

Big Moose Community Chapel



Profile - 2021

Who We Are

The Big Moose Community Chapel is an independent, non-denominational Christian church, founded and sustained by its local community. It draws its congregation from permanent and summer residents of Big Moose Lake and the surrounding area, as well as guests of local hotels and other visitors to the region. The Chapel has no formal membership, but is strongly supported by a dedicated group of congregants, some from families that have been involved since the church was first established, and others who have become involved much more recently.

Many of those who regularly participate in the life of the Chapel attend other churches when they are not in the Big Moose area. Those responding to a recent survey of the congregation reported the following church affiliations in the “off season”: Episcopal – 17%, Catholic – 15%, Methodist – 15%, Presbyterian – 15%, United Church of Christ/Congregational – 9%, Lutheran – 5%, Community Christian – 5%, Protestant (unspecified) – 4%, Baptist – 2%, Unitarian-Universalist – 2%, Non-denominational – 1%, None – 13%. A 1997 survey showed a different distribution but a similar breadth in religious affiliations. We are proud that people with different faith backgrounds, as well as those with no other church affiliation, are comfortable joining worship in our Chapel. We strive to make it a welcoming place for all.

Like most congregations today, our attendance skews towards people who are older, but we continue to have some younger families who attend, and enough children to maintain an active Sunday school program in the summer months.

Our Mission

Big Moose Community Chapel (Independent) is an institution dedicated to the common worship of God whom we meet in Jesus Christ, and to the service of humanity. It is pledged to freedom of thought and speech, to fellowship with all persons of whatever sect, class, nation, or race, to the building of character, to the undergirding of the home, and the establishment of a righteous social order. It has a free pulpit where those who preach are invited to declare the word of God as they discern it.

These words are the first Article in our By-Laws. They still offer a good description of the church that we strive to become. In practice, we seek to build on our long tradition of worship, fellowship, and family within our local community, and to nurture the gifts of those who come through our doors and use them to the glory of God. We endeavor to accept each other as we are, to show Christian love in our dealings with all persons, and to serve as a faith-oriented center of community life in our special corner of the Adirondacks.



Worship

The Chapel's main summer worship season is made up of ten Sundays beginning around July 1 and ending on Labor Day Weekend. Traditionally, we have had two services during the main season at 9:30 and 11:00 a.m., with a half hour for fellowship between the services. Single 10:00 a.m. services have been offered on two Sundays in June prior to the regular Summer season and through the month of September. In early August the Chapel holds a special Communion service, and a Memorial Sunday service to remember community members who have passed during the previous twelve months.

All worship services open with this traditional affirmation, our Bond of Union and Statement of Allegiance:

"We joyously covenant together to worship Almighty God, and to live as His children in every expression and relation of life. We earnestly call upon Him to help us to be pure minded and unselfish in personal matters, to make our family life happy in love, to be just, honest and merciful in professional, business and social affairs, to be loving and forgiving in church life and equally ready to share each other's joy or care.

"This chapel belongs to the Church Universal, serves a living Lord, and seeks to gather all men, women and children into one family to live together in freedom and discipline and justice, in faith and hope and love - unto this Church and its Lord and unto all its members, known and unknown, throughout the world, we pledge the allegiance of our hearts and hands."

In a recent congregational survey, many respondents affirmed a strong link between these words and their experience of worship in the Chapel.

The survey also told us that most congregants consider music a key element of our worship program. In addition to hymn singing, the Chapel has a choir that is open to anyone who wants to join on a given Sunday. The choir rehearses on Sunday morning before the first service. Numbers range from six or eight singers in September to as many as twenty on some Sundays during the summer season. The Chapel has not had a regular music director for the last few years, but has been fortunate to be able to hire skilled organists to plan music and direct the choir for all services. Guest soloists and musicians frequently enrich the Sunday music program.

The Chapel is available for baptisms, memorial services and weddings. Baptisms usually take place as part of a Sunday worship service. The Chapel hosts three or four memorial services in a typical year, and between eight and fifteen weddings. The regular pastor may be asked to officiate at weddings and memorials, but families are free to ask other ordained ministers to preside.

Sunday school is offered during the first service throughout the regular summer season.

The Chapel is closed at the end of September, but re-opens for an afternoon Christmas service on the third or fourth Sunday in December. This service is usually well-attended by people from the local area.

