

History of Community of Christ Alaska Branch

August 17, 1902

The church that is known as Community of Christ, Alaska Branch, has a long and interesting history. It was formed into a branch (Congregation) August 17, 1902. At that time it was called the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Alto Branch. The World Church headquarters for the branch is located in Independence Missouri.

Some time before, a young man Wellington Ellis, had heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, preached by John J. Cornish, a missionary of the church. Brother Ellis was baptized and soon became a minister. He then came to Alto Michigan from his home in Reed City Michigan to visit his family. He was anxious to tell the wonderful gospel he had embraced. He held a two week preaching series in a hall for his family, their friends, and neighbors. Some were baptized at that time and others were baptized later. By 1902 there were 16 members, enough to form a branch. Elder Warren Peak was sent by the church leaders in Independence to formally organize the Alto Branch.

The first Pastor was a young nephew of Wellingtons' Melvin Ellis, receiving the call of Priest, soon after baptism. The services were held in the homes at first. As the membership grew, in 1917, they rented the Town Hall on McCords Avenue. About 1920, Priest Ernest Roark was elected pastor.

Sometimes a series of preaching services was held by visiting ministry. Often priesthood ministers would come from other places. Clyde Ellis an Apostle for the church, son of Wellington Ellis, came from the Polynesian Islands where he was ministering at the time. He brought one of the natives with him which was an exciting experience to have somebody from another country was a big deal in those days. It was at such a time when Brother Harrington, the District President, saw a need for stronger leadership in the branch. He asked Elder George LaLone, older brother of Floyd LaLone to come and be elected the pastor for awhile. He and his family helped the members to grow spiritually.

In 1931 the members started holding services in the school house in Alaska when it became available for rent. In 1940 when it was no longer used as a school, the branch bought it. It was in 1932 when Arthur Gibbs, who was a neighbor in the area, was baptized. He later went under World Church appointment as a Seventy (Missionary) for the church. That was very unusual for a hometown boy and such a new branch to have that happen.

It was in 1933 that Brother George LaLone moved away and Brother Macey Ellis was elected as pastor. In 1936 Henry London was elected pastor, then Brother Macey Ellis was elected pastor again until 1944. Then Brother Robert Johnson was elected. He was pastor for one year. The membership had grown to 75 during these years.

The building that had been purchased was renovated to fit the needs of the growing congregation. There was much work to be done. Everyone worked hard to make it a church home.

In 1941 Elder Merrill Champion and his family transferred from the Grand Rapids Branch to the Alaska Branch. He was elected pastor in 1945 until 1947 when Elder Macey Ellis was elected pastor again for the next five years. Elder Merrill Champion was once again elected pastor for the next 5 years. During that time in 1956, the membership reached 100. It was 1952

when the name was changed from the Alto Branch to the Alaska Branch. The first Vacation Church (Bible) school took place in 1957. There were many calls to the priesthood, being processed during those years.

The fall of 1959, Elder Bruce Ellis was elected the pastor. He is the oldest son of Brother Macey Ellis, who passed away that year. Brother Bruce remained the pastor until 1965. During those years the dream of a new church building took form. The old building needed too many costly repairs, and with the growing membership, the best way to go was to build a new church building. At first they thought it should be built where the old building was, but was advised to sell that one. Sister Ada Ellis-Smith gave four acres of the Ellis farmland that was on 68th street east of the old building. The old building was sold. In 1964 with the plans all in place the new building was started and for the most part it was finished in time for the Easter Service dated April 18, 1965. By then the membership was at 130. It was June of that year that Elder Bruce Ellis accepted a call to a World Church appointment. He and his family moved to Independence Missouri, our World Church Headquarters.

No one was ready to be the branch pastor at that time, so our then, District President appointed Elder Guy Kramer, from Greenville to be the Pastor. He served as branch pastor for two years. Brother Dirk Venema was ordained in 1965 as a High Priest. Many more men were called to different priesthood offices during these years. High Priest Dirk Venema was elected pastor in 1968 and remained pastor for the next five years. The membership had grown to 174 by then. Also during those years many improvements was made to the church building. It was in (1965) that the Labor Day Weekend Campout Retreat was started. It began on Friday night and went through Monday. They gave the name of the place, Par-Knob. The property was owned by Dirk and Shirley Venema, members of the Alaska Branch. The place was located on 68th street, east of Campau Lake. The property was used by the church members until the property was sold in the late 1980's. It was a time of study, worship, fun, food, and good fellowship. One time in 1970, there was 250 people, members from our branch and members in our district that gathered at Par Knob. Many new people became members of our branch during the 1960's and 1970's. During that time they were teaching the "GoYe And Teach" slides in the homes of friends and neighbors, taught by the priesthood. A peak year was 1970 when there were 23 baptisms. By 1970 the membership of our branch was at 282 people. Some of them were members transferring from other branches.

1972 Elder Robert Loesch was elected as pastor. He was pastor for two years. During that time the mission in the village of Hastings was started. Members of our branch (Alaska), living around Hastings, had quite a distance to travel, so those members started meeting in a hall at first. Priesthood members from our branch provided much of the ministry. Soon the Lutheran church became available for rent with the option to buy. The Grand Rapids District and also the Alaska Branch was giving those members help, financially as well as spiritually. They became a branch in 1986.

