

Chelsea Church reopened by Dakota Presbytery

Over 100 years old, the church represents history

By Louis Montclair For the **Journal**

On a hill-top in the middle of the prairie a few miles west of Poplar, people traveling down U.S. Highway #2, or by Burlington Northern Santa Fe train will see a white church building.

Abandoned and deserted buildings dot the prairies of the Western United States, and to those who don't know the history of this area, one would think of it as another forgotten relic of the past. However, there is much more to this church than meets the eye. To those who live in the area, the church is a landmark and a symbol of spirituality.

This is Chelsea Church.

Over 100 years old, it is regarded as one of the oldest sites on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. The date on the church sign says it was built in 1902, but the church has been around years before, church members say.

The church has been closed for many years, and recently it was voted by the Dakota Presbytery Committee on Ministry (COM) to be reopened for full operation, Dakota Presbytery Pastor Jerry Swanson said.

The annual spring gathering of the Dakota Presbytery ministry in Flandreau, SD resulted in the COM deciding to reopen the Chelsea Church for full church operations, Swanson said.

After the opening of the church, Pastor Swanson set the schedule for the church, which is every Sunday at 2 p.m. Swanson is the *only* ordained Dakota Presbyterian minister on the Fort Peck, Reservation, and he pastors Dakota Presbytery churches in Wolf Point, Fort Kipp, Riverside, and Chelsea.

The Dakota Presbyterian COM will meet again in the fall, and they will be discussing the progress of the re-opening of the Chelsea Church, Swanson said.

"First Church"

To many, Chelsea is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, Christian spiritual site on the Fort Peck Reservation. Chelsea descendant Herman Pipe Sr. said that the church was established on the reservation by Huakpapa Lakota people years before the arrival of the Dakota from Minnesota and the Nakota from Canada.

The Chelsea people were very spiritual, and their beliefs were central to their way of life. When the United States government outlawed Native American religious practices, such as the Sundance and 'the Ghost Dance, the Chelsea people would not have survived without spirituality and they established the Chelsea Dakota Presbyterian Church.

The original church was a log house near the river. However, the church soon had to be re-located because there was so much flooding on the land it was located on, Pipe said.

It was moved up on a hill next to an old cemetery. However, a tornado passed through the area and destroyed the church, and it was re-built again Pipe said. Roosevelt County built a road near the church, and it cut directly through the cemetery. The graves were re-located to the hill next to the church, and it still stands there today.

Since it's conception, many different families have branched out from the original Chelsea descendants, including the Red Elks, Running Bears, Grey Bears, Pipes, and Red Doors. The church was closed down by the Presbyterian Church, and many people viewed that as criminal and only recently was the church able to regain recognition. Pipe said. Pipe said that he has been attending the church since he was a child, and he is happy that they finally reopened the church officially.

Community members have been working to keep the church alive. Fort Peck Community College students have repaired the roof and repainted the outside, and people are still buried at the cemetery and services are still held at the old building.

Pastor Swanson said that the Dakota Presbyterian COM asked him to pastor the church and he said that although it's tiring to work for three churches, it is an honor and privilege to pastor the Chelsea Church.

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