

## Bethel, AK

Bethel is a Western Alaska "bush" town located on the open, treeless delta of the Yukon and Kuskokwim, Alaska's two biggest rivers. At population 6,000 (68% Yup'ik Eskimo) Bethel is Alaska's 8th largest city with Alaska's 4th busiest airport, 400 miles from the nearest highway. Travel is by snow machine in winter and boat by summer. The sky is



light for 19 hours in June and 5 1/2 in December. Winter becomes summer on the day of "break-up" toward mid-May when ice on the frozen waters begins suddenly to move. A wet, flat, harsh, remote land rich in fish, birds, mammals and berries, it encompasses the largest wildlife refuge in the US. In 1885, Moravian missionaries from Pennsylvania started a settlement here near a Native village on the sandy banks of the Kuskokwim. The Yup'ik are the largest Alaska Native group living on their traditional lands. The first JVs served in Bethel in 1965. Today, the Bethel JV community inherits a significant tradition of Jesuit and JV companionship in service at Native missions and parishes in the Delta region from 1957 at Holy Cross followed by service at St. Mary's, Tununak, Kotlik, Pilot Station, Chefornek, Emmonak, McGrath, Nightmute, Toksook Bay and Newtok until the closure of the Jesuit boarding school at St. Mary's in 1986. It is the transportation and trade hub for 50 predominantly Native bilingual villages with 20,000 Yup'ik people living in an area the size of Oregon. Subsistence is the way of life, and a social and cultural value in these villages. In Bethel, subsistence meets the cash economy amid a tangle of social service agencies dealing with cultures and families in transition, and the ravages of alcohol. The Yup'ik were decimated by European diseases from the 1830s, when the Russians established trading posts, until the end of the tuberculosis epidemic in 1941. Alcohol is the European "disease" today, responsible for 70% of



deaths in men aged 15 to 34 and closely related to homicide, suicide and accident rates 4 and 5 and 8 times the US rate, respectively: half of Yup'ik people die before they reach age 44. The family income in the region is the lowest in Alaska. It is a place you never imagined, and could never forget.