

Newcomer's Chapel marks 200th anniversary Sunday

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Each Sunday as they stand to preach, co-pastors Jon Long and Michael Bradford grab hold of a bridge between the past and present — an old, wooden pulpit — at Newcomer’s Chapel of Pigeon Run United Methodist Church.

A church member dusted off the pulpit last spring after discovering it in his barn, then refinished it and donated it to the church. The significance of the pulpit, which graced the church’s platform many years ago, is not lost on Long or Bradford.

“I think this congregation has a bright future,” Bradford said, “We’re really working hard to reach out to the younger generation.”

The country church, surrounded by woods and acres of rolling farmland just north of Brewster, will celebrate its 200th anniversary at 9 a.m. Sunday. The public is invited to attend the service, which is to include an oral history of the church and a character portrayal by local historian Bob Hawes of fictional circuit riding preacher Stumpy Boggs. A covered-dish luncheon will follow at the church, at 11789 Sarbaugh St. SW, off state Route 93.

“For a church to survive that far out is a true testament to the spirit of the people ... It’s a small, rural community dedicated to taking care of one another and it has that strong tie and commitment,” Long said. “We still have a lot of farm folks but the newer members are generational. They are more diverse in their professions. We have a number of school teachers.”

Several former pastors have been invited to the service, including the Rev. Earl Bailey, who pastored Newcomer in the mid-1960s and will be delivering Sunday's sermon.

There are several third- and fourth-generation families who attend Newcomer, according to Long.

"I just think that any time you can trace your history to 200 years, you definitely have the hand print of God on your ministry," Long said.

PROUD PAST

The sanctuary dates back to around 1840 but the Pigeon Run Baptist Church actually was organized on the present site in 1812 when services were held in a grove and five surrounding houses. Originally a coal mining area, Pigeon Run later developed into a farming community. The congregation moved into a log cabin in 1817 following the arrival of Methodist preacher James Dixon and worshipped there until 1840 when a new structure was built. Three years later, the church changed its denominational affiliation to Presbyterian and for a short time became a Lutheran congregation. A United Brethren society was formed after several circuit-riding preachers held meetings at Sugar Creek and Pigeon Run. The church was named Newcomer Chapel in 1890 in honor of Bishop Christian A. Newcomer, a United Brethren circuit rider from Hagerstown, Md., who held meetings in Ohio and Pennsylvania in the early 19th century. It's been estimated that Newcomer, who was born in 1749 and died in 1830, traveled 150,000 miles on horseback during his ministry, including 50 times across the Allegheny Mountains.

"There is no reference to Christian Newcomer ever preaching here but we know that he passed through the area," Hawes said. "... He did a lot to bring a lot of those little groups together. He helped to organize them."

Typically, circuit riders traveled light, carrying their belongings in a leather saddle bag. Hawes' costume will include several wool vests, a neck cloth and a wide-brimmed hat that were typical of the dress of the early circuit riders.

"If you were a respectable man, you didn't roll up your sleeves. The cloth kept your skin covered and normally you would have on at least one vest," Hawes said.

In the early 1940s, the church was renamed the Pigeon Run United Brethren Church and, five years later, became the Evangelical United Brethren Church. More than two decades later, the Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist denominations merged to create the Pigeon Run United Methodist Church.

A basement was added in the late 1950s to create much-needed Sunday School classroom space. The sanctuary was remodeled between 1976 and 1978 and a steeple was added in 1979. The fellowship hall was added in 2002 at a cost of \$400,000 to accommodate church events such as weddings, funerals and showers. The hall also doubles as a worship center for a new contemporary service. Three years ago, the church formed a shared ministry that allows Long and Bradford to serve United Methodist churches in Beach City and Brewster on a rotating basis.

BRIGHT FUTURE

Newcomer's contemporary service, which was launched by members from each of the churches served by the shared ministry, is attracting a mix of young and old, with attendance averaging between 40 and 60 people. The service features a praise band and audio-visual technology. Long noted one of the attendees at the service is a man in his late 80s who worships at another church on Sunday mornings.

"We have a very positive future with the new families that we have attending the church," Long said.

Long and Bradford are newcomers themselves to the ministry.

Long joined the pastorate five years ago after retiring from Fishers Foods, where he served as director of produce, floral and frozen food products. In addition to being a minister, Bradford runs Michael Bradford Computer Consulting.

"I feel incredibly blessed to be here," Bradford said.

Long added the church continues to be mission driven, not only locally but also abroad.

"We are very much about being the hands and feet of Christ," he said.

