

Christmas in Shishmaref

By The Rev. Marvin Jonasen

On a cold, clear December 24th afternoon, with the sun slowly rising on the southeastern horizon around 1:00 p.m., the arctic Inupiaq Eskimo village of Shishmaref, Alaska, prepares for Christmas Eve and the excitement and activities, hope and promise that the birth of Jesus brings.

What's it like to celebrate Christmas in a frozen land where the sun shines dimly above the horizon for about two hours? Read more about the unique ways this village of about 600 celebrates the season.

The day begins with the people of Shishmaref bringing gifts to the church, which are placed around the altar and Christmas tree in preparation for the gift distribution that follows the children's Christmas Eve program. In 2014, 164 children (pre-Kindergarten- 8th grade) participated in the program, sharing words from scripture and singing hymns. Blended with the choir and congregational singing, the worship reflects the awesome beauty and joy that we receive from God at the birth of Jesus. The service concludes with the singing of Silent Night - in Inupiat, many singing in parts, all acapella. Following the service, the teenagers distribute the gifts; there is something for everyone.

On Christmas morning, worshippers gather at the church for a Christmas Day worship service. In the evening, residents come for a community-wide reindeer stew meal at the Shishmaref school, followed by Eskimo dancing and basketball games that go well into the night.

The festivities don't stop there. From Christmas Day through New Year's Day evening, every day and night in Shishmaref is alive with numerous activities and events for all ages— from foot races to dog sled races to a village-wide football game. Nearly every one of the village's almost 600 residents participates in some way. The week-long events conclude with a gathering at the church on New Year's Day evening for a "SingSpiration Service" (a service of song, prayer and sharing) with baked goods prepared by members of the community.