

49. Sarrail

Saints Peter and Paul Ukrainian Orthodox Church

Saints Peter and Paul Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Sarrail is the oldest Orthodox congregation in the Lac La Biche-Boyle region. It was established shortly after Ukrainian settlers arrived in the late 1920s. Fred Holowenko, a recent immigrant from Ukraine, played a key role in rallying the community behind the Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church of Canada (UGOCC), at a time when Protestant missionary efforts were already underway in the settlement.

Fr. Ewen Olendy, originally ordained by a Russian Orthodox bishop in 1927 but later accepted into the UGOCC in 1928, began organizing and serving the Orthodox faithful in Sarrail in 1929. That year, William Nykolyn donated two acres of land for a church, and the community obtained a government permit to harvest timber. Fred Pysyk was elected the first president of the congregation, with John Sambirsky as secretary-treasurer. In the meantime, services were held in local homes while volunteers harvested and milled trees at Joseph Hewko's sawmill, producing 30,000 feet of board lumber.

Establishing the Cemetery and Church Construction

While the church site was secured, plans for a cemetery faced a challenge. William Nykolyn's wife was uncomfortable with a burial ground near their home, prompting the congregation to seek an alternate location. On July 2, 1932, the UGOCC Consistory formally requested the Province of Alberta to designate a two-acre parcel at NE 29-66-18 W4 for a cemetery. The Consistory also encouraged the Sarrail faithful to officially incorporate as part of the UGOCC.



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Construction efforts faced another setback when the earmarked lumber was instead offered for sale, likely due to delays. Fr. Olendy intervened and secured the material on the condition that construction begin by July 1932, despite a lack of funds. Meanwhile, Fr. Olendy's standing with the UGOCC Consistory was uncertain, as he had been suspended two years prior. He insisted that the Sarrail church "belonged to him" and sought to dictate which priests could serve it. However, church authorities in Winnipeg rejected his claim, asserting that the congregation, not an individual priest, determined its religious leadership.

Despite these disputes, a pivotal meeting took place on July 17, 1932, with Fr. Olendy present. A week earlier, Edmonton lawyer P.J. Lazarowich, representing the Ukrainian Self-Reliance League, had attended a community picnic to prepare the necessary legal documents. At the meeting, 23 people formally established the congregation of Saints Peter and Paul and applied for admission into the UGOCC. Fr. Olendy later notarized this declaration in Edmonton on August 22.

Construction of the church proceeded under the supervision of Bill Gerela and Joseph Hewko. The volunteers built a spacious rectangular structure featuring a large dome over the entryway, providing a functional place of worship whenever priests visited from Edmonton, Smoky Lake, or other districts. During this period, reaching the church was challenging, requiring travel by foot, wagon, or sleigh from the nearest railway station, 17 miles away.

Challenges and Growth

The 1930s were difficult years for the Sarrail congregation. Along with the hardships of the Great Depression, membership declined as some members joined the Catholic Church or lost interest, having initially preferred to build

a community hall rather than a church. By 1939, when Fr. Semen Sawchuk visited the parish with writer Ivan Danylchuk, he recorded that the congregation had only seven official members. However, nearly 50 people attended the Divine Liturgy he celebrated on August 6, and he baptized 11 children.

Fr. Sawchuk's notes provide a revealing snapshot of the congregation's struggles. Many attendees displayed a lack of religious awareness—some even walked out when a collection was announced, yielding just \$4.32, which was all he received for his expenses. Meanwhile, Seventh-Day Adventists were gaining followers in the community, even among previously staunch Orthodox families. Despite these challenges, Fr. Sawchuk noted that the congregation still held a deep appreciation for Fr. Olendy, who had organized the community before leaving the UGOCC in 1934.

Yet the Sarrail faithful persisted. In 1943, eight girls and 25 boys were baptized at Saints Peter and Paul, many during the annual Feast Day liturgy on July 12, which attracted worshippers from across the district. By 1944, the congregation had secured the resources to complete the church's interior, contracting George Fleming for finishing work, painting, and installing a chimney. Later, an iconostasis was installed for \$1,500, featuring large icons that cost an additional \$500, reflecting the growing prosperity of local farmers.

Stabilization and Decline

In 1950, the appointment of a resident priest for north-central Alberta was a turning point, granting Saints Peter and Paul more regular access to religious services. In 1951, the congregation contributed \$140 toward furnishing a manse in Boyle. The following year, when Fr. Zubrytsky was assigned to the parish, the residence was

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relocated to Lac La Biche, strengthening the congregation's ties to the region.

By 1959, Sarrail had 28 families in its congregation, though only 12 were paid members, and only six were considered truly active. Despite this, 14 Divine Liturgies were celebrated at the church that year. By 1962, paid membership had dwindled to just five, while sympathizers increased to 20, and services rose to 15 annually. However, deaths and rural depopulation increasingly strained the congregation's ability to meet financial obligations.

By 1964, membership had slightly recovered to 11, even as one member relocated to Boyle. That year, 12 services were held, but the congregation faced an \$800 budget shortfall. Reports from the time indicate that firewood was still being used to heat the church.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Saints Peter and Paul congregation remained an active part of the Lac La Biche parish district despite ongoing hardships. In 1993, they reported 14 members (four individuals and ten families), which grew to 16 the following year.

