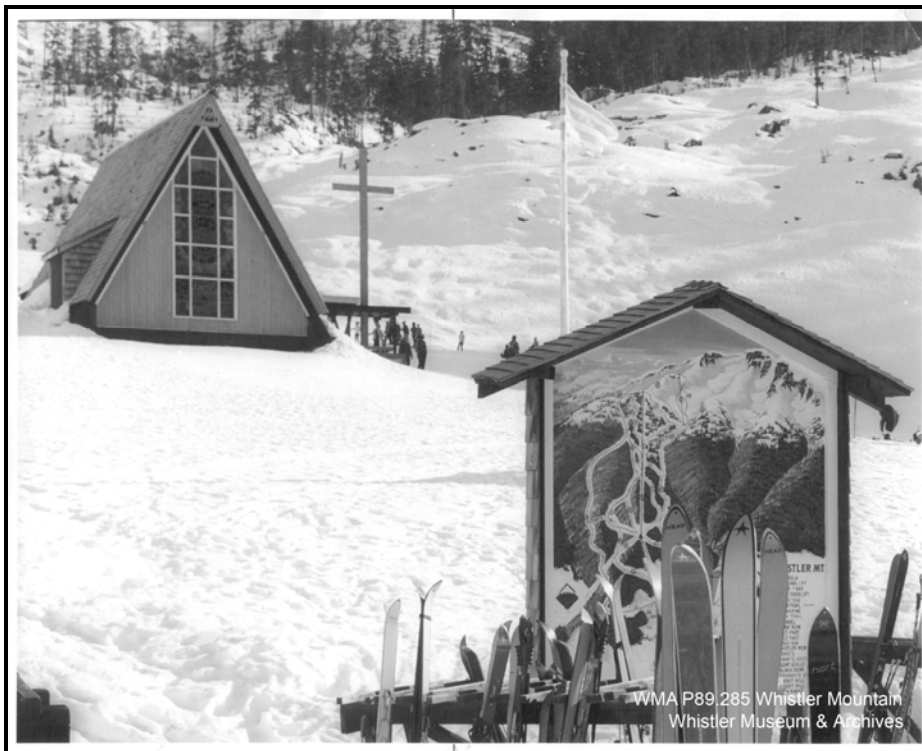


Heritage of Faith - Sacred Buildings and Spiritual Places *Exploring the state of faith and spirituality in Whistler*

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Whistler Skier's Chapel
WMA P89.285 Whistler Mountain
Whistler Museum & Archives

Each year the Heritage Society of British Columbia sets aside a week for communities to honour local history and culture. The theme for 2005 is *the Heritage of Faith – Sacred Buildings and Spiritual Places*. Throughout ancient folklore and religious texts, people have always been attracted to remote mountains and pristine peaks. Something magical seems to happen in the presence of these sacred mountain places. Hence, in keeping with this year's Heritage Week theme, 'the *Heritage of Faith - Sacred Buildings and Spiritual Places*,' the Whistler Museum & Archives sent me out to explore sites of worship in Whistler including churches (past and present), and the role that spirituality plays in the 'ski bum' culture.

Unlike many other communities in British Columbia, Whistler lacks obvious examples of historic places of worship. Initially, this led me to conclude that locals were too engaged in the "Church of the Great Outdoors" or partying to find time for organized religion or bible classes. This couldn't be further from the truth.

Sunday mornings are surprisingly busy around Whistler, despite findings by Statistics Canada that attendance at religious services has fallen dramatically across the country over the past 15 years. Soon after I began researching into the heritage of faith, it became quite clear that Whistler is home to a diverse group of established and post-modern faiths.

Mainline Christian Religions

Whistler's first church stemmed from the childhood memories of Norwegian-born Whistler resident Franz Wilhelmsen whose vision included a chapel designed specifically for skiers. With the support of local skiers, Wilhelmsen set in motion the creation of Canada's first ecumenical church – the Whistler Skiers' Chapel. It was built to act as a multi-faith worship centre for residents of Whistler. The chapel's first service was held on Christmas Eve in 1967.

