

# **60 Years of Ministry**

## **A History of Covenant Bible Church *1958-2018***

In 1958, the year before Alaska became America's 49<sup>th</sup> state, Arctic Missions decided to plant a church in the small village of Talkeetna. At that time Talkeetna had about 300 inhabitants, no road access, and only a dirt landing strip. The town is located at the junction of two important rivers in south-central Alaska, the Talkeetna River and the Susitna River. In addition, the Chulitna River enters the Susitna River just upstream of the townsite.

The first location of the church was west of the railroad tracks, near where the U.S. Post Office now sits. The first missionaries sent into the village to plant the church were named Worthington, and they remained in Talkeetna for about two years. They lived in a log cabin and supervised the erection of a Quonset hut for use as a church building. The Worthingtons were replaced in 1960 at what was then called Talkeetna Bible Church, by Pastor and Mrs. Ken Lobdell.

The Lobdells ministered in Talkeetna for nearly seven years. During this time, a road was built to Talkeetna in 1963. The Talkeetna Spur Road was not paved until 1970, about a year before the George Parks Highway was completed between Anchorage and Fairbanks. Also in 1963, Arctic Missions purchased two lots on the east side of the tracks, adjacent to the Talkeetna Cemetery. A new Quonset hut was built on the property, along with a small frame house, which became the parsonage.

In 1965, Ken Lobdell extended the ministry of Talkeetna Bible Church by starting an outreach mission in Healy. Ken would regularly ride on the Alaska Railroad north for four hours to minister in Healy. Eventually, this work was turned over to a group of Baptists from Fairbanks, who continued the work after the Lobdells left Talkeetna to plant churches in British Columbia in 1967. Dave Cochran briefly served as the pastor of Talkeetna Bible Church.

In 1968, Rev. Lloyd Dean became the pastor in Talkeetna. Under his ministry, TBC outgrew the Quonset hut, and construction began on a two story, 30' by 50' frame building in the spring of 1972. Construction was completed in phases and worship was held in the basement kitchen area until the second floor sanctuary could be finished. The total cost of construction was approximately \$10,000, which the church covered without going into debt. The Quonset hut was sold to Bob and Candy Moore for the sum of \$2,500. It was moved to the west side of the tracks and became the town's first hardware store. Many years later, Moore's Hardware moved into a new building at the Spur Road junction with the Parks Highway, but it is

still owned and operated by members of the Moore family. What became of the old church Quonset hut is unknown.

Pastor Dean left Alaska in the spring of 1974, and Gary Calhoun became TBC's pastor in July of that year. In November, 1975, the church began to function independently of Arctic Missions in a move toward becoming an independent community church. At this time, the real property remained in the name of Arctic Missions. Jerry Banek assumed the pastoral role in the summer of 1976, for an agreed-upon term of three years. He left in October, 1979, when he was replaced by Pastor Calvin Churchill. The deed to all the property of the church was signed over to TBC from Arctic Missions on July 29, 1979, completing the transition of the church to an independent ecclesiastical body. Rev. Gale Van Diest of Arctic Missions gave an inspirational and encouraging talk to the congregation during the hand-over celebration. The Chairman of Arctic Missions, Mr. Karl Kroon, presented the Deed of Trust to the deacons of Talkeetna Bible Church.

Pastor Churchill became ill in October, 1980, and had to resign his pastorate. The church then called Pastor Gerald Etherton as her next pastor, and he and his wife Alice moved to Talkeetna. The Etherton family ministered at TBC for almost exactly three years, leaving in November, 1983. At that time, the congregation began to search for a pastor who would have the ability and desire to remain with the church for a longer period and lead them in a long-term program of spiritual growth and outreach.

In 1984, the church leadership consisted of a board of four elder/deacons; Mr. Dick Smith, Mr. Glenn Valentine, Mr. Marvin "Dean" Cook and Mr. Larry Rivers. Mr. Rivers, who was a big game outfitter, had a client who came to Alaska on a sheep hunt in the Brooks Range. He recommended a potential pastor in Oregon and offered to contact him on behalf of the church. Subsequent to this contact and further correspondence, the board invited Jack Phelps and his wife Debra to travel to Alaska for a two-week candidate period. They arrived in Anchorage from Elgin, Oregon, on April 22, 1984, and, on May 6, the congregation voted unanimously to extend a pastoral call to Mr. Phelps. A letter in the file, dated May 11, 1984, indicates Mr. Phelps' acceptance of the call.

