Kings Lodge.<sup>66</sup>

The missiological implications of climate-based migration deserve special consideration, since this has not traditionally been a major area of missions focus. In Alaska, the church must not forget its own role in the state’s education system. While Marino blames government policy, it was quite often Christian missionaries who were bearers and implementers of this policy. This is a dark chapter in the church’s history that we might prefer to forget, but that is not an option as the world’s changing climate exacerbates the consequences of the early missionaries’ decisions on where to establish permanent settlements. Marino argues, “The financial burden of flooding now is a cost incurred by the colonial model and, as such, places the burden of responsibility on the same

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<sup>66</sup> “Discipleship Program,” *Great Commission Alaska*, [www.akmission.org/discipleship-program](http://www.akmission.org/discipleship-program) (accessed 16 April 2019).

institutions that pushed for infrastructural development in the first place.”<sup>67</sup> *The Church is one such institution.*

What might this look like? How can the Church succeed where complex government bureaucracy continues to fail? Governments, of course, are corrupt. Inevitably, and usually unconsciously, decisions are made to favor those in power over those with little voice.<sup>68</sup> This trend has been shown to repeat itself time and again in response to environmental disasters, as exemplified by the government’s botched responses to Hurricanes Katrina and Maria in New Orleans and Puerto Rico. The church has an opportunity to stand for justice in these situations—both by prophetically advocating for the disenfranchised, and by taking real-world steps to assist them.

The 2013 flooding of the village of Galena on the Yukon River may provide a model for such a brand of “environmental missions.” When the spring thaw caused an ice dam on the Yukon River that flooded the village, SEND International missionaries took a lead role in coordinating the relief efforts. Though FEMA was also mobilized, it was the church that provided the most immediate and visible response in the eyes of the community. SEND missionary Jerry Casey summarized FEMA’s involvement in a news story:

“Because it was considered a national disaster area, FEMA was there,” Casey reports. However, it took about three weeks for the situation to be declared a disaster. Until FEMA arrived, state response was working to deal with the aftermath

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<sup>67</sup> Marino, 95.

<sup>68</sup> Brad Coombes, “Maori and Environmental Justice: The Case of “Lake” Otara,” *Indigenous in the City: Contemporary Identities and Cultural Innovation*, eds. Evelyn Peters & Chris Andersen (Vancouver: UBC, 2012), 334-353.

of the flood. Most of FEMA's work was focused on rebuilding government buildings and infrastructure.<sup>69</sup>

Just as Marino observed in Shishmaref, government bureaucracy was largely ineffective in responding to the incident. The missionary community, on the other hand, was quickly able to mobilize its logistics arm to evacuate elders, recruit work teams, and rebuild the community. The same news story describes this mobilization effort:

Casey also noted a lot of aid coming from the lower 48 states including Texas and Louisiana. Many missions groups native to Alaska stepped in to help as well. "It was a large group effort," Casey explains. "Mission Aviation Repair Center, Samaritans Purse, a missionary by the name of Adam White—it wasn't just SEND responding up there. It was really neat the way all the organizations that are based here in Alaska came together to go up there." SEND received recognition for their work from the town of Galena. They were awarded for their service that helped save many townspeople from despair. Their actions have even opened doors for sharing the Gospel.<sup>70</sup>

The case of Galena may provide hope for communities like Shishmaref and Kivalina. Driven by the love of Christ, the global Church has the resources to assist these communities where the government has fallen short. Here is an opportunity for "environmental missions" in the U.S. Church's own backyard—our response here at home may help us develop a paradigm of response to even greater catastrophes in heavily-populated regions threatened by sea level rise such as Bangladesh and the Maldives. The Church bears a moral imperative to take a role in advocating justice for Alaska's "climate refugees."

Marino issues a challenge to the government that the church ought also to hear:

It's not that much money. Compared to what relocation would save, compared to what colonization cost, and compared to the histories of genocide and resource extraction in Alaska and the culpability of governments for creating risk in the first place, relocation is absolutely affordable. What the United States and the state of

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<sup>69</sup> Julie Bourdon, "Small U.S. Town Still Reeling from Disastrous Flood," *Mission Network News*, 11 March 2014.

<sup>70</sup> Bourdon.

Alaska can do today to keep climate change from grossly overburdening a population that did almost nothing to cause it is to fund the relocation of critical infrastructure for six hundred people, ten miles across a lagoon, to a safe place of their choosing, close to the ocean. This is not philanthropy—this is one meager step toward justice.<sup>71</sup>

A missiologist would add, it is an opportunity to model the righteousness of God and to proclaim the good news of His salvation to a people in need.

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<sup>71</sup> Marino, 100.

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