Benvoulin Church- SOS, 2279 Benvoulin Road

Statement of Significance

This was the first Presbyterian Church south of Vernon. Construction coincided with the survey of the the townsite at Benvoulin. It is associated with the village phase of Kelowna's development.

Place Description

The historic place is the Benvoulin Church, built in 1892 as a wood Gothic Revival church with a prominent belltower, and located at 2279 Benvoulin Road, in Kelowna's South Pandosy neighbourhood.

Heritage Value

Benvoulin Church has heritage value as the first Presbyterian church between Vernon and the U.S. border and the first Protestant church in the Central Okanagan; for the locally prominent people associated with its construction; for its distinctive architecture and landmark status; as the last significant vestige of the failed Benvoulin townsite; and for the value placed on it by Kelowna residents in restoring it as a gathering place for the community.

The church was built in 1892 by H.W. Raymer, then newly arrived in the area, who went on to build many important buildings in Kelowna. Lumber came from the sawmill of notable pioneer Eli Lequime. The lot was donated by real estate promoter George Grant MacKay, who had been involved in the development of Vernon. Building the church was part of MacKay's scheme to develop his Benvoulin townsite, laid out in 1891. MacKay was promoting Benvoulin as a station stop along the projected Vernon & Okanagan Railway, which was intended to build to the U.S. border. He died in late 1892, eliminating his driving force, and the railway was never built (rails reached Kelowna only in 1925), so the high expectations for Benvoulin never materialized. Settlement focussed instead on Lequime's Kelowna townsite on the lakefront, close to steamer transport on Okanagan Lake, laid out in 1892. A few businesses hung on in Benvoulin until about 1900, but the area reverted to rural use.

When the church was built in 1892, hopes for prosperity were high. Prime movers for its establishment were the Governor General, Lord Aberdeen, and Lady Aberdeen, who purchased the neighbouring Guisachan Ranch from MacKay in 1890 and who provided liberal donations

to the church-building fund. Howard Dell made the plans, reputedly based on Crathie Kirk near the Aberdeens' home in Scotland, but looking like a pioneer Canadian church. The wood-framed and -sided building is representative of a Gothic Revival church - sometimes called 'Carpenter Gothic' - with its steep cross-gabled roofs, cruciform plan, prominent belltower, and pointed-arched windows. When the church was dedicated on 11 September 1892 by the Rev. Thomas Somerville, a visitor from Glasgow, the congregation had only three families, along with several unmarried men. Mrs. Robert Munson chose the name 'Bethel' for the church.

The church has value for the various communities it served for seven decades. While the expectations of Benvoulin were not fulfilled, Bethel Presbyterian Church served Presbyterians scattered through the whole Central Okanagan until the first Knox Presbyterian Church was built in Kelowna in 1898. Methodists held services here until they had their own building. In 1925 the congregation voted unanimously to enter the newly-formed United Church of Canada, becoming Bethel United Church (and Benvoulin United Church c.1934). In 1953, with the bell-tower leaning precariously, its top portion was removed and the tower was given the truncated appearance familiar to older residents of the area. Four years later, Reid Hall, honouring Alexander Reid, a mainstay of the church from his arrival in Benvoulin in 1903 until his death in 1953, was built to house Sunday School and meetings. The gradually shrinking congregation and easy automobile access to other churches made the church unviable, and it closed in 1964.

Benvoulin church has further value for its survival and conservation, evidence of the value placed on it by the community. After it stopped religious services, it was used as a youth centre and coffeehouse. In 1982 the Central Okanagan Heritage Society was formed, with the restoration of the church its first project. The restored building opened in 1986, with the tower rebuilt to its original appearance. In 2000 Reid Hall was replaced with a larger hall. The Benvoulin Church now serves as a community facility for public, family, and cultural events, and is a popular site for weddings, meetings, concerts, and exhibits.

Character Defining Elements
- A dominant landmark, marked by the tall belltower, with no adjacent buildings on this side of the road
- Very good representative example of a wood-frame Gothic Revival church, seen in features such as the pointed-arched windows on four sides and the steeply-pitched cross-gabled roof
- The cruciform plan
- Original beveled horizontal wood siding, with vertical boards at the top
- Details of belltower, including the segmental arches and pointed-arched railing in the opening at the top, the pointed-arched louvred openings, and the ornamental shingles near the bottom
- The entry through the base of the tower