By early June, 1984, the Phelps family had been relocated to Alaska, and the church began to make arrangements for the new pastor to complete his ordination process. Pastor Phelps had been licensed to preach the gospel by Community Bible Church of Victorville, California, in 1973 and had served one interim and two associate pastorates after that time. But not having a permanent pastoral call, he had never sought ordination. TBC organized a Pastoral Ordination Council to examine Pastor Phelps, consisting of Rev. Gale Van Diest, Rev. Russ Arnold, Rev. Lloyd Dean, Rev. Robert Perrin and Pastor Gary Wilford. Rev. Van Diest was the council chairman. The council unanimously recommended that the church proceed, and an ordination service took place on August 19, 1984. Pastor Phelps' parents, Byron and Jean Phelps of Moab, Utah, were able to be in attendance.

In the summer of 1985, tragedy struck Talkeetna Bible Church. Dick Smith, a longtime member and leader in the congregation, had a desire to develop a pastoral counseling ministry through the church. The church leadership made arrangements to send Dick to San Diego for training through the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation. At the time, their son Lincoln was a student at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. The plan was for Dick and his wife Barbara (“Bobbie”) to drive to Illinois, drop Lincoln off at school, and proceed to Southern California for enrollment in the CCEF course. Near White Court, Alberta, the Smiths were involved in a head-on collision. Bobbie was killed instantly and Lincoln passed away a few hours later without regaining consciousness. Dick was very seriously injured and spent several weeks in the hospital in Edmonton. He recovered and lived for a few more years, but never returned to live permanently in Alaska. At a memorial service on September 29, 1985, Bobbie and Lincoln were buried at the Talkeetna Cemetery adjacent to TBC. Dick was eventually interred there as well.

Outreach to the local community, to other parts of Alaska and to the world, had always been part of Talkeetna Bible Church’s vision, dating back at least to Ken Lobdell’s work in Healy and Lloyd Dean’s efforts to start a sister congregation in Trapper Creek, which bore fruit in the summer of 1975. So when, in late 1986, Pastor Phelps was asked to help start a Reformed congregation in Wasilla, the church agreed to lend assistance. Three families in Wasilla and one who lived near Palmer began to meet for Bible study with Pastor Phelps, who would drive down to the lower valley once a week to teach and fellowship with this group. The group would also travel to Talkeetna for Sunday worship occasionally.

This continued for several months until the group was ready to take the next steps toward organizing as a mission church. It was the desire of the group to affiliate with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church denomination, so Pastor Phelps contacted men he knew in that denomination’s Presbytery of the Northwest. The result was that, in the summer of 1987, the Presbytery arranged for a retired OPC Pastor, Rev. Lawrence Eyres, to move to Alaska and shepherd the new mission as Interim Pastor. A close relationship continued between TBC and what became Grace OPC during Pastor Eyres’ tenure. One example was a joint worship service in Talkeetna on Sunday, October 29, 1987. This date was the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Abraham Kuyper, the great Dutch Reformed leader of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The two congregations worshiped together and spent the rest of the day sharing a meal and fellowship.

Pastor Eyres left Alaska in 1989, and in October of that year, Mark Sumpter was sent by Presbytery to serve as Stated Supply. In July 1993, Sumpter was ordained and commissioned as an Evangelist with Grace Orthodox Presbyterian Church. When the Wasilla group finally became a particularized church, three of the men in the original Bible study group, Dr. Robert Martin, Mr. Bruce Long and Mr. Steve Booth, were ordained as Ruling Elders. Rev. Sumpter left Alaska in August, 1994. The relationship between TBC and Grace OPC remained strong during this

period and the two congregations enjoyed fellowship and a partnership in ministry outreach to the MatSu area.

Another significant activity during this time was the founding of the Alaska Private and Home Educators Association (APHEA). The birth of this association, which remains today as the only statewide Alaska Christian homeschool organization, took place with the writing of a letter to 25 home school families in various parts of Alaska, proposing to form a statewide home school network. It was designed to promote and protect private Christian home school activities in Alaska. With particular assistance from church member Roger Sherman, Pastor Phelps established a steering committee and eventually a Board of Directors to guide the new association's activities. This organization spearheaded the effort to amend the Alaska statutes governing home education, completely freeing private home school families from the burden of bureaucratic control in 1996. The Home School Legal Defense Association in Virginia has declared Alaska's statute to be the "best home school law in the nation." Over the years several men from TBC and Grace OPC have served on the APHEA board and as President of the association, including Dr. Martin and CBC Elders Gerald Allsup and Craig Mischenko. APHEA continues to hold annual conventions and serve the home school community in Alaska to this day.

