

Devoted Following

Community works to renovate historic church in Centerville

By Jeanie Senior

When members of the Centerville Church of Christ sent out their first appeal for money to help repair their historic church, they got a gratifying response.

So far, donations have totaled about \$10,000, which is a big step toward the roughly \$50,000 needed for the renovation.

Church supporters are not just looking for money. They would be happy for people to volunteer their time, skills or materials.

The landmark white wood-frame church has welcomed worshippers since 1884.

"I don't think there's ever been a period when there weren't services," says church treasurer Brooke Warrener.

That record could make it one of the oldest continuously used churches in Klickitat County.

The Centerville Church of Christ is independent of any national denomination, according to Brooke, who calls it "Bible-based, New Testament."

Inside, the church is warm, inviting and well-maintained.

Outside, church member Neil Wiidanen points to the problem areas: dry rot in the wooden beams above the foundation, and on the south side of the steeple, more deterioration, the result of years of snow and rain running unchecked down the wood siding. Water leaking into the steeple has damaged walls, floors and the foundation.

"The more we looked at it, the more we found we needed to do," Neil says.

The existing church building dates to 1884, when it was constructed on a lot purchased for \$12.50. The steeple and belfry were added a few years later. An addition with two classrooms was added in the early 1940s. In the 1950s, the entire building was moved forward onto a newly built concrete basement. Most recently, a stained glass window was added in the entry as a memorial to Ina Kayser.

The bell in the steeple rings every Sunday morning, Neil says.

Rental of the parsonage on an adjacent lot provides a source of income to the church.

Brooke, whose ancestors homesteaded in the Centerville area in the late 1800s, grew up in the church. She plays the piano during Sunday services, although she also has played the small pump organ that stands against one wall.

A plaque on the organ says it was purchased in 1894 for \$12 and served as the main instrument at the church until 1926. Even now, when Brooke pumps its pedals and plays a few notes, the sound is still strong and clear.



Brooke Warrener at the pump organ inside the Centerville Church of Christ.



Left, the Centerville Church of Christ shows signs of wear as it catches a ray of sunlight. Below, Neil Wiidanen surveys dry rot above the church foundation.



Like Brooke, Neil is the descendant of early Finnish settlers in Centerville. He and his wife, Patty, who moved there several years ago from Dufur, live in what was his grandfather's home.

As a child, he came to the church with his grandparents when he was visiting them. Both his mother and father served the Centerville church as ministers.

According to "History of Klickitat County," published by the Klickitat County Historical Society in 1982, the church was founded in 1877 "by a group of Christians who had been meeting in homes and the local schoolhouse."

They formally organized as "the Church of Christ at Centerville on the second Lord's Day in January 1884 with W.D. Smith and Nelson Lacourse as elders and J.H. Smith and D.F. Gilstrap evangelists." W.H. Maloney also was listed as an evangelist, and J. Eshelman and J.H. Smith as deacons.

On January 13, 1884, according to church records, the congregation in the new church included 13 men and 12 women.

When the Christian Ladies Aid Society of Goldendale was organized in 1908, its goals were lofty: promoting Christian

fellowship and spiritual growth among its members, aiding the church financially, advancing church benevolence "and attaining to a higher intellectual sphere."

When a parsonage was completed next to the church in 1916, the Ladies Aid furnished the residence.

Although Centerville is a quiet place these days, it once was bigger than Goldendale.

Brooke says her father talked about hotels, a bowling alley, lodges, a bank. Then a big fire wiped out much of the infrastructure.

There is one other church in town, and the Centerville School, which serves children in kindergarten through eighth grade. But the post office and the last business, a grocery store and bakery, closed around 2002.

Neil says attendance at the Church of Christ on a normal Sunday is about 20 to 30 people, with Sunday school at 10:30 a.m. and church at 11 a.m. The Rev. Ken Akins of Goldendale has been pastor for the past several years.

"Christmas day and Easter, there's usually more people," Neil says. "There might be 50 people there on Christmas."

The first batch of people who got appeal letters from the church included alumni of Centerville School.

"They're scattered all over, and a lot of them as little kids went to church here," Neil says.

Others, he says, might not be churchgoers, "but they might be interested because it's a historical building."

There is talk of a yard sale in the spring to raise money. The ladies of the Grange are considering a fundraising dinner, with proceeds going to the church.

"I thought that was nice," Neil says. "We're all kind of in this together." ■

Donations can be sent to Brooke Warrener, treasurer, Church of Christ Centerville, P.O. Box 1154, Goldendale, WA 98620. Contact Brooke at (509) 773-4644.