

Ptarmigan Telegraph

The Story of Radio Station KICY

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ISBN 0-9755150-0-4

Read: 2009 September 24 through October 17.

Reviewed: 2009 December 18.

When a Baptist marries a Methodist in Texas, where do they go to church? In our case, we were in an extra-church study, “Bible Study Fellowship” and in connection with that heard that the Evangelical Covenant Church of America was going to plant churches in the Houston area where we lived at the time. Covenant wasn’t Methodist or Baptist, but it was close enough to both.

The Covenant denomination is rather small as denominations go and, I would say, somewhat insular, the product of Swedish immigrants. We laughed, for instance, at the notion of evangelizing Texas, the buckle of the Bible Belt. You are not part of the Covenant for long, however, before you are introduced to one of their crown jewels, the Covenant radio station in Nome, Alaska, KICY. At Champions Covenant, the actual church that we had helped found, we had the crew down from KICY for a presentation in the first year that we were a full-up church, 1986. They flew in the station’s airplane and proudly landed among all the jumbo-liners at Houston International, although the largest private airport in the county, Hooks, was only two miles up the road from the church.

Having been romantically interested in the arctic for some years as a young man (and still being kind of young at the time), I talked to them about the possibility of bringing my radio experience and my new engineering degree to Nome to work with the Arctic Broadcasting Association. That didn’t work out, but we did become long term supporters of the ministry.

KICY went on the air on Easter Sunday, April 17, 1960, and at the time was the only non-military broadcast facility in Nome. Not only was it Christian broadcasting, but it was the only link between many peoples living in Nome and in the bush country for hundreds of miles around. FCC regulations generally don’t permit personal messages over the airwaves, but they make an exception in western Alaska due to the remoteness of the region and of the listeners. Personal messages of logistical importance, “safe arrival,” or just personal greeting are queued up in a KICY program segment called the “Ptarmigan Telegraph.”

It all started in the late 19th century while the Covenant was immigrating from Sweden to the United States. Missionaries were trying to reach Russia but were blocked from the European side. Some saw Alaska, “Seward’s Folly,” as another way around. The author starts with the stories of several of these missionaries. As often happens, they headed for Russia but ended up in Alaska and, one way or another, decided to do their mission work there where it also seemed to be needed.

A missionary here, a missionary couple there, but not much happened outside of local influence. The natives were, well, native, and any church religion they had was Russian Orthodox. There were some converts but Alaska is huge and sparsely settled and travel is hard. In one case, a missionary couple actually travelled to Provideniya over on the Russian side. While they were waiting in something like customs, a Russian soldier pulled out a gun and shot one of his comrades in cold blood. The Covenant missionaries were freaked out and returned quickly not just to Alaska but to the midwest U.S.

So there were false starts and small, local efforts, but from the 1930s forward there was also the dream of a radio broadcasting presence in western Alaska. People were bringing broadcast receivers up with them and of course there was also early amateur radio, but visionaries wanted a local radio broadcast station that would be useful for several hundred miles in the open wilderness.

And so it happened that Art Zylstra was between jobs at HCJB, the big Christian shortwave station in Quito, Ecuador, and HOXO, the “Voice of Panama” when he was landed by the Covenant Mission Board to come to Nome and get what would become KICY on the air. It was in late 1958 when this happened, and through miracle after miracle (and a few unexpected inside connections here and there), and with some help from others (Bill Hartman, Ralph and Gert Fondell among others) and even a grant from Pasadena Covenant Church, they got the equipment they needed, built a tower, painted it the right colors, and went on the air in spring 1960.

Nome is a city of less than 4000, but it is the big city on Norton Sound having, for example, its own commercial airport, so it is not the typical town of 4000 that I’m used to from rural Texas.

The mission of KICY to this place has changed several times over the last fifty years, including at least once since we’ve been supporters. There was a time in the 1990s, for example, when it looked like KICY might go under. One of the ways that the current management has addressed this was to reduce to only one paid employee, the station manager. All else (chief engineer included) are volunteers. They may be there to work for KICY, but they work for money somewhere else, and/or raise their own support. Some even go there and work (in health care for instance) and donate their salary to the support of the station. The volunteers are also expected to be somewhat involved in the community beyond just broadcasting.

Reading their newsletter (*KICY Calling*) month after month for several years, I get the idea that the volunteers do mostly construction and on-the-air type work and that the engineering and maintenance are handled in some other way, perhaps by contract or special donation of specialists. In 1986 I had a FCC First Radiotelephone License that would have been useful in this work. The FCC doesn’t carry that grade anymore and I don’t know if any of my skill would be useful at KICY. Perhaps.

In any case, although I grew up in the church and am used to the travails of ministries and other volunteer organizations, this is not a model to which I'm very accustomed. I've been in the government sector a long time now and don't identify as well as I used to.

Nome is the terminus of the Iditarod dog sled race and for a couple of weeks every winter becomes worldwide media central for the region.

Throughout the book I found references to people, places, or events I knew about from the Covenant. In the list of all known volunteers in the back, I know eight of the three hundred or so people personally.

KICY also has an FM station, which is only useful in and near town. Recently the AM station has been authorized to go to 50 KW beaming towards Russia. (This is expensive in terms of energy, and even in terms of the cost of a backup generator at that power level, according to the KICY Call Letter.) There is Russian programming in the middle of the night (evening of the next day in Siberia) and much contact across the Bearing Sea. This sort of thing was just opening up following the demolition of the Berlin wall at the time of the one visit that I made to Alaska myself. That was to urban Anchorage for Martha Oudall's wedding in March 1990.

Some of the dreams of the missionaries from over a hundred years ago are being realized.

Looking at the big map of the region on pages xiv and xv, I'm a little nostalgic. I used to be drawn to this place, and maybe to this ministry, though it was never clear that the gig wasn't just an otherwise unrelated matchup between some of my skill and experience, an exotic location of fanciful dreams, and escapism. Now, is it the draw itself that I miss, kind of like I miss other features of youth, or do I still feel the draw just a bit?

Supporters are invited to a 50th anniversary dinner and tour in Nome this coming April. I've decided not to go, but may spend money like that to be on a volunteer crew sometime in the future.