

The Martha's Vineyard Times

Historic and Fragile: Aquinnah's 150-year-old Church

By Dan Cabot

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The oldest continuously operating Native American protestant congregation in the country struggles to save its 150-year-old church.

The little white church - Community Baptist Church - is tucked away, about a quarter of a mile from State Road behind the Aquinnah town library. The chapel is smaller than the living rooms in some summer homes on the Vineyard, but it manages to convey the well-kept, welcoming feel of larger churches.

The pews, nine rows of them with a center aisle, are well worn but remain serviceable, like the well-thumbed old hymnals and Bibles in the racks. The 19th century lamps, once kerosene, are now electrified. The organ sounds fine when Kathryn Stewart plays the old familiar hymns. The church serves an ethnically diverse congregation of approximately 25, more than half of whom are Wampanoag.

Eight years ago the congregation raised money and saved the handsome spire, which was threatening to fall. However, its pastor, the Rev. Roger Spinney, explains the roof structure is failing and will need to be replaced before it collapses. Moisture collects and is rotting the rafters and the plates they rest on - he points to the rust spots on the tin ceiling next to the hanging center lamp. The roof was never properly ventilated, he says, which is the root of the problem, and the roof repairs will include a louvered vent.

At one point the historic church turned to a modern method to ease its financial problems. In 2005, church leaders agreed to let Cingular Wireless, now AT&T, conceal an antennae inside a 48-high fiberglass replacement steeple in exchange for payments of approximately \$1,500 per month. Aquinnah officials objected to the antenna and Cingular filed two lawsuits but later backed off.

The church building is worth saving, not just because of its almost 150 years of Aquinnah history, and not just because it is a picturesque little chapel with a beautiful pressed-tin ceiling. It is worth saving because the congregation it serves includes the oldest continuously operating Native American protestant congregation in the country, the descendents of the first Christian Native Americans in North America.

The building

The first Christian meeting house in Aquinnah was built on Old South Road in 1698, according to "Historical Sketch of the Community Baptist Church of Gay Head," written by Howard Clarkson Whitcomb. "Only cellar holes and ancient foundations now remain - not a single structure on this old road," he writes.



From "Historical Sketch of the Community Baptist Church Gay Head, Massachusetts", shows congregants assembled for a service in 1953.

Photos courtesy of Martha's Vineyard Museum

According to church member and Wampanoag historian June Manning, in 1859 the present church replaced a building, possibly a former school house, which was moved from Old South Road, and that later burned to the ground. Some of the scorched timbers were salvaged from the fire and used in the replacement church.

It's estimated the critical repair projects will cost about \$12,000, but Ms. Manning thinks it may be more, because the parsonage also needs work. The parsonage, rented as affordable housing, is the church's main source of revenue.

Attendance at the Gay Head Baptist Church is down in recent years, but the little congregation, Wampanoag and non-Wampanoag, does its best. Two weeks ago they held a dance party. Mr. Spinney, who is also pastor of the Vineyard Haven Baptist Church, tended the barbecue, a band came from off-Island, and church members performed. Everyone, it is reported, had a grand time and the event raised over \$2,400.

History

In his 2005 book, "Faith and Boundaries," historian David Silverman notes that although contacts elsewhere between English settlers and native peoples often led to brutal extermination of the Indians or to the gradual disintegration of their communities, that did not happen on Martha's Vineyard, where "Natives and newcomers were linked by economic interdependence, growing political ties, and . . . exchanges of material culture, ritual behavior, and . . . beliefs."



From the archives of the Martha's Vineyard Museum, an historical photo of the Community Baptist Church building built on the site in 1859.

His book chronicles how the Aquinnah Wampanoag community succeeded in holding on to its culture when so many others have failed.

In the beginning, there was no "interdependence" or "linking" of any kind. The earliest contacts between the Wampanoags of Martha's Vineyard and the English colonists of the New World were nasty and treacherous on both sides. By intelligent negotiation and selective combative tactics, the Wampanoags were for many years successful in defending their Island from English incursions, and Martha's Vineyard, which the Wampanoags called Noepe, remained almost English-free until the 1640s.

For that reason, the Noepe Wampanoags had escaped early plagues of European diseases in 1616, 1618, and 1633, which wiped out as much as 75 percent of the native populations of mainland Indians, including mainland Wampanoags.

Thomas Mayhew Sr. was able to acquire English title to the Vineyard and Nantucket in 1642 in large part because the Noepe Wampanoags had been so hostile that few Englishmen wanted to risk settling on Martha's Vineyard. Nevertheless, Governor Mayhew came to his new estate to negotiate for the Indian rights, and a sachem named Tawanquatuck was willing to listen. Against the wishes of many of his people, Tawanquatuck sold Mayhew land for a settlement in what is now Edgartown.

His son, Thomas Mayhew Jr., was the first minister to Christianize any of the indigenous peoples of New England, beginning in 1643, when he was 22. The Wampanoag Hiacoomes was the young Mayhew's first convert and translator, and his Wampanoag language teacher.

Eventually the Bible was translated into Wampanoag, and services were conducted in that language. The "praying Indians" of Martha's Vineyard, as they came to be called, and their descendants, constitute the oldest continuously existing community of Christian Native Americans.

Although the younger Mayhew was lost at sea in 1657, his father continued his ministry. In 1663, according to Charles Bank's "History of Martha's Vineyard," the elder Mayhew succeeded in converting Sachem Metaark of Aquinnah, who then became a missionary to his people.

The Mayhews were Congregationalists, and originally, so were their Wampanoag converts. But sometime around 1693, the Aquinnah congregation became a Baptist congregation, and it remains so today. Mr. Silverman suggests that the reason for the schism may have been political rather than religious.

The English were pressuring the Aquinnah congregation to replace their deceased Wampanoag pastor with Experience Mayhew, grandson of Thomas Mayhew Jr., but the Aquinnah church wanted another Wampanoag pastor. Even though many Wampanoags could understand, read, and write the English language, church was "the one place where the people gathered together to hear the people's own language as a sacred language and where Wampanoags held positions of respect." Not willing to have an Englishman, even a Mayhew, for their pastor, they joined a different sect. Now, 315 years later, the Aquinnah Baptist church is the oldest continuously operating Native American protestant congregation in the country.

Identity

In "Faith and Boundaries," Mr. Silverman points out that Christianity did not usually work out well for the cultures of the Native Americans who converted to it. Conversion often turned out to be only a delaying tactic to stave off the collapse of the Native American community. However, Mr. Silverman notes that on Martha's Vineyard: "Wampanoag communities on Chappaquiddick, Christiantown, and especially Aquinnah managed to survive as distinct geographical, social, and cultural units into the nineteenth century and beyond."

Ms. Manning explains, "From the beginning, in Aquinnah the church and the tribal culture were kept completely separate." There was no overlap between Wampanoag culture and Christianity, so the church did not assimilate or replace the native culture, and the native culture did not try to adapt its own stories to fit Christian narratives. That distinction is still true today. For contemporary Wampanoags, the church and its life are one thing, and the tribe and its life are another. A person can live comfortably in both.

And that is something worth saving.

Donations can be sent to Community Baptist Church of Gay Head, P.O. Box 151, Aquinnah, MA 02535 or contact 508-693-1539.

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