

Church life in Whistler

Skiing and Sunday services are not often lumped together but faith communities in Whistler are bringing church to the mountain through everything from slope side bible studies to Sunday gatherings.

For many Whistler residents, involvement in a faith community is as much a part of life as sitting on a chairlift. From Whistler's humble beginnings to its evolution into a world-class resort, churches have played a role.

In Whistler, there are many ways to indulge whether it's on the slopes or in the spas. But for the people who've chosen to make Whistler home, church provides much needed balance.

Whistler's first church stemmed from the childhood memories of Norwegian-born Franz Wilhelmsen, the president of Garibaldi Lifts Ltd. and one of the founders of the ski resort. His 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 Church.

The small structure 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. After being moved twice from its original location next to the original gondola in Creekside, the chapel held its last service on Easter Sunday in 2000, before being dismantled.

Today, Whistler is home to four different churches, Church on the Mountain, the Whistler Community Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the Whistler United Church. Congregations range anywhere from 30 to over one hundred members, depending on the weather and the season.

These places of worship are an integral part of mountain life as residents get married, raise families and live life in the mountains. For Church on the Mountain Pastor Chad Chomlack, leading a faith community is about striving to integrate faith with life in mountains.

"We emphasize living out your faith while playing and working. It's about expressing your faith in a tangible way," Chomlack said.

With the backdrop of the Coast Mountains, Chomlack said ministry in the mountains often touches a chord with people.

"When people go away on holidays, they have time to think and reflect," he said. "Skiing is a very meditative act. People become more conscious of their presence in the world and God in their lives."

In addition to visitors, Whistler churches minister to those working in the tourism industry. Chomlack said church is an opportunity for both groups to come together.