The chapel's dedication ceremony in March 1968 brought together clergymen from the Anglican Church in the Diocese of New Westminster, the British Columbia Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, the Jewish Community in Whistler and the Whistler United Church of the United Church of Canada. The chapel was designed by Vancouver architect Asbjorn Gathe and kept free of any purely Christian symbols. After being moved twice from its original location, the chapel held its last service on Easter Sunday 2000 before being dismantled.

In the early 1980s, the province gave the Chapel Society the deed to a small lot, which was later exchanged by the municipality for the current location on Blackcomb Way. The Maurice Young (MY) Millennium Place Interfaith Chapel opened for worship service on June 17, 2001. Since its inception, MY Place has served as a worship centre for the Roman Catholic Church, the Whistler Community Church, the Jewish faith, and the Whistler Village Church.

The Chapel Society's intent was to rebuild the chapel once the mortgage owing on MY Place was paid off. Fundraising for the new chapel is expected to commence this summer, with an anticipated completion date of summer 2006. The Society's Director, Morgan Montgomery Morgan confirmed that the new chapel would incorporate the familiar A-frame style and many of the building's original furnishings. The wooden altar is still in use at MY Place, while the pews and the stained glass windows remain in storage. The new chapel will be built near the Roundhouse Lodge on Whistler Mountain and will be used primarily to host weddings and special ceremonies.

Whistler Village Church

The Whistler Village Church's "shared vision" brings together the Anglican Church of Canada, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the United Church of Canada in an inclusive and highly participatory Christian climate. The Reverend William Roberts leads a congregation drawn from a small population of established residents and visitors. Although this religious union may appear complicated at first, the church maintains a

simple philosophy - to *envision a dynamic interdenominational Christian church with a shared ministry, serving a diverse congregation of Whistler community members.*

Roberts regards his church as “an experiment in ecumenical religion.” His postmodern religious sermons weave together teachings from the Bible with literature, music and philosophy. The Whistler Village Church attempts to be tolerant, democratic and open to compromise with liberal theology.

Roberts believes that people can gain perspectives on different religious faiths only by entering into dialogue. This secular outlook is evident in Roberts’ involvement with the Whistler Forum in conjunction with Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Dialogue. In January, Roberts collaborated with the David Suzuki Foundation, Mayor Hugh O’Reilly and the Oracle to host a successful tsunami relief fundraiser - ‘The Power of You.’

When asked why people include religion in their daily lives, Roberts feels that religion is somewhat nostalgic and tends to be stable and safe. Certain families have practiced Anglicanism or Catholicism for generations. It’s almost an unwritten rule that future generations will do the same. “However, when people come to the Whistler Village Church, they want the unexpected. They want to experience some transformation and learn something new. I am not here to offer a ‘how to’ religion or to provide ‘big box store’ answers. There are no easy answers when it comes to finding your true faith and spirituality.”

Our Lady of the Mountains Catholic Church

The Catholic Church like many others in Whistler began in the Skiers’ Chapel. As the worshippers outgrew the Skiers’ Chapel, they relocated to the Whistler Conference Centre. In 1990, the Catholic Church later opted out of the Skiers’ Chapel Association and secured their own property. The log-accented church building sits adjacent to the River of Golden Dreams and Crabapple Creek in Tapley’s Farm.

“Religion is a way of life more than a set of rules and regulations that people abide by,” said Monsignor Desmond. “The overall goal of our church is to offer a welcoming place for people to come and live out their faith.”

Monsignor Desmond has been coming to Whistler since 1991, loves to ski and has been a priest for the past 39 years. Sunday mornings are quite hectic around the Catholic Church. Following his sermon in Whistler, Monsignor Desmond drives to Pemberton and Mount Currie where he does it all over again.

Monsignor Desmond was recently honoured with the prestigious papal distinction of Prelate of Honour. This honorary award recognizes Desmond’s long-time dedication and service to the Kamloops Diocese. A photo taken with Pope John Paul II is proudly displayed in his church office. Five years ago, Desmond had the opportunity to discuss religious matters directly with the Pontiff.

