

# THE SANDISFIELD TIMES

*Tribunus*



*Plebis*

RELIABLE. REGULAR. RELEVANT.

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## Have You Noticed?

### RIGHT HERE IN RIVER CITY

By Tom Christopher

Have you noticed the Farmington River running drier this summer? The reservoirs seem full – and many are – but the rivers feeding them have been reduced to trickles.

And have you, like me, been struggling to keep your garden adequately irrigated?

I learned recently that this news should come as no surprise.

I had hoped that my Sandisfield landscape would somehow prove immune to the worst of the climate upsets that have been plaguing much of the rest of the United States. Surely my New England hilltop wasn't going to suffer the same fate as Texas or Oklahoma.

A couple of weeks ago, however, I belatedly came across an article, published in June of 2020 in the online journal Inside Climate News, which revealed that far from being immune to this global warming trend, Sandisfield is actually in the cross-hairs. Citing a peer-reviewed study published in the scientific journal PLOS One, the author of the Inside Climate News article reported that in fact the northeastern United States has proven the fastest warming region in the lower 48.

A little digging found this conclusion duplicated in another report on the U.S. Geological Survey website. Apparently, a survey of weather records from the last 50 years has found that we in the Northeast have already passed the 2 degrees Celsius

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## New Boston Church Enjoying Revival

### POPULAR PASTOR FILLING THE PEWS

By Ron Bernard

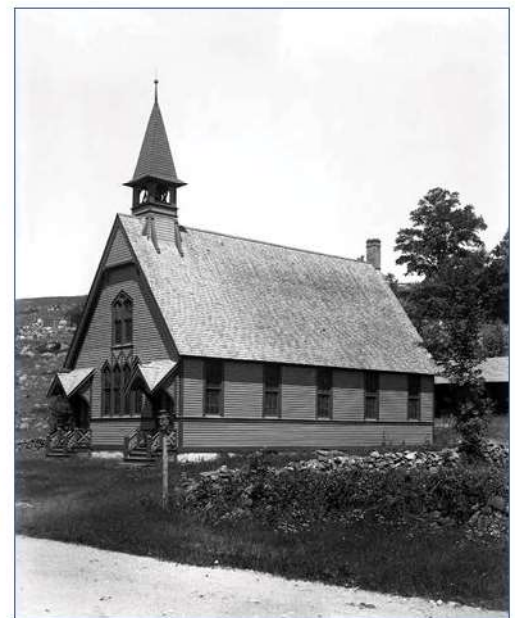
"Survival of New Boston church may require a timely miracle," was the headline of a Berkshire Eagle feature story on November 22, 1982.

Forty years ago, prospects for the charming "Little Brown Church," as it has always been known, were not good. Except for a brief resurgence of interest and volunteer support in 1979 when the building celebrated its centennial, attendance at services had been trending down for decades, especially from the early-1970s when the congregation numbered 26.

Charles Knight, a young, earnest but unordained minister, was hired at that time. He instituted certain unpopular policies and some church members were put off by his style of preaching. Regular attendance fell to six. Meanwhile, he had to deal with serious problems with the building including a flooded basement, bum furnace, bad roof, obsolete wiring, and more. Seemingly, the situation could not get worse.

But it did.

About a year later, The Eagle reported that attendance was now only four. No new members were at the door. Shaky finances and the plagues of "bad luck" and structural problems continued. Discouraged and blaming himself, Mr. Knight



*The New Boston Church in the early-1900s. There are no trees in the pasture behind the church, but plenty of rocks.*

*DeMars image, courtesy Great Barrington Historical Society*

told the reporter, "We are almost broke." Soon after, he withdrew.

### KEEP ON KEEPING ON

The stalwart little congregation regrouped and somehow managed to keep going, and stabilized the building. The old parish hall in back, however, was beyond salvation and closed. Retired and other preachers from around the area filled in for holy days and some Sunday services.

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## New Boston Church Enjoying Revival

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Attendance remained low but steady. Turnouts at Easter and Christmas were respectable.

A long-time summer resident during that period told The Times, "I remember going to a service years ago. There was only a handful of people there, and they just left at the end. No one even said hello to me. I never went back."



Pastor Eric Kriebel with his wife, Jennifer, and son, Jacob, 4.  
Photos: Ron Bernard

Then, in 2017, prayers were answered. A mini-miracle (some might say) did arrive in the person of the Rev. Eric Kriebel. Only 36, he appeared and acted with the maturity and confidence of someone with decades of experience behind a pulpit in front of diverse congregations.

"I was called to this life's work, to help people," he said. "My great-grandfather was the founding pastor of a Congregational church in Pennsylvania in 1895. Faith and ministry have been at the core of my family's life. I preached my first sermon at fifteen and worked in youth ministry [migrant camps and homeless shelters] in Florida where we lived." In a subsequent email to the Times, he added, "I also taught history and Greek for a year at a private Christian school in Florida."

Rev. Kriebel came to Sandisfield with credentials. He is a graduate of Pensacola Christian College (B.A., Bible Studies; minor, history education, 2004) and holds a master's degree in Christian Education from New England Bible College (2007).