In 1985, Pastor Phelps was visiting his longtime friend, Rev. Dennis Tuuri, in Hillsboro, Oregon, where Rev. Tuuri was working to plant a church. On that occasion, he met a man who lived in Anchorage and was part of a small home fellowship calling itself Reformation Bible Church (RBC). Upon returning to Alaska, Pastor Phelps visited the family in Anchorage and met another family, Gerald and Melissa Allsup and their one-year-old daughter, who also were part of RBC. Thus began a relationship that would have far reaching and long-standing positive effects on the future ministry of Talkeetna Bible Church.

Late in 1985, Talkeetna Bible Church launched a new ministry. Seventh Trumpet Ministries took its name from Revelation 11:15. With the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the angel proclaims that "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever." The centerpiece of the new ministry was a newsletter, *The Seventh Trumpet*, which was to be produced five times per year and mailed to a subscription list. Volume 1, Number 1 was issued in January, 1986. By summer of that year, the subscription list had reached nearly 90 names, mostly in Alaska, but with some readers in the Lower 48 and Canada.

The content of *The Seventh Trumpet* included original pieces by Pastor Phelps and other contributors from TBC, as well as reprints of articles from other like-minded ministries. For example, the first issue had a reprinted article on Christian education by Rev. James Jordan of Geneva Divinity School in Tyler, Texas. Minutes from a congregational meeting in July, 1989, indicate that by that time the newsletter had more than 300 subscribers and was financially self-sustaining as a result of donations from readers. *The Seventh Trumpet* was published for

five years, the final issue being Volume V, Number 5, in November/December, 1990. When publication ceased there were 1,004 subscribers distributed across all 50 states, the District of Columbia and 20 foreign countries.

In late summer, 1987, Pastor Phelps received a letter from RBC stating that the group was struggling with a problem of leadership and requesting that Pastor Phelps consider serving as an elder/advisor to the congregation. After discussing the matter with the TBC board, Pastor Phelps agreed to serve RBC in this way. The caveat required by the board was that the two congregations would remain organizationally separate and TBC was not obligated to RBC in any way except for services rendered by her pastor. This proviso was accepted by both congregations.

Meanwhile, TBC was growing in numbers, maturing in the faith and slowly developing a new identity. Liturgical worship and weekly communion had been adopted in 1986. In 1987, the Sunday School had reorganized to facilitate study and memorization of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. By the summer of 1988, the midweek Bible study was being held in the home of a member family and was studying various doctrinal issues concerning a Reformed, Covenantal perspective on the Scriptures. Some member families, who preferred an Arminian understanding of salvation, left in March, 1988, to join other churches, and several new families joined TBC. Also, because of the severe recession in Alaska that started in about 1986, TBC lost some members who were required to leave the area to find work.

In 1989, the congregation began a process of reviewing the church constitution. In February, 1989, the constitution was amended to divide the former “board of directors” into two distinct offices – elders and deacons. Previously, members of the board were called “deacons” but functioned as both elders and deacons, and board terms were limited to two years, although the same men could be re-elected once to serve a consecutive term without a break. The amended constitution provided for elders and deacons in separate offices with no fixed terms. Shortly thereafter, Marvin Cook was ordained and installed as CBC’s first permanent Deacon.

The long period of studying the Reformed faith and discussing ecclesiology finally culminated in a unanimous congregational vote on March 27, 1990. At that time Talkeetna Bible Church changed her name to Covenant Bible Church and adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) and the two Westminster Catechisms as her secondary standards, while reaffirming her commitment to the whole counsel of God set forth in the Holy Scriptures.

Having officially become a Reformed congregation, CBC was now faced with a new dilemma. It was recognized by the church that an “independent” Reformed church was an anomaly and was an unsatisfactory situation to be in. Discussions were entered with some men in the OPC Presbytery of the Northwest, but a mutual understanding led to a decision that this

would not be a good fit for CBC (although the relationship with that denomination's presence in Wasilla remained on solid ground).