In 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, no services or other activities were held in the Chapel. On-line worship services were offered for each Sunday in the regular summer season.



Other Chapel Activities

The Chapel holds a popular Balsam Bee where balsam pillows are made in a traditional manner and sold at the Chapel's annual Bazaar. The Bazaar is a major fund-raising event, with about a dozen booths selling food, handicrafts, Chapel memorabilia and other items, along with a silent auction and children's crafts and games. Several hundred people from all over the area attend the one-day event.

The Chapel also sponsors evening concerts, study groups, and a weekly historical lecture series in collaboration with a local historical society. The Chapel is open for guided tours on Tuesday afternoons or by appointment, and is a magnet for visitors interested in its history and architecture.

Membership and Attendance

There is no formal membership roll for the Chapel, though there are criteria for voting in the annual meeting (regular attendance and support for the Chapel's activities, financial and otherwise). The Chapel maintains a list of approximately 400 people who have asked to receive newsletters and other mailings. Our web site has a form to permit anyone to be added to our e-mail list. That list numbers 109 at this time.

Attendance for the 9:30 service during the regular summer season has been in the 125 to 175 range in recent years. Attendance at the second service has been as low as 10 people, rarely exceeding 30. Attendance at services in June is in the area of 25, and between 30 and 40 in September. The Christmas service has usually drawn between 100 and 200 people. Online worship views in 2020 ranged from 40 to 100, with the larger number at the beginning of the season.

Attendance has trended slightly downward in recent years, but there has not been any sharp decline noted. About half the congregation is made up of full-time summer or year-round residents, with the balance made up of their guests and regular or occasional summer visitors.

Governance

An annual meeting of qualified members of the congregation is held at the end of August. The annual meeting calls the regular minister for the coming summer season and selects a slate of Trustees, as well as auditors and a Clerk who serves as Secretary to the Board of Trustees. Trustees, who number 21, serve overlapping three-year terms. The Trustees elect their own officers, who are a President, Vice President, Treasurer and Assistant Treasurer. A concise set of by-laws vests authority for managing the affairs of the Chapel in the Board of Trustees. The Trustees usually meet three times a year, before, during, and after the regular summer season. They also designate an Executive Committee which may act on their behalf on matters of great urgency, particularly during the off-season when organizing meetings represents more of a challenge. E-mail votes by the full Board of Trustees are also taken on important policy issues that may come up during the off-season.

The Chapel has no employees. The business of the Chapel is entirely managed through the voluntary efforts of active members of the congregation, who are organized into committees and given broad delegated authority from the Board of Trustees to make decisions within their areas of responsibility. Those responsibilities, as well as those of officers, are detailed in a handbook of standard operating procedures. The handbook is a living document, whose regular updating is left to those running the committees, except where important policy issues may be at play. In such situations, committee chairs put forward researched proposals to the Board of Trustees for their deliberation. At present, there are 27 committees, some of which have fairly broad responsibilities (e.g. Worship, Finance, Facilities), and some of which are also very active but devoted to particular activities (e.g. Bazaar, Music, Weddings).

The regular summer minister, guest ministers, organist/choir directors, and individuals who perform cleaning, repair, and landscaping tasks are all hired as contractors, rather than employees, with compensation set by a Personnel and Contracted Services committee in consultation with the Finance committee.

Financial Matters

The Chapel has an endowment fund created by individual gifts over many decades, as well as a fund to support music and arts created in the name of an earlier pastor and his wife. There is also a special fund supporting Memorial Woods, the columbarium and wooded area across the street where people may have their ashes inurned or scattered. The operating budget is drawn chiefly from half of the Sunday collection, an annual stewardship campaign, the fund-raising Bazaar, wedding fees and individual gifts. These funds may be supplemented as necessary by a draw on the Chapel's endowment earnings, limited by current policy to not over 4.5% of the principal in the fund. The Chapel may also use this draw to pay for planned upgrades and major repairs to the Chapel and the Manse (summer minister's residence). It has not been necessary to draw the full approved amount of funds from the endowment in several recent years.

The Chapel devotes 50% of funds collected during regular worship services and all donations collected at the Christmas service to charitable purposes. Organizations to be supported and donation amounts are set by an Outreach committee on an annual basis. Donations go almost entirely to social service agencies in the region.



