

The banner being refurbished now was originally created in the 1960s and has “Nome” across the top. The images depict the Holy Spirit hovering over everyday life and people gathered for and being sent out for worship, said Rev. Karen Sonray of Our Savior’s.

Working with sealskin, a traditional art form, takes time. For the original six sealskin altar symbols, much of the sealskin used was first bleached by the winter sun. The skin was soaked and stretched, then left outside in early spring, when temperatures are still below zero. The combination of the sun and cold create a permanent bleach. The women then used calf skin as borders and sewed the individual pieces in place with reindeer sinew, taken from the backbone of the animal and made into thread. Final color touches were added with artist oils. For the modern banner restoration going on now, very little bleached skin was available, as the process is so time-consuming. However, one elder had a piece of bleached skin given to her by one of the creators of the original six sealskin symbols. The skin was more than 40 years old, but once scraped and softened, it was ready to use.

The original six altar symbols tell the story of faith for both the worshippers at Our Savior’s in Nome and, for many years, tour busses that would stop with visitors to see the stunning example of local art work.

The three symbols on the right represent the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while the three on the left represent the means of grace: Holy Communion and Baptism.

The upper plaque on the left shows the right hand of God coming out of a cloud reminding us that God is in the heaven above, but His hand made all that is. The cross standing on and encompassing the earth means victory through the Gospel and includes Greek letters for “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.”

The head of the Dove coming from above is surrounded by the cruciform nimbus and surrounded by the triangle and three circles indicating the Trinity. The seven radiating lines at the bottom represent the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The bottom plaque on the right shows an open book with two burning candles signifying the Word of God. The middle one represents Holy Communion with bread rising out of a chalice. The top one represents baptism showing a font with water being administered by a hand.

The work was a true collaboration among the women from Nome and congregations from nearby villages. Nome women made the Son and Word of God symbols; Shishmaref women made the Father and Holy Spirit symbols; Teller and Brevig Mission women made the Baptism and Holy Communion symbols. Not all the names of the artists were recorded but those known include: Louise Barr, Bessie Moses, Maggie Oquilluk, Frieda Olanna, Margaret Picnalook, Kiatcha Rock, Ida Weyauvanna and Emma Willoya. Descendants of these women worship in Nome and other Seward Peninsula congregations, a tangible symbol of the story of faith that is passed on through the generations.

*This article is an edited version of one that appeared in in a historical piece written by LaVonne Okleasik, long-time member of Our Savior’s Lutheran Church, Nome.*