Monsignor Desmond admits that Whistler's transient population poses difficulties in establishing a long-term Catholic community. The Church's long-term goals envision stabilization of the Church's population, increasing its community outreach and organizing more socials involving Whistler's youth.

Whistler Community Church

The Whistler Bible Club started in Whistler in 1977. Two years later, a small group of people began meeting regularly for Sunday services in the Skiers' Chapel. In 1980, this group allied themselves with the B.C. Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, an evangelical Christian denomination. After outgrowing the Skiers' Chapel, the group began meeting at the Myrtle Phillip Community Centre in 1993.

While the mainline churches experience a decline in attendance, evangelicalism is undergoing a period of growth and vitality. The Whistler Community Church, a biblical movement centered on the study of the Bible, follows the authority of the scriptures. Conversion and missionary work form important aspects of their faith.

Pastor Tim Unruh believes, "We all have a God-shaped hole within us. You can choose to fill it with stuff, a relationship, a job, etc. or you can give it the full attention it deserves. We are all made for a relationship with each other and with God."

On Sunday mornings, Pastor Unruh plays the guitar, leading his congregation in singing uplifting hymns. In some ways, it felt more like a folk festival than a mass. Unruh's congregation consists primarily of families and teens. Sunday sermons usually average about 160 followers. Sunday school, a nursery, and bible study are also provided.

The Whistler Community Church's spiritual foundation is not centered on a building or a church. When it comes to a church, it's not about the design, the building materials used or the building's shape. "A church is a group of like-minded individuals who come together, irrespective of their physical church building," said Unruh. Despite Whistler's prohibitive real estate prices, residents have found creative ways to worship God. The Whistler Community Church recently acquired a two-acre parcel in White Gold and hopes to build a new place of worship in the coming years.

Youth Resurgence

"More Canadians, especially young people are sitting in church pews these days," reports Reg Bibby, a University of Lethbridge sociologist. Forward-thinking churches are aware of this trend and are finding unconventional ways of reaching out to young people. The post-boomer generation kids are searching for meaning in their lives and want to ask questions without being pressured into making a commitment. These teens are drawn to churches that include lively music, social events and offer new approaches to worship.

The Snowboarders for Christ (SFC) provide Christian fellowship through bible studies, camps and big air competitions. Extreme sports and attractive lifestyles are used

to evangelize instead of strict religious doctrines. This trend has branched out into other sports such as surfing, kiteboarding, windsurfing and BMX. These groups come with names like the Eternal Riders, Surfers of Faith and the World Christian Skateboard Association. The SFC in Whistler meets at the Rendezvous Lodge on Blackcomb weekly for bible dialogue, coffee and riding.

The Church on the Mountain

Pastor Chad Chomlack and his wife Stacey run the Church on the Mountain which endorses the Southern Baptist faith. In fall 2004, the Chomlacks acquired the existing church from founders Kurt and Laura Boes of Hawaii. In only a few months, they have made significant strides in engaging Whistler's youth in faith-based dialogue. Sermons are held on Saturday nights at Legends Hotel in Creekside near the old site of the original Skiers' Chapel.

Prior to moving to Whistler, the couple operated the Muskoka Woods Sports Camp for Christian youth. Although their faith overlaps a great deal with Whistler Community Church, the Church on the Mountain caters to a younger, more transient population comprised of 18 to 35 year olds. In the winter months, this demographic group can grow to a potential of 5,000 people.

Dr. Reg Bibby, Canada's leading expert on religious trends states, "Canadians want organized religion, but they are not connecting with what's on offer. People want to talk about spirituality but they don't want to be bullied with lots of rules." Pastor Chomlack admits the same and finds that the truth becomes more concrete once you've wrestled with it for a while. Today's youth spend a great deal of time discussing spiritual concerns: *Who created this world? Why are we here? What is our role on this earth?*

"We want people to come together naturally – not through strict doctrines or rules. Many young people are here for only nine months, but they are hungry for a sense of community and family. Many of these young skiers and snowboarders are undergoing their own spiritual journey. Sadly, some of these kids get on a destructive path. We want to offer some alternative choices."

