



Shoring up Faith at 175
Topsail United Church Honours Historic Anniversary in 2012
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As a child growing up in Chamberlains, Lorraine Jarvis remembers riding the shoulders of her father, Cyril Mercer, to church every Sunday in Topsail. "One of my memories of the church is the little old stove in the centre," she said. "It was one you had to shovel coal into, and I can remember Alex Butler didn't have any hair, so he had a nice shiny head. He would shovel the coal into this little stove, and I can remember seeing the flames flicker on his head." You will see no such flames flickering today in the more modern confines of the present Topsail United Church, located directly next to where its predecessor once stood on Topsail Road overlooking the sea.

Today, Topsail United Church continues to thrive as the lone United Church between Paradise and Holyrood.

Known locally as 'The church by the side of the road,' Topsail United Church is celebrating its 175th anniversary. To mark the event, church members are planning a variety of events and activities, many of which expect to bring back old faces.

No doubt those events will look to solidify the church's place in the community. For Jarvis, herself a minister, Topsail United Church is a special place unlike any other. "My most wonderful memory of that church is the warm, loving feeling I got from the people who were there," she said. "I've lived in Labrador and I've lived in Clarendville, but every time you come home, (you're) drawn to the church of God through the people."

Its origins can be traced to the very beginnings of the village of Topsail. The first residents were Methodist settlers, and the first church services were held in the early 1800s at the home of Joseph Miller.

Clergy travelled from St. John's to preside over services, but as a road did not exist between the two communities, they were forced to take a road to Portugal Cove before travelling along a coastal trail by horse or dogsled.

The first church was built in 1837, with clergy supplied by Gower Street Methodist Church. It was replaced by a new building in 1871 and gained its first

resident minister, Rev. Mark Fenwick, in 1886. Known then as the Topsail Methodist Church, it later joined the United Church of Canada in 1925.



The Old Church

The old church was packed for the final service in 1977. Marie Allen, who first joined the parish in the late 1960s, served communion for the occasion. It was a full church," she said. At the time, there was a need for more space, and Allen notes the old church had no water or sewer services

Efforts made to save its structure were unsuccessful. According to a news story published at the time of its closing, tourism minister Tom Hickey said the government was reluctant to become involved in preserving the 106-year-old structure.

Jarvis remembers a reporter covering the event who stood on the back of the organist's stool to take photos. She said one of the congregation's members, the recently deceased George Jacobs, was almost locked inside the old church before it was closed for good. They were just going to put the padlock on the door, and then it came open and he came out," she laughed.

A white wooden cross stands in the field next to Topsail United Church on the spot where the old church once stood, built with wood from that same building. The old church's bell is the same one used today at Topsail United.

Yesterday and today

Today, the church has fellowship groups for men and women who are heavily involved in local events. The congregation played a big role in aiding the work of parishioner Sarah Budgell, who twice in the last three years has journeyed to the Central American country of Guatemala. Money donated by members of the church has been used to build a home and pay for bunk beds, a stove for a school, shoes, and other items. "It was very emotional," said Budgell of her trips to Guatemala.

Existing as a church to serve a growing region sits well with Topsail United. Rev. Bruce Kearley said while the church continues to retain a rural feel, its congregation is changing as a result of the urbanization of towns like Paradise and Conception Bay South as a whole.

That growth is apparent within the area surrounding the church. Kearley recalls the properties next to it were barren when he first joined Topsail United Church nine years ago. Today, they are populated with homes.



Church Service

"You may not know everybody in church now on Sunday morning, but that being said, we've still been able to maintain that togetherness." With that ability to stay

together comes the need for new members of the congregation to get involved.



Emily Howe, 12, said the church's junior and senior high bands are fairly new, and Kearley adds that the children's choir, which ceased to exist for a number of years, has come back to life over the last three years. The band programs make use of drums and guitars to perform a more contemporary brand of music than what most of the church's longest serving members may be used to.

Children's Choir To continue the promotion of youth involvement in the church, Topsail United recently hired a Christian development director. The move was nine years in the making and follows up on the recommendation of a needs assessment conducted by the church.

Valerie Howe, Emily's mother, is 2011 chair of the church's official board, and she said it has been incredibly welcoming to her family since moving to Paradise in the late 1990s. "Both of our girls, Emily and Ashley, are big parts of the music program here," she said. "I grew up in the church, and now my kids are growing up in the church in a different community, so the welcoming is very evident all around."

Emily Howe is especially appreciative of the supportive environment the church fosters. "When the choir sings, they're always commenting on how wonderful it is to have youth take part in the service."

Meetings to prepare for this year's anniversary started back in 2010 according to Eileen Green, chair of the committee in charge of celebrations. The first event was held on Jan 23, a ham and beans supper sponsored by the men's group followed by a variety concert organized by the women's group.



Anniversary Committee

Guest clergy who have served the church will visit throughout the year. Rev. Pearce Penney, a minister for the church in 1959, was the first to do so, though he Anniversary Committee remains a familiar presence most weeks as a member of the congregation.

A dinner theatre, church picnic and tree planting event are also scheduled, and the month of November will be a big one for the church, as it includes the official anniversary weekend.

Anniversary events will include the singing of the special hymn "The Church By the Side of the Road," written locally by Phoebe Florence Miller.

"From my perspective, it's certainly humbling to know you're a part of that long

history, and as years go on, people will look back at this congregation and say, 'We kept it going,'" said Kearley.

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