History of the Congregation

Camp owners around Big Moose Lake gathered in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for prayer, song and sermon in boathouses, camps, hotels, the railroad station and schoolhouses. Local

citizens and those who vacationed at Big Moose organized themselves to erect a chapel on the western end of Big Moose lake in 1928. A prominent local builder was hired to carry out the project, which he did using stone from a local quarry and beams, lumber and paneling taken almost entirely from the surrounding forest. Ground was broken in 1928, and the Chapel was completed in July, 1930. On the eve of the first service, the building was substantially damaged by fire. The community rallied and raised enough funds to permit complete reconstruction in time for the Chapel to open for services in the summer of 1931. Worship has continued in each of the ensuing 90 years without interruption.

The Chapel has drawn guest ministers and some who served for longer periods from various Protestant denominations and clerical backgrounds. Several were regular preachers for a number of years. Our last regular summer minister served for two decades, and our current minister has been with us for more than twenty years.



Location and Surroundings

Big Moose Chapel is located on the shore of Big Moose Lake, in the west-central region of the Adirondack Park. The Chapel draws congregants from those who have seasonal and permanent homes in the immediate vicinity of Big Moose, as well as from summer residents of other settled lakes in the region and the villages of Old Forge, Inlet, and Eagle Bay. While the shores of many of the smaller and all of the larger lakes in the region are surrounded by seasonal homes, most of the rest of the land area in the region is designated forever wild forest. The Big Moose area offers some of the best hiking, camping and snowmobiling opportunities in the eastern United States.

Basic shopping needs can be met in Inlet, eight miles away, and Old Forge, about fifteen miles from Big Moose Lake. Old Forge has a community health clinic with doctors and basic emergency care available. Major medical problems are usually dealt with in Utica, about fifty miles to the south of Old Forge.



Chapel Architecture

The Chapel's designer and builder, Earl Covey, constructed many camps and a hotel on nearby Twitchell Lake. He later moved his operations to Big Moose, where he resided and built another hotel, along with many other fine camps. Although self-taught in the building trades, his skills as a stonemason and craftsman in wood had reached a very high level by the time he undertook the Chapel project.

The building's exterior walls, with a bell tower rising above a gabled front, are constructed of locally quarried granite blocks. Buttresses support the walls and corners of the L-shaped structure, which has a copper roof that was installed in the late 1990s.

The Chapel's interior walls are wide yellow birch boards with contrasting cherry battens that, along with the clear glass windows, radiate a warm amber glow. In the peaked end walls, a board and batten sunburst design gives a visual focus upward into the ceiling. Arches shaped from large pines support stringers running from front to back with identical tapered log rafters rising and meeting at the peak. All the wood in the Chapel was harvested from the surrounding forest. Seating was originally folding chairs. These were eventually replaced by pews modeled from those in Riverside Church in New York.

A sandstone fireplace highlights the back wall of the Nave, adding elegance to the room and warmth on cool mornings. Decorative sconces and other ironwork were crafted by Walter Colpitts, a congregation member who did metal working as an avocation. The lectern and altar table were made by one of the Chapel's early preachers, Dr. Percy Wightman.

The Chapel has a 50 rank electronic Allen organ installed in 1996 to accompany the choir and hymns. We have recently installed a modern sound and video system which can both record and broadcast services and other events with an installed internet connection.

The Chapel is on the National Register of Historic Places, and is recognized as one of the jewels of Adirondack architecture.



The Manse

Fern Spring Camp on the South Shore Road of Big Moose Lake was acquired in 1942 as residence for the Chapel's summer ministers. Nestled beneath huge cedars and white pines, the two story building with covered porches overlooks a panoramic view of the lake.

An unusual panel construction technique puts this impressive summer home on regional architectural tours from time to time. The camp's large living room and dining area focuses on a massive fireplace built of granite blocks with a chimney of similar stonework extending into the high cathedral ceiling. Off one end of the living room is a den with a view of the lake. At the opposite end is a fully-equipped kitchen with knotty pine cabinets. There is a laundry room off the kitchen's back porch with a washer and dryer. The master bedroom plus two additional bedrooms and a bathroom are on the first floor. The second story has three bedrooms and a bathroom. The front hallway leads to a second floor covered porch.

The camp has a small sand beach, a boathouse, and a large floating dock with a beautiful view north across Big Moose lake. There is a woodshed where a generator for backup power is located, and a two-car garage. The residence has phone service and fairly high-speed internet.