Chomlack finds that today's youth are interested in giving back to their community and to the Third World. Unlike previous generations, these kids are suspicious of the government, question everything and tend to deconstruct existing belief systems.

Chomlack and long-time childhood friend Jack Crompton who acts as Pastor for Young Adults at the Whistler Community Church run the Chapel. This group meets at the South Side Diner on Tuesday nights. Regulars call it "KBC" - kick back conversation. It's hard to imagine that this long-time Whistler hangover joint is now a place of worship and spiritual dialogue. The South Side has always had good energy. Perhaps that explains why people from all walks of life come here to hang out.

Mysticism and New Age Movements

Those professing to have no religion, along with those people embracing religions other than Christianity are also gaining popularity. Neo-pagan or nature-revering religions include faiths such as New Age, Paganism, Celtic Reconstruction and Wicca. Unlike the structured, more traditional Christian religions, these groups believe in discovering the truth through revelation, some of which cannot always be fully understood or explained.

Kelly Oswald, a metaphysician and founder of the West Coast Institute of Mystic Arts in North Vancouver felt that the time was right to introduce these “other” faiths into Whistler’s spiritual community. Visitors to her store in Nesters can experience the “mystic arts” which include the intuitive arts, healing arts, personal growth, the art of science (sacred geometry, astrology), ancient ceremonies, respect and connection with the Earth, and prayer. The tools and practices of the ancient civilizations which have stood the test of time and still continue to exist today.

“My goal in opening the Oracle was to help people find a way of becoming whole, to help spread these teachings – to heal old wounds,” said Oswald. “We all need spirituality. It needs to come from love with a connection to a source, nature and a supportive community. You can follow a traditional doctrine and still explore other religions and philosophies. Ultimately, we are all interconnected and draw upon similar beliefs.”

In some ways, books like the *DaVinci Code*, *the Celestine Prophecy*, and movies like *What the bleep do we know?* and *Indigo* have taken mysticism and new age movements into the mainstream media. Wicca, a polytheistic religion that traces its roots back to pre-Christian paganism, is the fastest growing religion in North America. Oswald believes that Whistler is a very spiritual place and contains a wide realm of different faiths and worship services because it brings together people from all over the world.

Carolyn Hachey, a local writer and massage therapist believes there are other factors at work. She believes that Whistler’s Nordic Bluffs lie at the centre of North America’s most powerful intersection points or “ley lines.” Hachey turns to nature for her spiritual time and prefers to pray at the “Heart of the Dragon” atop the Nordic Bluffs. “People coming to Whistler are picking up these energy paths which will resonate with them when they need it most,” said Hachey. “I visit my special rock to show my appreciation to God.

Whistler is also home to the Jehovah Witnesses, the Victory Christian Centre and the Buddhist Sea to Sky Retreat Centre, founded in 1993 by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche and located near Daisy Lake Dam

Judging by the amount of spirituality centered in and around Whistler, it’s evident that residents and visitors alike continue to engage themselves with spiritual concerns. Many believe that a regular dose of religious faith helps provide strong social and family connections. It offers a sense of purpose in this ever-changing world. People are working towards a new understanding and experience of spirituality in their preferred way. A faith belief helps us recover peace of mind in this crazy world. Those who don’t necessarily

subscribe to a particular doctrine, experiment with different ones until they find the one that fits.

So whether you pray to Buddah, God, Allah or Ullr, in the end we are all here to ski and to enjoy Whistler's alluring lifestyle and breathtaking beauty. We hope that you will take some time this week to honour your own form of spirituality and appreciate all that Whistler has to offer.

More information on these religious groups can be found at:

www.churchonthemountain.ca

www.whistlerchurch.ca

www.whistlermillenniumpl.com

www.siddharthasintent.org

www.theoracle.ca

www.2InspirePromotions.com/carolynhachey.htm