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Old Kildonan Church rich in history

By: Mark Halsall

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A group known as the Friends of Historic Kildonan Church is working hard to breath new life into one of Manitoba's oldest and most historically significant buildings.

The church, tucked away among the timeworn tombstones in the Kildonan Presbyterian Cemetery just north of Main Street and Chief Peguis Trail, was completed by the Selkirk Settlers in 1854.

"This was the centre of the social, cultural and religious life of that original settler community," says John Whiteway, a member of the Friends of Historic Kildonan Church. "It was at the heart of that."

It also played a part in the 1869-70 Red River Rebellion as the site where Norbert Parisien, an alleged spy for Louis Riel, was held captive.

It was during his escape from Kildonan Church that Parisien shot and killed Hugh John Sutherland — one of the few casualties in the rebellion. Parisien also died, from injuries he sustained when he was recaptured.

The first Presbyterian Church built in Western Canada, it's also the oldest stone church still standing in Winnipeg.

Both the city and the province recognize the church as an important heritage site, but it's rarely used today (it's last regular church service was held in 1988) and is in need of major renovations.

June Thompson, chairperson of Friends of Historic Kildonan Church, says the group was formed in the spring of 2011, following meetings to assess community interest in restoring the church.

Since then, it has received a \$15,000 grant from the Winnipeg Foundation for a feasibility study as well as a provincial grant. The provincial historic resources branch is also completing a technical study of the building.

The Friends will outline their conservation efforts at a public meeting slated for 2 p.m. on Sat., Sept. 8 at the church, located at 201 John Black Ave.

Wins Bridgman, director of the architectural firm undertaking the feasibility study, will talk about the church's historical significance as well as restoration methods and the feasibility of future uses.

Thompson says the current Lord Selkirk — a direct descendent of the original Lord Selkirk of Scotland who was instrumental in founding Red River Colony in the early 1800s — will also be there as part of the bicentennial celebrations marking the arrival of the Selkirk settlers.

She adds that a capital campaign will begin in earnest once the initial studies are completed and a direction has been set for restoration and the uses best suited for the building.

According to Thompson, one of those uses could be providing historical education for school students.

"The building has to be able to sustain itself after it's restored," she says. "We want it be a very vibrant building, with people of all ages in here."

Getting the church to that stage won't be cheap. The cost of stabilizing the structure — which involves basic repairs to the roof, walls and windows to make it waterproof — has been pegged at \$50,000.

Thompson and Whiteway say depending on the extent of the work, the final bill for restoration work could top \$1 million.

Whiteway acknowledges a great deal needs to be done, but contends the cost could have been a lot higher if the church hadn't been built so well in the first place.

He says a couple of restoration experts for the federal government who were invited to give the building a once-over, came away impressed with how well it has held up structurally.

"The actual bones of the church are apparently very solid," Whiteway explains. "I remember them saying you could put a tank on top of the roof of this building, and it wouldn't collapse. They were amazed."

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