At the time, there was a small Anglican communion in the western United States, called the Anglican Churches of America and Associates (ACAA). Communications were conducted in 1991 with Rev. Truman Davis, Rev. R.J. Rushdoony and Rev. Norman Milbank concerning CBC affiliating with this denomination. Pastor Phelps flew to Arizona to meet with Pastor Davis and had helpful conversations with him about the matter. Eventually, however, the Consistory of CBC decided against affiliation with the ACAA, and continued for several years in an unsatisfactory independent status.

In 1989, Pastor Phelps had begun an outreach Bible study in Anchorage, approximately 120 miles south of Talkeetna. The group attending this study included some people from RBC, a family from a local Baptist congregation and some families who had left the Christian Reformed Church in Anchorage, which was drifting into liberalism. Over the next few months, this body grew and CBC began to discuss developing it into a mission congregation. In October, 1990, two former members of RBC left that group and sought membership at CBC. At the same time, the Baptist family announced it had embraced the Reformed faith and requested CBC membership. Hence, in November, 1990, CBC made arrangements with a hotel in mid-town Anchorage to rent a conference room each Sunday for Lord's Day worship. Pastor Phelps would lead worship in Talkeetna in the morning, then drive to Anchorage and lead a service at the hotel. Seven families were regularly attending at the beginning. By summertime, attendance had risen to ten families, including the Allsup family from RBC, who Pastor Phelps had met six years earlier, as related previously. Gerald and Melissa Allsup formally joined CBC on July 21, 1991.

By September, with attendance at 10-12 families, seven of whom were member families, it was apparent that the Anchorage child was outgrowing the Talkeetna parent. Therefore, in November, 1991, Pastor Phelps and his family moved to Anchorage, renting a house in the NE part of the city. For the next year and a half, he reversed the previous practice, holding worship in Anchorage in the morning and traveling to Talkeetna for an evening service.

During this same period, CBC began to experience financial hardships. Pastor Phelps' family now included four teenagers, one of whom had started college in Hillsdale, Michigan. In addition, they had a newborn baby, born in March, 1991. To relieve this difficulty, Pastor Phelps started a consulting company, doing contract work for several air taxis and a local engineering firm. Thus began a long period of bi-vocational work by CBC's pastor.

In 1993, a newly elected member of the Alaska House of Representatives offered Pastor Phelps a job as a senior staff member. This required Phelps' presence in Juneau for five months each year. An arrangement was reached with the church to grant a temporary leave of absence for the months of January through May, with Pastor Phelps returning to full time duty with the church from June through December. He was also able to fly back to Anchorage periodically to

lead services during the winter months, and was available by telephone to consult with the congregation. Nonetheless, this began a difficult time for Covenant Bible Church, which was to last much longer than anyone had hoped at the time.

In February, 1996, Phelps was offered a full time position with an industry trade association as its General Manager. His financial circumstances were such that it was virtually impossible for him to turn down this opportunity, and he became a part time pastor *in absentia*. Then, in 2001, Phelps became Acting Chief of Staff for then-U.S. Senator Frank Murkowski in the Senator's Washington, D.C. office. Pastor Phelps again sought and was granted a leave of absence from Covenant Bible Church. Only at the end of 2002, when Senator Murkowski became Governor Murkowski, was Phelps able to return to Alaska and begin resuming his pastoral duties. There was a transition period when he spent most of his time in Juneau, but by the summer of 2003, he and his family were living in Palmer so that he could be with the church each Sunday once again.

The years 1996-2003 were a dark and difficult period for Covenant Bible Church. Three men and their families kept the work functioning with a largely absent pastor. These were Gerald Allsup, Craig Mischenko and Donniss Walters. The latter had been involved with the former RBC and joined CBC in January, 1995. Mr. Mischenko had been a member since July, 1991. When Pastor Phelps was finally able to relocate to the area, the congregation consisted of five families and two single men, and a period of rebuilding CBC began.

In the meanwhile, CBC had begun exploring the possibility of joining the Confederation of Reformed Evangelicals (now the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches), which had been founded in 1998. In 2002, the church sent a visiting delegation to the CRE presbytery meeting in the Seattle area, and in 2003 CBC came under the care of Reformation Covenant Church in Portland, Oregon, as a Candidate Church in the CRE. In 2004, at a meeting in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Covenant Bible Church was voted into the CRE as a full member church. By that time, the CBC roll had increased to 45 members.