And experience. He has served in churches in New York State and Connecticut. "I served as Associate Pastor at a church in Manchester [Conn.] for five years," he said. "I'm here because I was inspired by pastor Toby Quirk's book about the challenges

– and great rewards – of small rural churches. I have found my pastoral home here at this special place." He lives with his wife, Jennifer and son, Jacob in Torrington, Conn., where he is employed by the U.S. Postal Service.

Attendance at services in New Boston began to increase almost as soon as he arrived.

Michael Gantt, a minister from Brattleboro, Vermont, who served in the New Boston Church as a student pastor in 1971, wrote an on-line article titled, "Planting the Seeds of Renewal" which described a re-visit to New Boston in 2018.

*After 48 years my path happened to cross with a young man who is currently providing pastoral care for the church. He invited me to come down and stand behind the very pulpit from which I preached almost one-half century ago. It was surreal.*

*For 144 years they have opened the doors to preach the gospel. Oh, they have struggled against the tide. The community has changed, the population has declined and finances have been a real and constant issue in keeping the doors open at the 'Little Brown Church.' But open they are, and I was blessed to hold my bride's hand as we walked into that beautiful sanctuary once again.*

*There was no big orchestra Sunday morning. Two older gentlemen and a wonderful lady led us in worship by guitar. It was simple. It was genuine. It was a sweet precious time. I was so powerfully moved by the simple eloquence of the moment. There was no pretense to make, no egos to stroke, no effort was made to impress. Just 25 or so glad voices willingly lifted up in worship.*

Four years later a reporter who is not in the habit of attending church was struck on several occasions with how very personal and connected Rev. Kriebel is with individual parishioners. He knows everybody's name and their family situations. His sermons are positive and not overbearing. He is charismatic and genuine.

You are likely to hear, "Mary's mother is in the hospital, let's pray for her recovery," "Bob's brother is recovering from surgery, let's give thanks for that." "(Somebody) has passed away, let's have a moment of silence to honor their life."

Following a recent Sunday service, most of the congregation gathered outside to greet, chat, and enjoy fellowship. Parishioners waited patiently for a turn to have a word with Pastor Eric. While waiting my own turn, I approached a few others to learn what drew them to this place that day. Each party responded in almost exactly the same way,



Congregation on a recent Sunday.

"... because of Eric! He is wonderful." No need to increase the size of the interview sample.

There is one more thing that needs mentioning. Eric told The Times, "I write to each of my parishioners once a month." These are personalized, hand-written notes. Imagine that.

Seating capacity in rows of original pews is about 85. Today average attendance is about 45 and increasing, which is one of the congregation's aims. This level is probably already near or above historical highs. Other goals include creating a presence on social media, especially Facebook, right away. "We are completely invisible," Eric said, "but we are working on it." Also envisioned are programs for children and expanded parking to accommodate growing attendance. "Eventually we might offer weekly services," he said. But there is a critical need for more volunteers to help with the property and the benefit dinners.

Church Moderator Sandy Morrison has held things together for about the past fifteen years. She is grateful to her band of committed volunteers especially the members of Sandisfield Fire Department and for use of their firehouse for functions.

Finances are a particular problem right now. "We rely heavily on proceeds from our semi-annual benefit dinners at the main firehouse," Sandy said. "But our income has dropped a lot over the last two years because we were restricted to outside drive-by pick-up instead of the popular big community gatherings we always had." These are going to resume. Mark your calendars for Saturday, September 17. Details to follow.

The congregation is facing the same expensive structural problems as 40 years ago. The furnace needs repair or replacement, ideally this year. The roof is approaching the end of its functional life and the basement (and structure) could benefit from a concrete floor. Exterior painting has to be addressed. It's a daunting list.

In fact, several more miracles may be required but there is good leadership and energy and momentum in New Boston. We might add that this

Cont'd on next page

“special place,” the last church in Sandisfield, an improbable survivor, is a big part of the heritage of our Town.

According to recent reports, people who have seen the church’s interior for the first time are stunned at its beauty and craftsmanship. That is worth a visit all alone. The hope is that the community comes together to save our lovely Little Brown Church and that it continues to thrive. 🍷

## THE LITTLE BROWN CHURCH

The New Boston Church is the most distinctive and iconic structure in New Boston village. It was built in Gothic Revival-style in 1879. The likely benefactor was Orlow Northway, a wealthy and trusted town leader and village resident. Northway headed an effort to bring a railroad line to Sandisfield in the early-1870s but the scheme failed, bankrupting many townspeople who had invested with him. Northway, a Sandisfield native son, was deeply remorseful.

Ransom Gladding, a master carpenter, and his brother Lewis, also a carpenter, built the Italianate-style house across the street from the church in 1876-78. We suppose that the brothers, who were otherwise employed by Northway, helped to construct the church.

A significant heritage asset, the building is in virtually original condition. It is a major “contributing element” in the New Boston Village National Register Historic District which received listing by the U.S. Department of the Interior in April.



*Early-1900s birds eye view of New Boston village taken from Tolland Mountain includes the Northway place (center) and the church and the Gladding house opposite (top left) on Sandisfield Road.*

*DeMars image courtesy Great Barrington Historical Society*

**SERVICES** are held generally twice per month on Sundays at 10:00 a.m. throughout the year. All are welcome. Venues are posted in The Times under Events. For more information, contact Pastor Eric Kriebel at ekriebel112781@gmail.com or at 860-940-4524.

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