

Session Three

Table Talk: How Are Lutherans and Other Christians Responding to Alaska Subsistence Issues?

Opening

Hymn *Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service* LBW 423

Scripture Leviticus 25:13-19, 23-24

Prayer God of all of us---Native and non-Native, persons of diverse religious persuasions, urban and rural enable us as individuals and organizations to respond to the issues related to subsistence in Alaska. Amen

A Story Let's hear the voices of several persons who are Alaska Native Lutherans. (Play the first seven minutes of the VHS, "...Because the Lord Loves You": Seward Peninsula Lutheran Ministries).

Table talk This week we listen to how Christians are responding to Alaska Subsistence Issues. At the table today we need volunteer voices for Synje Oslovich, three responders for the Alaskan Christian Conferences in 2000, 2001, and 2003, and the bishops.

Moderator: ELCA Lutherans do not have a position on subsistence. There was an article published in the *Lutheran* in December 2004, that relates to Alaska subsistence issues: "Remote village Alaskan congregations face challenges."

Synje Oslovich in this article states: "Tucked away in one of this country's most remote regions, four ELCA churches proclaim the gospel to a people that continue to live a primarily subsistence lifestyle...The villages of Wales, Brevig Mission, Teller, Shismaref---all on Alaska's Seward Peninsula---are among the United States' most isolated villages. They are located about 100 miles from the Arctic Circle...The people native to this region are Inupiaq Eskimos who fish the streams and ocean. Seal, walrus, whale, moose, caribou, and reindeer remain staples of their diet...Inupiaq people have historically been spiritual."

Moderator: Other Christian groups have taken positions and are acting on Alaska Subsistence Issues. Let's hear from these organizations.

Responder for the Alaskan Christian Conference in 2000: Let me introduce this organization. We were founded in 1956 as the Alaskan Association of Churches and became the Alaska Christian Conference in 1972. We resolved in 2000 to "Promote reconciliation among all Alaskans. A reconciliation that can only be based in justice for Alaska Natives, recognizing their God given authority and the right to a subsistence priority in Alaska." We further resolved at the request of the delegates to the Alaska Federation of Natives Special Convention in 2000 to "help facilitate a face-to-face meeting with the Alaska Federation of Natives and the National Council of Churches to create an alliance between these organizations to increase understanding of the importance of subsistence hunting and fishing to the survival of Native cultures in Alaska."

Responder for the Alaskan Christian Conference in 2001: We affirmed our previous resolves. We added, "Be it further resolved that subsistence hunting and fishing of the Native Peoples of Alaska is a way of life and prayer, include: (1) the animals/fish giving themselves to the people as opposed to just killing/fishing of the animal/fish, (2) the distribution of the animal/fish among the hunter(s)/crew, (3) the disposal of the animal/fish of the hunt/gathering, (4) the

celebration among the community because of the animal/fish feeding the community.”

Moderator: I want to emphasize how the Alaska Christian Conference in this resolution recognizes the spirituality of the Alaska Natives as integral to subsistence way of life.

Responder for Alaskan Christian Conference in 2003: We continued to offer support for Alaska Native subsistence rights, sovereignty, and cultural integrity. We endorsed the Native Fish, Wildlife, Habitat, and Environment Report of February 2003. We asked the Alaska legislature to review this report and “support Alaska Natives in their effort to maintain their culture, their subsistence way of life, and their control over their communities as the Alaska Native Review Commission recommended in its 1994 Report.”

Moderator: Several Christian denominations have made declarations related to drilling at ANWR. Let’s listen to the response of Episcopalians, Methodists, & other Christian groups .

Denominational voices on ANWAR: As leaders of the *Episcopal Church, the Anglican Church of Canada, the United Methodist Church, the National Council of Churches* and several other communities of faith oppose oil exploration and drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. We support the message of Jonathan Solomon “the Porcupine caribou are central to our culture, our religion, and our social structure, and our livelihood.” We accept the findings of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game that directly link the presence of oil extraction complexes (i. e. Prudhoe Bay) with diminished calf production and survival rates.”

Moderator: We also hear the opposition voice of Mark Tooley, a researcher and writer for the Institute for Religion and Democracy in Washington. He labels the religious responders who oppose ANWR as all part of the religious left. He states that these religious groups are defending one village of 125 Gwich’in, who are mostly Episcopalian.

The Catholic Bishops of Alaska: Commercial fishermen, native Alaskans, hunters, and those who live a subsistence lifestyle,...all have stakes in an answer to subsistence issues. We summarize our position in the pastoral letter, *A Catholic Perspective on Subsistence*. Alaska’s indigenous people have a right to preserve their way of life. Recognizing the need for a harvest priority for rural subsistence users is one step toward a “just resolution” of the issue.

Moderator: We have a final voice at the table. Let’s listen to how the Friends Church in Alaska has approached the Alaska Subsistence Issue. They have produced *Sharing Ground Alaskans Listening to Alaskans about Subsistence*, a production of the American Friends Service Committee and the Alaska Humanities Forum 2004. As you listen, identify what their project is and what has happened as a result.(Disc One. Select from the DVD or VHS the section of the menu titled “Sharing Ground.” Fast forward to the photograph titled Alaska Friends Conference Annual Meeting. Then play the DVD or VHS to the title on the screen What We Heard. Twelve minutes.)

Questions

1. What are the strengths/weaknesses of these Christian responses to subsistence issues?
2. What do you think about the Lutheran response to Alaska Subsistence Issues in your congregation, as the Alaska Synod, and church-wide?
3. What responses to Alaska Subsistence Issues will contribute to problem solving?

A verse of Scripture and question for the week Micah 6:8 *He [God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* How shall I act with justice and loving kindness related to

subsistence issues?