With the geographical center of CBC's ministry having shifted south by 100 miles, and with only two families still involved in Talkeetna, the leadership decided to shut down the Talkeetna branch permanently. In 2005, the property in Talkeetna was sold and the church purchased 5 acres of land in Chugiak, in a cash sale. Since that time, the congregation has been saving money to build a new building on the property. In the meantime, Eagle River Grace Church in Chugiak, has been kindly renting its facilities for CBC's Lord's Day worship and occasional other functions, including an annual Church History Conference each autumn.

Since 2004 the church has continued to grow, year over year, and the membership peaked at 104 in 2016. The leadership team has also developed. In 2009, we ordained Gerald Allsup as an Elder, followed by Craig Mischenko in 2012. Our faithful Deacon, Marvin "Dean"

Cook passed away in 2006, and in 2011, longtime member Steve Howe was ordained to the Diaconate. In 2015, we added two more deacons, Derrick Honrud and Fred Phelps.

Beginning in about 1996, CBC came into contact with a Hungarian Reformed pastor who had lived through the Soviet period and was then running a Christian youth hostel in the tiny village of Fony, in the northeastern part of the country. The church began sending regular gifts of money to him and started praying for the people of Hungary, who had recently emerged from the crumbling Soviet Bloc. This continued for a decade, and in 2007, those prayers bore unexpected fruit. Pastor Phelps and Gerald Allsup were in Moscow, Idaho, for a meeting of Anselm Presbytery, and met a young Hungarian man who lived in a suburb of Budapest and had a desire to plant a CREC church in Hungary. After a lengthy discussion in the back room of Bucer's, CBC agreed to explore the idea of supporting such a mission. In April of the following year, Pastor Phelps flew to Budapest to spend several days with Attila Hajdu and his family. Upon his return to Alaska, CBC agreed to provide financial and administrative support to help found a mission church in Diosd, Hungary. Eventually, the mission came under the oversight of a CREC church in Poland, largely for logistical reasons, but CBC continues to be a partner in the work, including providing ongoing financial assistance.

The year 2013 brought to CBC another opportunity to expand the work of God's Kingdom, once again in Alaska. A family had moved to Alaska from a CREC church in Washington to take a position with a Christian logistics company, providing support for rural missions. The company is based in Kenai, about a three hour drive south of Anchorage. While there, the family became acquainted with other families who were interested in having a Reformed congregation in the area. A series of meetings resulted in a commitment from CBC to assist, and Pastor Phelps began traveling to the Kenai/Soldotna area regularly to teach. By April, 2014, the people were ready to begin moving toward being a mission church, instead of merely a Bible study group. Through a series of circumstances it became evident that it was expedient for the congregation to ally itself with the Presbyterian Church in America. During the second half of 2014, the CBC Session worked cooperatively with Faith PCA in South Anchorage and with the PCA's Northwest Presbytery, to transfer oversight of the Kenai Peninsula Mission (as it was then called) to Faith Presbyterian's Session, and assist in the calling of the congregation's first mission pastor. The process was completed with a letter transferring responsibility from CBC to Faith, dated June 8, 2015.

While the work in Soldotna was ongoing, Pastor Phelps was contacted by a group of people in Fairbanks, Alaska, approximately 360 miles north of Anchorage. These people also desired to have a Reformed congregation in their community. As far back as the 1980s, Pastor Phelps was traveling regularly to Fairbanks to work on issues related to the development of APHEA. During those visits, he became aware of the need for a Reformed work in the area. The contact from the northern group 30 years later was, therefore, most welcome. Thereafter, the CBC Session authorized Pastor Phelps to begin ministering in Fairbanks, with a view toward

establishing a CREC mission work there. This activity bore fruit when, in August, 2015, a formal agreement was reached in which the Fairbanks Bible study officially became a CREC mission church under the oversight of CBC. Elder Allsup and Pastor Phelps became the *pro tempore* Session and a Church Constitution was adopted. The congregation assumed the name Covenant Reformed Church (CRC) at that time.

On October 24, 2015, CRC welcomed its first pastor, Michael Shover, and his family to Fairbanks. Pastor Shover served the congregation for more than two years, before accepting a call to another CREC church. CRC has extended an invitation to Rev. Jason Biette to serve as Interim Pastor for the summer of 2018, and Pastor Biette has accepted the call. He and his family are scheduled to arrive in early June. Covenant Reformed Church is in the process of seeking a new permanent pastor to continue the work into the future.

In 2018, Covenant Bible Church celebrates its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the festivities will include hosting Anselm Presbytery of the CREC in Anchorage during the last week in September.