

Trip to Marshall

By MARC Staff Member, David Reese

The last week of December I had the opportunity to fly out with a Samaritan's Purse (SP) work team to the Native Alaskan village of Marshall. After an earlier visit where Franklin Graham (SP's CEO) met house pastor George Landlord and learned of his conversion to Christianity while watching his father Billy Graham on television, SP constructed a brand new church, youth center, and two parsonages in Marshall this past summer.



My purpose of visiting Marshall was to learn more about the hardships & challenges of village life first-hand from the pastors working there to improve my ability to "tell their story" effectively to our supporters. This particular work team I was traveling with came back to Marshall to fix several freezing water pipe issues in the buildings. Apparently the plumber who had installed the water pipes last summer was from a much warmer place (which is almost "everywhere," by the way!), and he had failed to anticipate the weather extremes just a bit.



Before I tell you that story, let me tell you a little about Marshall itself. With a Yup'ik Eskimo population of approximately 414 people, Marshall sits in western Alaska about 150 miles up the Yukon River east of the Bering Sea and has no connecting roads. When the river is iced over (typically October to mid-June), access is limited to only aircraft--unless your idea of fun involves the great outdoors with -50F temperature extremes. Marshall is a "dry" village (alcohol possession is illegal) and is considered one of the "better" villages by the extremely relative standards of life in rural Alaska. The village has 134 school-age children who attend a single consolidated (and also newly constructed) school. The majority of homes in Marshall have indoor plumbing, as opposed to the "honey bucket" toilets used in many Alaskan villages without running water, but during my brisk walk around the village I still quickly noticed the external appearance & hygiene issues caused by the extreme weather and isolation. It would not be an easy place to live!



We flew out in a Cessna 208B Caravan with a load of plumbing & carpentry supplies, including plywood sheeting that was stacked vertically down one side of the aircraft (blocking a beautiful view out one side of the aircraft, I have to say), while the four of us sat on the other side. The Caravan is a two pilot plane, and we had a combined crew of Rod Moyer from SP and Greg Hess from MARC. This is very typical of our partnering ministry here with SP. Our hangars sit side-by-side, and we co-operate (literally) very extensively. SP has been a great blessing here in Alaska and in support of MARC's ministry efforts in serving the missionaries, pastors, and other Christian workers in remote Alaska.

With the weather cooperating very nicely, we had a smooth ride and a beautiful flight. We took off in near zero temperatures, so you can imagine how cold it was at altitude. Fortunately, I had a plastic customer rewards card from our local grocery store that I used to scrape the ice off the inside of the windows that had frosted over after we had loaded up & climbed aboard; this allowed me to take good pictures throughout most of the flight. We had a great view as we flew across the Cook Inlet and by Mt Redoubt-the very scenic volcano you've seen from the pictures I've frequently taken from our house. It's always amazing to see Alaska from the air, as it's the only real way to even begin to fully appreciate the wonder of God's creation here. Seeing the many mountains and rivers winding throughout western Alaska is truly unbelievable and beautiful to experience.



After a -15F stop in the larger village of Aniak for fuel, we arrived in Marshall after our three-hour flight. We were greeted by 30-40 mph winds on the bitterly cold runway as we quickly unloaded the aircraft into the waiting SP truck driven by youth pastor Josh Funk & his wife Michelle. It's amazing how much quicker the plane got unloaded than when we loaded it! Cold is certainly a great motivator. We all piled into the overloaded 6-pax truck and watched our crew take-off for the return flight to Soldotna (since we were anticipating a two-night stay). After a slow ride to make sure we didn't lose any of our cargo along the way, we arrived at the church/youth center/parsonage complex and again unloaded, this time into the youth center area.



Josh and I made a return trip to the runway to pick up the lumber that we couldn't fit on the truck the first time around, and then he gave me a "windshield tour" of the village on the way back. In addition to seeing the visibly evident tough living conditions of Marshall, I was also privileged to hear Josh talk about his work there in Marshall, along with his perspective on Alaskan missions since he had grown up as an "MK" (missionary kid) in Hooper Bay. Josh and his new bride Michelle (now expecting their first child) had previously met when she

came to Hooper Bay on a missions work team and had just recently re-located to Marshall to join the Native pastor George Landlord & his wife Eunice.



Growing up in Hooper Bay, Josh said he and his family had been served so many times by MARC planes over the years. I thought it was very indicative of his servant's heart when he talked about how he had often wondered how the MARC pilots were doing physically, spiritually, and emotionally when they came to serve him & his family; and how he had prayed for their health & sustainment on the mission field too. Since we come from the "big city" of Soldotna and relative comfort of being on the "road system," his concern for MARC personnel was impacting and spoke volumes about his own comfort in the middle of God's will. Despite the physical extremes and being in a place others would avoid at all costs, both he & Michelle seemed incredibly "at home." Despite their relative youth, I was very impressed with their spiritual maturity!