Elder Ivan Stark was elected as pastor of the Alaska Branch in 1974 and remained so until 1980. The debt on the Alaska Branch building was paid off in 1975. A very impressive dedication service and celebration was held on October 5, 1975. There were many wonderful times of fellowship, but no one was keeping track and writing down the history of the happenings. I think it was 1980 that Elder Owen Ellis was elected pastor. It was 1981 when Elder L.J. McCaul was elected as pastor. Elder Ron Churchard was elected pastor the next year. Those were growing years for our branch. The younger generation was taking over the jobs that a vibrant branch needs. There was a lot of enthusiasm. The slides were still being shown, resulting in more baptisms. The youth groups as well as the women's and older youth groups were very active.

It was 1984 when Marvin LaLone Sr. was elected pastor. He and his family had moved back into the area. This was the year that the inspired document 156 of the Doctrine & Covenants came forth, from the World Church, about women being ordained to the priesthood. This became an exciting time for the World Church, because they (the World Church) continued to move forward in a world wide vision to bring peace and reconciliation to the world under the inspiration of Jesus Christ. In that same time period the World Church implemented the Faith to Grow program, offering many classes for members & new priesthood. Our branch & the World Church experienced much growth. Elder Robert Loesch was elected pastor in 1985 & 1987. Elder Ivan Stark was elected as pastor for 1986. During those years both men had the opportunity to initiate the calls for the first women into the priesthood. Also a major expansion began at Camp Manitou where all the branches, including ours, held retreats, youth camping, & special events. This expansion included the kitchen, dining hall, bathrooms, & dorms. The campgrounds was located in Marcellus, Michigan. Dick Blair was the supervisor of putting in the heating system for the auditorium and dining hall. Bob & Marilyn Onan was in charge of the chicken barbecues' for several years at Camp Manitou which was a fund raiser called Manitou Mania.

In 1988 & 1989 Lloyd DeVormer Jr. was elected as pastor of the branch. During that time a fund raiser for the building of the Temple in Independence Missouri, our Church headquarters was started. The first woman in our branch to be ordained to an Elder was Loretha Smith. She was ordained in 1988. In 1991 Loretha Smith was ordained to the office of Seventy. In 1989 Elder Ivan Stark was elected pastor. Lloyd DeVormer Sr. was elected as the pastor in 1990 and remained so until 1994. During that time a new addition was added to our church building, with a barrier free entrance hall. It has served the branch well. In 1991 Loretha Smith was called and ordained to the office of Seventy. It was in 1993 the Gregory family (Doug, Becky, Angela, Daniel, & Rachael) came to our branch. They have shared their many talents and time since then. In 1994, a record number of our branch members went to World Conference in Independence Missouri for the final dedication of the Temple.

Elder Robert Loesch was elected as pastor again in 1995. Then Elder Doug Gregory was elected as pastor in 1996. It was also that year the Grand Rapids District Centennial Celebration was held at our branch. Over 400 members of the church from the nine branches came for the two day weekend. It was in 1999 our branch hired Harvey Johnecheck, a High Priest from Northern Michigan, as a youth leader. There were many youth in the branch, and the district at that time and so with funds available from our branch, the region, and the Grand Rapids District paying some of the money for his shared time, it worked out very well. He remained the youth leader until 2003.

In September 2000 James Dodds was elected the pastor, but for personal reasons he resigned after two months. Robert Loesch was appointed by the District President until a business meeting for electing the next pastor could be held. Lloyd DeVormer Sr. was elected the pastor and was pastor as of December 3, 2000. He remained the pastor until September 2002.

It was 2001 when the name of the World Church was changed from Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to Community of Christ. It came about from action of the World Conference in 2000.

The first branch retreat on our church property was held in 2001. We had many campers from other branches. Camper trailers from fifth wheels to fold downs were parked on the north end of the church. A large tent was put up on the east side of the church for outdoor services. Electricity was installed on the storage barn near by for the trailers to plug into.

The big event for 2002 at our branch was the Centennial Celebration that took place on August 10-11, 2001. Apostle Dale Luffman was the main visiting minister.

The oldest members who were related to the first members of our branch was Rosetta Champion (daughter of Melvin Ellis) and Matilda Deming (her mother was Edith Ellis, Melvin's sister) was honored as long time members. Bruce Ellis & Robert Johnson, former pastors of the branch and their wives were there and so were many others who had been members of our branch before moving. The membership was 196 at that time.

Hap Frizzell, a High Priest, was elected pastor September 2002. He remained so until 2004. In 2003 the Michigan Region and the many Districts became Mission Centers. The Alaska Branch is in the Southern Great Lakes International Mission (SGLIM). It includes some branches in Canada.

In 2004 the first female (Elder Kathy Onan) was elected as pastor. Many worthwhile activities were happening then. It was 2004, when Daniel Gregory, (a teenager) was ordained a Priest. He has now graduated from Graceland University (the Church College) and is working for the World Church. On September 2006 Doug Gregory was elected as our pastor. He remained pastor until May 2008.

Our present pastor is Richard Blair. Elder Blair took office June 1, 2008 three months early to relieve Elder Doug Gregory do to new job. The branch continues to try new things and also the things that have worked in the past, to help members and friends grow in Jesus Christ. The building has been updated with a new sound and video system. Outdoor play equipment is available, and we also have a decorative fire pit. We had Vacation Bible (Church) School, and a branch retreat took place over Labor Day Weekend. We had some guests from a nursing home in Grand Rapids (Heartland Manor). The branch helps the community by collecting food and other items for those in need. Also the branch members support projects that the World Church and related organizations are engaged in. The members have been giving money to help a young girl in the Phillipines get an education. They are helping with many other projects. The last project they were involved in, was helping members in Russia to have buildings to hold their services in. The Priesthood is holding Wednesday night services with the help of members at the Heartland Manor nursing home.