

Sitka Experience May 2024

When I took a star from the Epiphany tree, I couldn't think what my star "**renew**" could mean. Well, it was a trip to Sitka, Alaska, to volunteer for the third time at the historic Lutheran church. Founded by Finns in 1840, it was the first Lutheran church on the West Coast of North America.

Our (Jon and I) purpose was to welcome visitors by telling them about the church and helping them with questions about Sitka. We were docents, basically, with Jon, selling popcorn when the weather permitted.

The 1844 organ, which is still used in services, was a real attraction. We asked visitors if they would like to play it. One man who had suffered a stroke could only play with one hand. Some children who were good pianists played and they and their parents were thrilled. A 92-year-old woman organist played. One of the entertainers from a cruise ship played.

Another highlight regarding the organ--one visitor was playing "Go Tell It on the Mountain" and some visitors there began spontaneously singing. After playing, one accomplished musician said "the sixth stop is the acoustics in the church."

One of the first encounters with a passenger from one of the many cruise ships which frequent Sitka was a woman whose cellphone dinged at 12 noon to remind her to pray for peace every day. Some people just came to pray.

We had Sikhs, Mormons, Protestants, Catholics, Russian Orthodox and "We are Christians, but do not go to church" people. We listened to personal stories and offered encouragement when appropriate.

Just a little about our wonderful Sitka church with 100 members and 25 active. Just soaking up the natural beauty and communing with friends were highlights. Sitka's population is 8,400 and has 21 faith communities (but not that many churches). Some days during the tourist season from early May to mid-October there are cruise ships with 7,000 total visitors in the harbor.

Because some of the cruise ships were repositioning (some from Australia), we had many foreign visitors –from Austria, Australia, Canada, China, Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, Taiwan, Thailand, and the United Kingdom.

A couple from Florida brought 25 bookmark hand stitched crosses by church members there. About 2,500 crosses have been distributed around the world.

States represented included California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Nevada, Oklahoma, Oregon, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington. Texas towns included Austin, Allen, Fort Worth, Georgetown, Houston, New Braunfels, New Caney, Plano, San Antonio, and the Woodlands.

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