In just the short time they've been in Marshall, they've been having 30+ kids attend their youth center activities, and that's pretty incredible considering that's just about one-fourth

of all the kids there in Marshall. They are effectively using the facilities God has provided to reach the village, and that's pretty exciting! Josh shared with us how some of the adults were even stepping forward to ask how they could get involved-he said that was completely unexpected based on his previous experience in Hooper Bay. Pray that George and Josh can continue to nurture that Christian responsibility & concern amongst the congregation there. Alaskan villages are in desperate needs of Christian adults to step up & lead their communities down a new path-free of abuse, assault, and addiction.



It's quite remarkable to see that rapid progress in a village that had resisted the very existence of the church to begin with. In attempting to construct the new church in Marshall, the village elders had made it incredibly difficult for SP to get the needed approvals to build. It's a testimony to Franklin's commitment to his promise to the village that SP "stayed with it" and made the church and youth center a reality despite many roadblocks along the way, due in part to the historical (but stagnated) Russian Orthodox and Catholic Church influence in the village.

I think many Christians could learn a lesson from this unfortunate example: all too often Christians are more concerned about their religious "competition" than they are for the very people in desperate need surrounding them who should be the primary focus of their Gospel efforts! Unfortunately, we Christians (yes, I'm preaching to myself too) are all too accomplished at placing our own conditions & restrictions on the wonderfully unconditional love of Jesus Christ. In a place where child abuse is six times the national average, where three out of four women will be abused, and where suicide rates are consistently four to six times above national average, you would think that "religious" competition would be the least of the village leadership's concern in light of the human tragedy of moral decline & decay existing there today.



Considering Christ's direct and ultra-emphatic condemnation of the Pharisees (the religious leaders of the day who had concocted their own death-spiraling, man-made labyrinth of religious walls, barriers, and distortion), I think we should practice extreme caution when drawing our own "religious" lines of distinction and separation. Yes, I would also argue there are certainly a few doctrinal lines of incredible significance that shouldn't be crossed (e.g., the deity of Christ, His atonement for our sins); but when we spend more time embracing and relishing our lines of distinction than we do in reaching out to those in spiritual and physical need, I think we're missing the point.

God's unconditional love is simple: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."*
John 3:16

Thankfully for Marshall, it appeared to me that God is working mightily through the Landlords and the Funks to break down the remaining barriers standing in the way. Please keep them in your prayers, along with the SP, MARC, and other mission partner efforts that sustain their "front line" work. It takes great teamwork, commitment, and fellowship to make progress here in the remote arctic conditions of Alaska. To those of you who help sustain this effort with prayer and financial support, "Thank You!" for helping us make a difference! Each of you are a vital link in God's desire for the people of Alaska to know His unconditional love.

I could tell you a long story about my great carpentry skills (not!) and the work we did to fix the freezing water pipe issues, but suffice it to say that when we left, the freezing issues were resolved! The church ladies I met who were using the kitchen to prepare for a bake sale at the upcoming regional school basketball tournament were all very happy that they could now use the restrooms at the church again! You might not appreciate that as much as they did, unless you think about the chore of layering up in your snow gear and having to walk, 4-wheel, or snowmobile home in sub-zero temps just to make a bathroom trip when you're at church or a youth group activity. Not very fun-especially with kids in tow!

The Landlords and Funks were also appreciative of the work the team did to plug a few exterior holes that were causing freezing pipe issues in their homes also and the work accomplished to tune-up the wood boiler used to heat the water in their parsonages' radiant

heating system. It was nice to leave knowing that we had made a great difference in not only their ministry efforts but also in their daily necessity of a warm place to live!



Speaking of warmth, pray that God will make available a work team to go out and help the Landlords & Funks cut enough wood to sustain their heating needs for the rest of the winter-they need some help in that department. Because both families moved to Marshall just at the beginning of winter, they didn't have a chance to stock up their wood supplies and are now having to cut firewood on nearly a daily basis to keep up with the heating needs for both the church/youth center and the two parsonages-it's cold there!! And just so you know, the lack of roads outside the immediate housing area means their wood transportation options are limited to sleds pulled by 4-wheelers and snowmachines (AK's name for snowmobiles), so it's not as easy as backing your truck up to a wood pile and hauling it home.

I tell you what-I had a greatly increased appreciation for the hardships they face in living in such a remote location from seeing it first-hand myself. I respect them even more now having seen what they are "up against" in the remote village environment. Pray that God continues to bless their vital work in Marshall!