

Church Warden — StaaRistaq

STAARISTAM AGAYUWIK CARLIARTAAARAA. – THE CHURCH WARDEN TAKES CARE OF THE CHURCH.



Image: Three Saints Church, Old Harbor, watercolor
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Many of Alaska's Russian Orthodox communities share clergy. Clergymen typically live in the largest community in a parish and serve smaller, outlying communities periodically. In the Kodiak region, for example, clergy stationed in the city of Kodiak and in Old Harbor travel to surrounding villages several times a year. The absence of a resident village priest does not limit the life of the Orthodox Church. The faithful worship and celebrate with the help of local church officers: a lay reader and a churchwarden.

The lay reader, a liturgical officer, is selected by the church and trained by a predecessor or a priest. Lay readers were once responsible for teaching Slavonic to village children, and they continue to lead Sunday services with instructions from a priest. Although they cannot perform all parts of the service, they can read scripture and lead songs. In recent decades, Alutiiq women have often filled the position of lay reader.

In contrast, a community appoints a churchwarden to maintain records, assist the lay reader, and manage the physical care of the church building with money collected from parishioners during services. The warden lights candles before services, builds and maintains crosses in the community cemetery, cleans the church, maintains the church walkway, and records baptisms, marriages, and deaths. In the past, the warden also made sure people attended church and kept children quiet during the services.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the lay reader and the churchwarden were also important political figures. They acted as part of the village council, working with a community's chief to govern and care for residents.