

Bethany Church Celebrates 50 Years

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By Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola

As a child, Flo Barton happily trekked across the “Perky” and the railroad tracks to attend services at a small Indian mission on Gallup’s south side.

More than 50 years later, Barton was the chairperson of the committee that planned the 50th anniversary celebration for Bethany Christian Reformed Church, the Gallup New Mexico church that had its origins in that Indian mission.

Although Bethany was officially organized as a church on December 27, 1956, the 50th anniversary celebration was postponed until the third weekend of January, 2007, to avoid the hectic holiday season.

In a recent interview, Barton and Denny Van Anandel, another planning committee member, talked about Bethany’s history, and the weekend’s anniversary events. Other members of the planning committee included Barton’s husband, Stewart “Stu” Barton Jr., Charlotte Burr Lorenzo, and Dennis Lorenzo.

All-Indian Origins

According to historical information provided by Barton and Van Anandel, Bethany began in the late 1920s in Gallup as Bethany Chapel, an Indian mission of the Christian Reformed Church. The first chapel location was on the corner of Aztec Avenue and Strong Drive, where Battered Families Services, Inc. now has its offices. In 1954, a small school was opened at the chapel. That same year, Indian students living in the Gallup Government Dormitory were bussed to services at the chapel. Barton started attending the mission in the early 1950s after Rev. Don Houseman, the local Christian Reformed missionary, invited her family to services. Barton said in the 12 years Houseman served in Gallup, he ministered to local coal miners, a street ministry and jail ministry, and went from “hogan to hogan” reaching out to area Navajo families. Stewart Barton Sr., who would become Barton’s father-in-law, was Houseman’s Navajo interpreter. Barton’s huge family of 14 children, headed up by parents Mary and Billie Holtsoi, lived on Gallup’s north side when they first met Houseman.

“In those days, no one had a car; so we all so we all walked to church,” said Barton of her family’s trek every Sunday and Wednesday from their north side home to the south side chapel. “It was no big deal because we walked everywhere,



Above: Little Gary Holtsoi and Virginia Begay await the start of church in the old Bethany Building back in the 50’s.

Below: Former Bethany Pastor Rev. Al Mulder and his wife, Darlene, enjoy the festivities at the 50th Year Celebration.

everyday.” “We were all a real close-knit church,” Barton said of the all-Indian congregation in the 1950s, adding that none of the other families had cars or televisions, but most had lots of kids. “We would bring our Hispanic friends and whoever wanted to go ... it was like a huge party.”

“Our church was always full,” she recalled. “We had tons of kids.” Because Navajo was the primary language for most of the congregation, church services would go on “forever” as everything was spoken in both English and Navajo. “All the Navajo people would just perk up because it was their time to listen,” Barton said of the Navajo portion of the service.

In December 1956, the mission congregation was formally organized as a church, and it became known as Bethany Christian Reformed Church. In the mid to late 1960s, the church began attracting more and more non-Indian families to its congregation, and in 1971, the church moved to its current location at 1110 S. Strong Dr.

Colorful Church

Barton said some of the native church members worried that Bethany would lose touch with its Native American roots as more non-Indians joined the church and as the church planned its 1971 move. “I think the Indian people thought they were going to be left out,” she recalled. “But it really didn’t materialize that way.”



Upper Left: Coolidge Begay family.

Lower Left: Nellie Lam and Bethany Christian School.



Stewart Barton Sr. makes his home and hogan visitations.

“We just blossomed,” she said of the move. “We had more and more people join the church.”

Van Anandel joined Bethany in 1972 after moving here from Washington State. A longtime area educator, Van Anandel worked first for the Gallup-McKinley County Schools and later for Rehoboth Christian School. “I think the multi-cultural community was a good picture of the Body of Christ,” said Van Anandel, when asked what attracted him to Bethany 34 years ago. “It was a real blessing to worship there and fellowship with such a variety of people.”

According to Barton, Bethany is even more culturally diverse today as a number of church families have adopted children from around the world. “We’re getting pretty colorful in our church,” she said. “I think that’s wonderful.”

Barton and Van Anandel said that a strength of Bethany’s is that it offers a wide variety of activities and service projects for church members of all ages. Van Anandel also cited the leadership of Bethany’s current pastor, Keith Bulthuis, as another valuable church asset. Bulthuis, Bethany’s pastor for 22 years, is an experienced counselor as well as minister, Van Anandel explained, and many new people have joined the church after first meeting Bulthuis as a counselor.

“Pastor Bulthuis’ preaching, teaching, and counseling ministry has been a wonderful blessing to many in the congregation,” Van Anandel said. “He’s greatly appreciated by the congregation.” Barton said she and the planning committee members have received lots of positive responses after inviting members of other area churches to join this weekend’s anniversary celebration. “It’s gratifying to me that people do want to help us celebrate,” she said. The committee also extended an invitation to all former church members, particularly those who attended services at Bethany as children. “It’s gratifying to me that people do want to help us celebrate,” she said. The committee also extended an invitation to all former church members, particularly those who attended services at Bethany as children. “I don’t want them to think they’re forgotten,” she added.

The Celebration

The celebration weekend was a wonderful success!

On Saturday afternoon, January 13, Bethany had an Open House featuring a Power Point presentation and posters filled with old photographs. Dozens of former members came, including many who had attended Bethany as children. They had a great time renewing acquaintances and enjoying the Navajo Taco supper, which was attended by over 300 people!

The Sunday morning snow and ice did not deter another 300 people from coming to worship and celebrating God's goodness. Some highlights of the worship service included singing by the Bethany Native Choir and "The Lord's Prayer" sung by Mary Lou Donkersloot and signed by Jean Cometsevah.

After the Sunday noon potluck, Rev. Al Mulder, Bethany's pastor from 1968 to 1984, reminisced about his years in Gallup. Then several other "old-timers" shared memories, and the program ended with Flo Barton narrating the Power Point presentation, identifying all those in the pictures and giving thanks for the wonderful weekend together. The day was topped off by an array of delicious desserts, a fitting symbol of the sweet fellowship enjoyed by all at Bethany that weekend.



The Bethany Native Choir celebrates in song.



Elva and Erma Voss traveled from Iowa for the celebration. Erma was Bethany's outreach worker in 1970.

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