

# snapshot.

a glimpse of Life!



August 2008

## A New Frontier



Bob Lenz

### Unalakleet, Alaska

We took the long flight to Anchorage, and after landing we boarded another flight on a smaller plane and flew for another 2 hours to Unalakleet, Alaska. We partnered with Craig Hamlow of Arctic Barnabas, a mission organization that serves ministry leaders in the Alaskan Bush. They flew us in Franklin Graham's plane from Samaritan's Purse. A pilot from M.A.R.C. (Mission Aviation Repair Center) flew us to a remote Bush village on the Bearing Sea. It was amazing to see so many ministries working together for the Kingdom.

The last time we landed here was in December of 2007 with 50 mph winds. We did school programs and an outreach. This time the climate was a little more welcoming, and when we landed there were two Eskimo women wearing their native parkas holding a sign saying "We Are The Body." You see, members of the band, Casting Crowns, were along for this trip.

### Leading the Leaders

After landing we were lead to a boat by a native Upik Eskimo who works with Alaska Christian College – a college that trains native Alaskans for ministry back in the Bush. As if we were not remote enough he took us up river further into the Bush. The shores were layered with humpback pink salmon. The fish will typically go out to sea for two years and come back to the shores to lay their eggs, and then die. Many eagles had gathered to come eat them. We went up another 8 miles or so into the Bush and were met at the shore by Brian Nanninga. He is the head of CYAK (Covenant Youth of Alaska). As he stood on the shore line I noticed fresh bear tracks next to him. We followed him on narrow paths through the woods until we came to a remote cabin. There, 50 youth workers and college leaders had gathered for a week of camp.



Along with me were members of Casting Crowns: Juan, the guitar player, Darren who handles technical needs, Mark Hall, lead vocalist, along with his wife, Melanie who serves as road manager, and their son, John Michael. Casting Crowns as a band has a real passion for Alaska and what we've been doing there. After hearing me share stories of past ministry in the Bush, they wanted to partner with us. Even though this band has won 19 Dove awards, an American Music Award, a Grammy and is currently the most played artist on Christian radio formats combined, they have continued to focus on ministry. Mark Hall, lead singer, is a youth pastor first, and members of the band all serve at their church in the youth department. They're not "too big" to reach out to this community that some might consider "too small" to make the effort.

### Better Than a Dream

We did three sessions of training on youth ministry, teaching how to reach the next generation of youth in the Bush. Mark did the first session, sharing on having every youth not just being the audience but having their own ministry. It's in this that youth can find purpose, significance and know that they matter. To back it up Mark "just happened" to sing "We are the body." I was unable to hold the tears back as they flowed freely, watching the native people and other youth leaders sing every word with exhilaration. Yet with each word they sang you could almost see the disbelief in their eyes that Casting Crowns was at their camp. They kept saying, "I can't believe that we're remembered; that we're not forgotten; that we're not alone." It's better than a dream come true for them, for none of them ever dreamed that this would happen.



Yet you could tell that pain lingered just beneath the surface of their stories. In many ways it's the same every where else we go - brokenness caused by the fall, selfishness and the sin of the world. Yet regarding Alaska, someone said it this way, "It's like an acute case here. The pain is so intensified because of the changes that are happening." The changes they speak of are happening at such a rapid pace, and are actually threatening their historic foundation and culture. See, the Bush communities just got television as recently as the 1980's. And now, only 25 years later, most of them have ipods and some even have cell coverage. It's not that technology is a bad thing, but the rapid rate at which it is being introduced is threatening their culture. Their family bonds, the traditions of berry picking, hunting, fishing, gathering and a way of life that relies so much on relationship is in

jeopardy. Now throw issues that still linger like alcohol, addiction, sexual abuse and the highest rate of suicide in our nation into the mix, and we have some of the greatest people with some of the greatest needs in the world.

At the camp I presented the second session, addressing the issue of why bad things happen if God is so good. We dealt with issues of divorce, abuse, forgiveness, cutting, and somehow trying to reconcile that with God's love. The honesty that was shared in the room caused some people's countenances to fall in remembrance of their own hurts and struggles. Their eyes looked downward, yet they were soon filled with tears... tears of hope. You could almost see hope being instilled in their hearts. I could literally sense our purpose statement being fleshed out right in front of me – convincing them that life is worth living no matter what has happened to you.

We had some breaks where stories were shared, hugs given and prayers offered. It was a sweet time. Then there was a break in the afternoon where we "had" to go fishing for a little over an hour. Now that's my kind of break! Within that short span of time we caught enough silver salmon to feed all 60 of us for dinner.

After our "break," Mark Hall did another session on Psalm Chapter 1. He shared about going deeper in our faith with roots that will hold us through the hard times – the storms and floods of life. But he also stressed that trees have branches that reach out to the world around them. He gave practical tools to equip them and connected at a heart and head level. I could see people taking notes with an "I can do this" look in their eyes. "God can use me," they thought. To close out his session, Mark sang the song, "The Voice of Truth..."

*But the voice of truth tells me a different story, the voice of truth says "do not be afraid!"  
And the voice of truth says "this is for my glory." Out of all the voices calling out to me,  
I will choose to listen and believe the voice of truth  
(“Voice of Truth” by Casting Crowns – chorus lyrics)*

### **Full Circle near the Arctic Circle**

The people we served said that on a scale of 1-10 they gave it a 15. They said it could have been a 20, but because it was only one day it was way too short. It was as if all the work we've done in Alaska throughout the years came together here, and the ministry we've had is coming full circle. There were people from Hooper Bay who I met 5 years ago, friends from Nome, Fairbanks, King Salmon, and others from various Bush communities and those along the road system. We have done outreaches in their schools, rallies in their communities, and now we were training them to carry the torch and continue to reach their villages. And there were others we trained as well that we hope to come along side in the future to do outreaches when we return. We want to encourage and equip the local churches, because we come and go, but they're there for the long term.

We have now been in 17 the Bush communities and 12 villages on the road system. We feel like we are part of forging a new frontier for the gospel. Being able to come back was almost like a family reunion. I wrote this from Anchorage where we had a four-day state-wide youth conference called "Fusion." There were over 700 junior and senior high students, and we saw dozens come to faith. Plus, I got to share four more sessions about going out and reaching friends for Christ.

We're excited because we now have contacts with the state, schools, churches, bible colleges and various missionary groups. We feel like the platform for ministry in Alaska is set like never before for us. They've asked us to come back in December – a time of year when, let's be honest, most people don't really want to go to Alaska. It's the middle of winter with little daylight and blistering cold. But it's our call. And the need is so great.

The doors are open, but it's going to take all of us teaming together to walk through them, along with tons of prayer and resources. Airfare tickets alone are almost doubled in price from last year. We also want to be able to bring a band, AJ the Animated Illusionist or the Fitz Family to minister because the Alaskan youth are such a visual people.

Those in Alaska continue to raise as much as they can to bring us in, but we have committed to try and raise at least half of the resources. Because of where we are financially, we can't make a commitment to go until the funds come in. Our portion of this is \$18,000. Thus far we have raised \$11,000. We need \$7000 more to go, plus plane tickets. We feel we're supposed to go, but we will not go unless God provides, and we know that he does that through his people. If you'd like to be a part, please consider giving towards our outreach to these remote Alaskan communities.

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For the Kingdom,



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