

Saskatchewan's oldest building

still refreshes faith

Like a beacon pointing to the heavens, the pale white steeple of Holy Trinity Church seems to hang in the balance between earth and sky.

Framed by evergreens, the Churchill River lapping a few feet from its front steps, the church stands alone on its rocky point — a place the Cree people of the area call “Amachewespimawin”, or “shooting-up place”.

In times past, their ancestors used this place to test their prowess with the bow, shooting arrows from their canoes up a nearby cliff along the river. As Stanley Mission grew, it clustered around this spot, chosen by the Anglican missionary Robert Hunt as the place to build his church.

Today, Stanley Mission is on the opposite bank of the river — the combined effect of an epidemic in the 1920s and the development of a Hudson's Bay trading post on the far shore. The stores and homes are there, and even a small chapel where regular Sunday services are held. The original Holy Trinity Church is in the care of the provincial Department of Environment and Resource Management, who keep it open for curious tourists to visit year-round.

However, the “oldest building in Saskatchewan” is no musty, dusty museum artifact. Weddings, funerals, Christmas Eve services — all are still held at Holy Trinity, with parishioners paddling over in boats or zipping over on snowmobiles.

Despite its nearly 140 years, there is still a living spirit to Holy Trinity, says Rev. Charles Arthurson, the diocese's Cree bishop.

“The people still use it, and they have the strong faith, I believe, in God and in the church,” Arthurson says.

“It's a very holy place to have a service,” he adds. “So old, eh? The ghosts of the place, so many people come and gone. ... He (Rev. Hunt) built it over a hundred years ago, and it's still standing.”

The fact that the church still stands, in the exact same spot Hunt chose for it in the 1850s, is a testament to both the faith of the people past and present, and to its designer's and builders' skill.

As a recent documentary on Lac La Ronge Provincial



Photo courtesy Woodland Aerial Photography, Doug Chisholm

Holy Trinity Anglican Church, the oldest building in Saskatchewan, sits alone on the north bank of the Churchill River, in constant sight of the community of Stanley Mission on the south bank.

Park put it, Holy Trinity is “a church that would not have been out of place in the English countryside of the 19th century ... until you look closely.”

Following Rev. Hunt's blueprints, the church took approximately six years to build, and all of the work was done by hand. The boards were whipsawn from local timber, and the original reddish paint came from ochre clays, similar to that used for the rock

paintings near Stanley Rapids.

The hardwood, locks, hinges and 1,000 pieces of stained glass for the windows was brought over from England — twice. The first set was lost when the boat capsized in rapids along the Churchill, and a second set had to be ordered.

Although the church was completely restored in the 1980s, with a new foundation and reconstruction of the bell tower, many of the original finishings are still intact. The pews — the same ones on which Hunt's parishioners sat — are still painted pink and blue, and there is local beadwork decorating the pulpit. A small graveyard, still used by residents of Stanley Mission, is just outside the church.

While historical records are scanty — “native people didn't write,” explains Bishop Arthurson — church members still have vivid memories of Holy Trinity's early years. Rev. Samuel Charles, 84, is an ordained Anglican minister. He has spent most of his long life in Stanley Mission, and he still remembers what it was like to be a child attending Holy Trinity Church.

“I go with my dad to the church all the time

just to stay with my dad. I can't play or run around,” Charles says in English, his less-used second language. “A lot of women, they had five or six children to look after ... and they (the children) would sit on the floor and look around. If they moved ... (their mothers) would say, ‘Sit still!’”

The church bell would be rung 15-20 minutes before services, and with its peal echoing across the water, parishioners would head over to the church. Upon arriving, men would take off their coats and hats and hang them on a tree outside, Charles recalls.

Even in those earlier years, the church was used primarily in summer, since its parishioners were often out on their traplines all winter. This actually served Holy Trinity well, because the furs they caught helped support the church financially.

“The man and his family, they'd pick the best beaver, the best fox ... and they'd give the pelts to the clergyman and that would be their offering,” Arthurson says.

“They'd pick their best pelts to give to God.”

Carmen Pauls

Staff

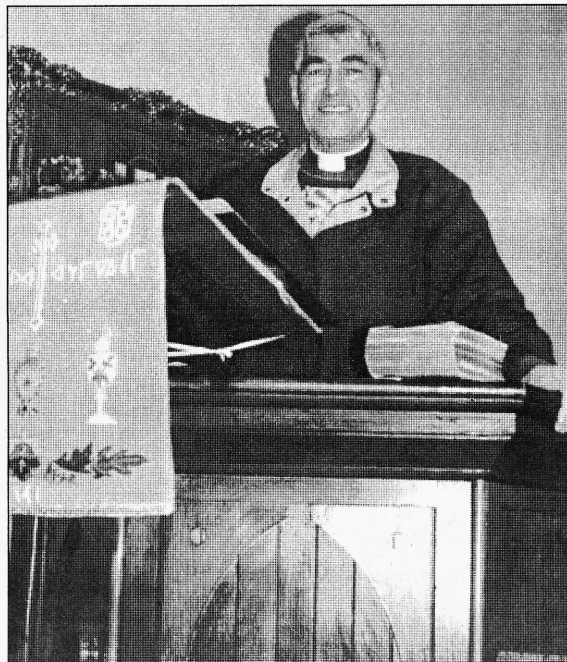


Photo by Carmen Pauls

Bishop Charles Arthurson, a Cree, presides over services at Holy Trinity Church. The building brings together a Victorian structure, an old Christian faith, and an even older Cree culture.

These days, no offering is required of visitors to Holy Trinity, although if you drive up you may need to pay for transportation. Jim's Camp will provide boat charters — call 635-2052 before you leave or ask at the Amachewespimawin Co-op Store for directions to the fishing camp. A canoe or sailboat will also suffice, and if you're a strong swimmer or very devout, so will your own two legs.