

St. Michael and Stebbins Assembly of God

Est. in 1962: John and Lois Covlasky

Pastor in 2018: Lillian Faga



Approximately 125 miles from Nome, St. Michael (known as *Taciq* in Central Alaskan Yupik) and Stebbins (known as *Tapraq* in Central Alaskan Yupik) are located on St. Michael Island which can be found in the southeast side of the Norton Sound. St. Michael rests on the east side of the island and just

miles away to the north is the village of Stebbins. The island was named for the archangel Michael by Russian-American traders who built a fort named “Redoubt St. Michael” in 1833. In the days of the Gold Rush of 1897, Fort St. Michael was a major gateway to the interior and swelled to 10,000 residents (Explore North). Today, St. Michael is home to around 400 people who enjoy a subsistence lifestyle. In 2010, Stebbins’ population was 556 people with its economy dependent upon commercial fishing and subsistence hunting and fishing.



St. Michael in 2016

John and Lois Covlasky – 1962 – 1963

B. P. Wilson wrote of the early work in St. Michael and Stebbins. According to Supt. Wilson, John and Lois

Covlasky's ministry began in the early 1960's (Wilson, 149). Because of the situation in Kotlik, the Covlasky's felt like St. Michael might be a better base of operations for the Gospel message. They moved to St. Michael sometime in 1962 and would travel to Kotlik on occasions. In 1963, a house was built for the Covlasky family in St. Michael. On May 2, 1963, Supt Wilson was presented a check which provided materials to build a church in Stebbins. The following is an excerpt from Wilson's book detailing the process.

“Kenneth Garrison and B. P. Wilson flew to St. Michael with a planeload of necessary tools. They were the first to land at the airport which was not quite finished. After building at St. Michael, John Covlasky took the men and tools by boat to Stebbins to build...Kenneth Andrus, the Henstocks, and John Covlasky all contributed to the work. Within three weeks both buildings were built except for painting” (Wilson, 154).

L. C. Burton – 1964 – 1967

While living in Stebbins, the Missionary Burton family would travel to St. Michael. Brother Wilson, speaking about the Burton's ministry wrote, “Neither he nor his wife played any musical instruments, so they improvise by using a tape recorder for the music and they would all sing along with it” (Wilson, 149). Pastor Burton in a report mentioned, “The Lord has given us one family that is genuinely saved, and very faithful to services. Their testimony is having a good effect on the village....”

Gordon Olson ministered in St. Michaels for a short time in 1966-67.

Billy J. Williams – 1968 – 1969

The Billy Williams family ministered in both Stebbins and St. Michael for approximately a year (Wilson, 148, 154).

Harriet Brown – 1970 – 1974

Miss Brown arrived on St. Michael Island in 1970 and would minister two weeks in Stebbins followed by two weeks in St. Michael (Aiken, 54). Due to health issues, Sister Brown left the area for a while, but long to return.

While the church did not have a permanent pastor, Supt. Wilson reports that A. E.

Capener, Richard Potter, and Sanford Peterson ministered in the area from time to time (Wilson, 148, 154). Also, Ted Boatsman served at St. Michael for approximately five months.

**Phyllis Fenstermaker – October 1975 – 2009 and
Jeanne Parke – October 1975 – 1984; 1989 – 2004**

Pastor Phyllis and Pastor Jeanne served St. Michael and Stebbins in a ministry partnership that would span over thirty years. In *Called to the Last Frontier*, Jack Aiken describes Phyllis' and



Jeanne's incredible legacy which began with their friendship at a church in Titusville, Pennsylvania in the early 1960's (Aiken, 152). Following Bible school training and other education, their paths crossed again, and they ended coming to Alaska in 1972. Upon receiving permission from Ken Andrus, the Western Section Presbyter, Jeanne and Phyllis arrived in St. Michael in 1975 (Aiken, 154). In the early days of ministry, the ladies would preach and teach in one village for several weeks and then go to the next village for several weeks. While Pastors Phyllis and Jeanne served in both locations, Phyllis predominately took care of the church affairs in St. Michael and Jeanne led the church in Stebbins.

Specific Details about the Church in Stebbins – October 1975 - 2004

In 1980, Jeanne Parke reported going to Stebbins twice a month for services. She noted that six adult and sixteen children regularly attended those services. Feeling the urging of the Holy Spirit, Pastor Jeanne left the area for a while to pursue other missionary assignments. Caleb and Janet Dotomain, along with their children, were missionary interns in Stebbins during the summer of 1988. During these months, the Dotomain family ministered to adults, preschoolers, children, and teens. Services included "Tiny

Tots with Aunt Jan,” Royal Rangers and Missionettes, Youth Alive, Worship service, Sunday school, and an evening service and mid-week Bible study for adults. Pastor Caleb, speaking about the ministry opportunities wrote, “The people of Stebbins are hungry for the Word of God. They want a better life than the one they are experiencing now. On June 22, three teens accepted Christ. In addition, late that night we were asked to pray for our neighbor that was suffering from a skin rash...(which had kept him awake for three nights and days). Before we prayed, we ministered to him about Jesus Christ’s power to heal...the next day he reported to us of his healing!”

