

# Adoption in Angoon meant much to anthropologist

The following piece was written by Dr. Kenneth Tollefson who first went to the community village of Angoon in 1974 on an anthropological study. Tollefson is now a professor of anthropology at Seattle Pacific University.

by Kenneth D. Tollefson

I did my anthropological fieldwork in a remote fishing village in Alaska. I was just another intruder into an Indian community. These pristine caretakers of the large island had been forced by whites to: pay taxes, attend foreign schools, give up their land, and forfeit their natural resources.

Perhaps their probing question repeatedly asked of me was reasonable: "What are you doing here?" After being asked this question a dozen times a day for the first three days, I looked into a mirror and in-

quired, "What are you doing here?"

Lonesome, homesick, and discouraged, I wanted to leave. I had a commitment. I stayed. Those first few days were not easy. I had planned to board with a local Indian family. They were out of town. Instead, I moved some doghouses in the grade school's carpenter shop, opened an old divan, unrolled my sleeping bag, lay down, and fell to the floor. The springs were broken. I reached for the light but there was none. A poignant feeling of estrangement permeated my being. I was not at home.

In fact, I felt so low I became envious of the village dogs. Every dog had a home. I watched as the dogs moved socially down the street, breaking off from the pack one or two at a time when they arrived at their homes. I went back to my room, opened a can of soup and stared out the window.

A few days later a couple invited me to move in with them. I was overjoyed. They made me feel like I was one of the family. I fit into their pattern of living as best I could. I set and cleared the table, washed the dishes, and swept out the house. My abilities seemed best suited to menial tasks.

The local people began to talk and joke with me. My anthropological questionnaire survey progressed adequately. The water, mountains, eagles, seals, and other forms of wild life fascinated me. Deep down inside me there was always the haunting reality that I was a stranger and constantly under surveillance.

As my participation in community life increased, I became less aware of my estrangement. I gathered gumboots from the rocks at low tide to give to the elders — a real delicacy. I helped dig a grave, write letters, and assist with individual needs. I was even invited to a potlatch ceremony.

I prayed a lot. I wanted my life to be a model and a ministry. However, under the intense scrutiny of the community gaze, I felt like a failure. I was still a

stranger. I shared that with my wife over the telephone just three days before I left the village.

Some elders asked me to extend my visit a couple more days. One of the last of the traditional chiefs had died. They thought the activities would be educational to me. Several chiefs and people arrived from other communities. The funeral potlatch was well attended. It was held to feed, honor, and pay for the services rendered during the funeral. I was asked to sit with the deceased chief's relatives.

In turn, about 50 adults stood and donated some money for the "pay-off" to all the guests. I stood and made a contribution at the appropriate time. As each host member stood he/she gave their Indian name. I gave my English name.

When all the donations were made, a ranking chief arose and addressed the audience. He told them, "We have a member who has no name."

I was called to the center of the room and told to sit on the table piled high with thousands of dollars in cash. Then the chief mentioned the name that was to be given to me three

times. Each time it was mentioned, the visiting chiefs repeated the name in approval and confirmation.

I was no longer a stranger. I was at home in the community. I had been adopted. Later that evening with the mayor, with whom I had been living, told me that his house now belonged as much to me as it did to him. Another chief admonished me to always remember the name, the money that backed it up, and to live to bring honor to it. Later, I received some cash in settlement of the former chief's estate. I had been adopted as his brother and given a high-ranking name.

A new vista of Biblical truth unfolded like a flower to the first rays of dawn. Adoption was no longer an objective theological tenet. It was a personal experience. I had experienced socially what God had done for me spiritually. Morally, I was once an alien and a stranger to God. At conversion I joined His household. I had a new identity (sonship), a new name (Christian), and a new inheritance (his of God). What love! What security!