In the summer of 2000, to commemorate the Second Millennium of Christianity, a special service was held at the church, drawing 175 worshipers. The event included a celebratory banquet and performances by Ukrainian dancers, a church choir, and tsymbaly players. A highlight of the gathering was the presentation of *Sviatkuvannia 2000—A Celebration of Our Faith*, a 142-page hardcover book chronicling the congregation's history.



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Priests

E. Olendy (1928–1932)
H. Wasyliv
S. Sawchuk
H. Hrycyna
M. Fyk (1940–1942)
W. Melnychuk
W. Seneshen (1950–1955)
H. Wasyliv (1951)
P. Zubrytsky (1952–1956)
A. Teterenko (1956–1957)
M. Domaradz (2000–present)

Cemetery

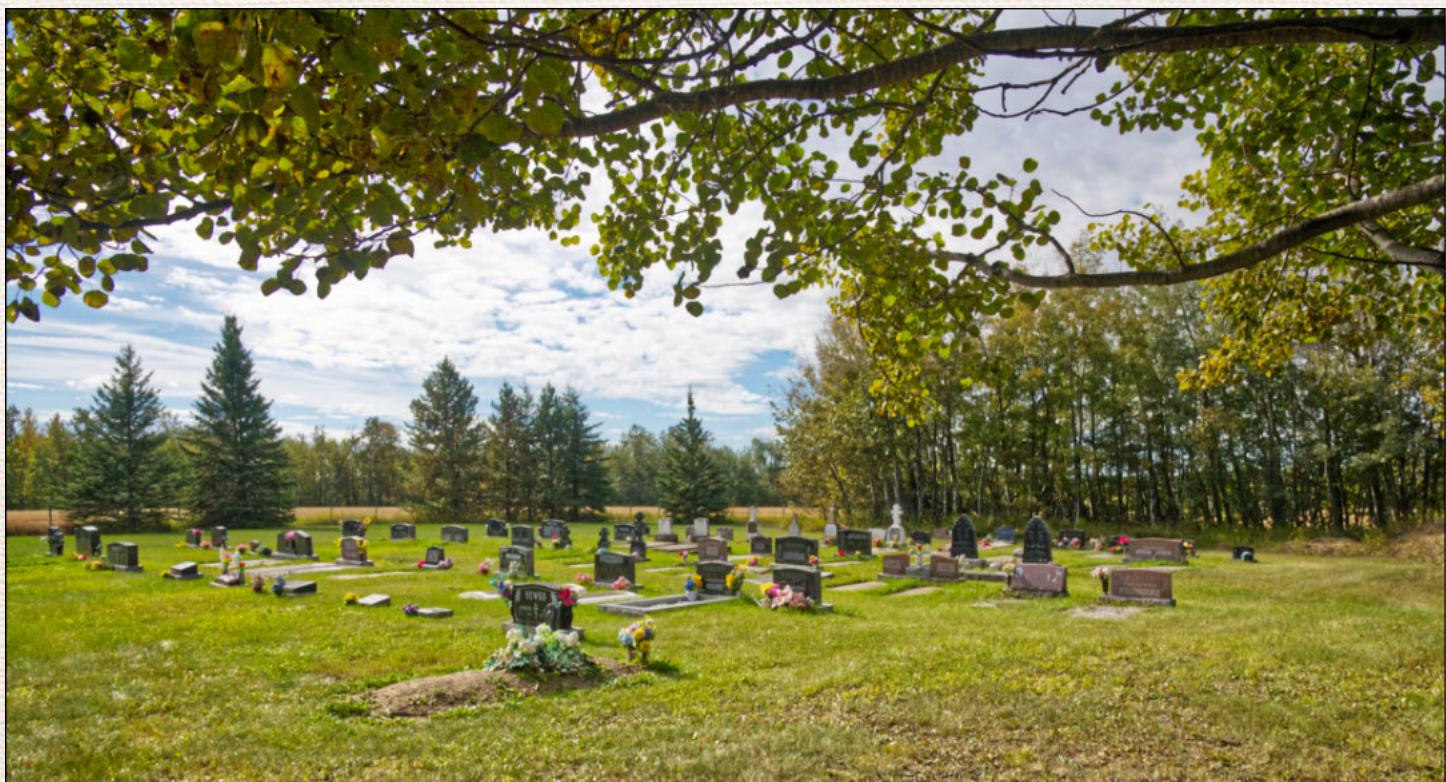
Located next to the church at NE 29-66-18 W4. The first burial was Joseph Hewko in July 1934, followed by Katherine Sawchuk in 1940. Cemetery coordinates: 54.753469, -112.703379

Location and Feast Day

Situated 35 miles (56 km) northeast of Boyle and south of Grassland. GPS Coordinates: 54.753912, -112.703135 Their Feast Day is July 12.

Founding Members

M. Bilon	F. Holowenko
J. Budney	M. Lazarchuk
M. & A. Chamczuk	W. & J. Nykolyn
W. Gerela	J. Pusiarski
Jacob & A. Hewko	F. & M. Pysyk
Joseph Hewko	J. & P. Sambirsky
N. & D. Hewko	A. Sawchuk
S. Hewko	



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