Stan and Becky Brown served in Stebbins September 1987 through May 1990.

Upon Pastor Jeanne’s return to the church at Stebbins, the attendance began to grow. Starting with approximately seven kids in Sunday School and five people attending services regularly in 1989, Pastor Parke began to emphasize children’s ministries. In 1993, twenty children were regular attenders to Thursday “Kids Church” along with nineteen adults who attended worship service. Speaking of the attendance growth Pastor Jeanne commented, “A new couple has just started coming...they have been there four times. This year we had 208 names on the rolls.... I can’t wait to see what happens in 1994.”

God continued blessing Pastor Jeanne’s efforts and prayers. In 1994, the attendance continued to grow, and ten people became followers of Christ. By the next year, Pastor Jeanne wrote, “There are over 130 people coming to the Stebbins church. Many are children whose families are still Catholic. We are having between 50-75 people each day now. It is exciting to see interest in the things of God. The church is full to overflowing ... We have even gone to two services—the first for children, the second service for adults.” In 1996, Stebbins was named “one of the fastest growing Sunday schools in



the nation.”

Evelyn Dunken served as lay pastor from September 1996 through May 1998. During that time, Ms. Dunken continued to emphasize children’s ministries and continued the Missionette program with three girls engaged in the “Stairway to the STARS” program. Pastor Jeanne returned and continued moving the church forward.

Continuing emphasis on children’s ministries in Stebbins seemed to be a key to effective ministry. Understanding this principle, Pastor Jeanne invited several children’s evangelists to come and hold services. One such group came from Muldoon Community Assembly in Anchorage. The Kids-In-Training (KIT) Team led by Peggy Crowe and Fay Niemann was composed of third through fifth grade kids who had spent their school year preparing skits, songs, and testimonies and raising funds to travel to the village. This team provided a “rousing crusade in which 150 kids attended and many lives were radically impacted.” In 2001 there were 107 children’s names recorded on the Sunday school roster.

Adults were also growing in their faith and in their consistency of attending services. AK Field Fellowship Coordinator, Jim Schulz installed three individuals as the Stebbins Assembly Advisory Board on November 15, 1998. The members of this board included Virginia Tom, Barbara Dunn, and Peter Martin. Because of the growth of attendance, it was clear that a new building was needed. In March 2002, \$6,813.74 was in the building fund. With lots of effort and prayer from the small congregation and the help of other supporters, construction began on the new church building. On August 22, 2004, Supt.

Ted Boatsman dedicated the new building in Stebbins.

Medical issues forced Jeanne to leave the area in 2004. Don Cross became the caretaker of the facility following Pastor Jeanne’s departure.

Specific Details about the



Church in St. Michael – October 1975 – 2009

Apart from several times for furlough, Pastor Phyllis Fenstermaker led the congregation and resided in the village of St. Michael for many, many years. The 1979 Annual Church Ministries Report (ACMR) mentioned the following statistics: thirty-nine adults in the major worship service, thirty-seven adults attended Sunday evening services, twenty-eight conversions, fifteen people baptized in water and six individuals were filled with the Holy Spirit. In February the year following, Supt. W. R. Leisy dedicated the church building in St. Michael. Brother Leisy writing about the dedication service observed, “every pew was occupied.” During the 1980’s, worship service attendance averaged around twenty-five adults and Sunday school attendance was about thirty children. Again, children’s ministries proved to be an in-road into the community. In 1989 at a Good Friday baptismal service, ten individuals (mostly children) were baptized in water.



Water Baptismal Candidates

Adults, such as Clara Austin, were also vital to the life of the church in St. Michael. Clara would serve as the church treasurer for at least fifteen years. In the 1993 ACMR, sixty-eight adherents were listed, along with two conversions and thirty-four adults in regular attendance. Within just a couple of years, Sunday school enrollment increased, and more people were becoming Christ-followers. In a special April 1999 newsletter to her friends and family, Pastor Phyllis exclaimed, “We were just four short of breaking 100 at our Easter services!” At that time, the congregation had five adults serving as Sunday school teachers because there were ninety-nine kids on the roster.

In the first decade of 2000, the church at St. Michael continued to average over thirty in attendance on Sunday morning, between 45-50 adults on Sunday evening, and twenty-seven during mid-week studies. Pastor Fenstermaker served in the area until 2009, having given thirty-eight years of her life to the people of St. Michael Island (Aiken, 155).

Prophetess Hayden – served as interim pastor for a season.

**Linda and Brian Staub –
June 2010 – 2016**

Linda Staub became the pastor in St. Michael in the summer of 2010 and was appointed the pastor at Stebbins in October 2012. Pastor Linda emphasized children's ministries and ministry to those suffering from

addictions. In her

newsletter in 2012, she wrote about the spiritual climate in the village saying, "God is moving in St. Michael." This "move" of God was evidenced in the one-on-one conversations she had with women who dealt with daily struggles. She noted, "Women are being set free from addictions." Another outreach that provided hope within the community was through a "coffee shop." Pastor Linda mentioned (due to the kind contributions of a church from the Lower 48) the congregation was able to purchase a very nice espresso machine and have enough funds to get the shop started. Speaking of the opportunity to minister through the coffee shop, Pastor Staub communicated, "We have had the opportunity to pray with several people who come in for 'coffee' and they



Pastor Linda in St. Michael getting ready for church.



leave blessed by the Holy Spirit!"

In 2015 over forty-five people gave their "hearts to the Lord and many were healed physically and emotionally as well as set free from spiritual bondage." Pastor Staub continued, "Mid-week services have really taken off this

Local Transportation.

Fall after we made the decision to split the women on Wednesday and men on Thursday. This has given both groups the freedom to share openly. We have seen a lot of growth as a result.”

Lillian Faga – April 2016 – present

In an interview with Pastor Lillian, she noted the following information about when she came to Stebbins, “In April 2015, I came with my Pastor for a week-long mission trip to St Michael. When we came, we had prayer ministry with several people. I felt such a burden for the people and shared that with my pastor. He said, ‘why don't you pray about helping Linda with Stebbins for a couple of months, she mentioned she could use help out there.’ After a lot of thinking, prayer, and counting the cost, I said, ‘Yes, Lord I will go.’” Pastor Lillian continued, “The plan was to stay until December, but God had a different plan. I think He just needed me to get out here...four months later, I found myself waving goodbye to my Pastor, Brian, and the two men who did a village flip on the parsonage.” Thinking over her situation at that time she stated, “I didn't know anyone in Stebbins. The two people I met in April who lived in Stebbins, were out of the village. I didn't have any phone numbers for the village police, I had no transportation, and the Staub family was twenty minutes away. As I stood outside, waving, I looked around and said, ‘Jesus, it’s you and me.’” The Stebbins advisory board members in 2015 were Jean Ferris and Marlene Katcheck.

During those early days of her ministry, Pastor Lillian confided, “When I was in prayer about coming to Stebbins, I asked the Lord, ‘What do you want me to do?’ He so clearly spoke, ‘tell them I love them and I’m coming soon.’ In December of 2016...I had a deep talk with the Lord, shared my frustrations, and asked him to take them from me. He so clearly said, ‘Would you just feed them.’ A heaviness lifted, and I said, ‘Yes, I can do that. I can teach the WORD.’”

Pastor Lillian was appointed pastor of Stebbins in 2016. Discussing the demographics of the church, Pastor Faga writes, “When I arrived there were three long-term Christians still attending services in Stebbins. Since then the church has grown. I have five women that are very involved. Sunday Service attendance could be five to twenty-five any given Sunday. Since I have been here, there have been three new Christians who are now part of the five-person core. We had a couple of special services with Pastor Austin Jones and Pastor Jimmy

Okitkun, and an Evangelist from South Africa. About 120 people responded to the altar calls at these services but did not return for discipleship.”



Youth on the way to Camp AN.

Today, because of a pastoral vacancy in St. Michael, Pastor Lillian ministers in both Stebbins and St. Michael. During the summer months, Pastor Faga is kept busy with preaching in St. Michael on Sunday mornings and then heading back for afternoon services in Stebbins. Recognizing the importance of youth and children’s ministries, Pastor Lillian has a youth service on Thursday evenings and sent fifteen teens to youth camp in 2018. On Tuesday and Thursday afternoon she provides children’s ministries for the kids of St. Michael and adult Bible study on Tuesday evening. On Monday and Wednesday afternoons she offers children’s ministries for those living in Stebbins and adult study on Wednesday nights. She excitedly reported, “I have help for the children services at both churches” which testifies to the spiritual

growth and development of the adult congregation. Pastor Lillian is diligent about her desire to “disciple two couples to be strong in their faith and pursue ministry so that they can pastor in St. Michael and Stebbins.” We join Pastor Faga in praying the Kingdom will continue to advance on St. Michael Island with many coming to faith in Christ and growing to their full potential in Christ.



Services in St. Michael.

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