

Two Churches End An Old Quarrel

Dixon-Area Residents Celebrate Pact

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DIXON — On a historic day for New Mexico's Presbyterian and Catholic churches, it was the type of moment everyone thought was a sign from above.

The best kind of sign.

With several hundred people crammed tightly together inside tiny Embudo Presbyterian Church, the Rev. Adam Ortega, of nearby St. Anthony Church, smiled as the rain pelted the roof and the thunder rattled some eardrums.

"We're here to celebrate what's happening, the union of communities," he told both Catholics and Presbyterians alike. "Pushing us to bring a reconciliation."

Those words had barely escaped his lips when a loud clap of thunder caught everyone's attention.

An omen? Hardly. More like a stamp of approval, said Archbishop Michael Sheehan.

"There is no greater blessing in the natural order than what is happening outside," he said.

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Residents of this area on Sunday joined Sheehan and the Rev. Jim Collie, regional presbyter of the Presbytery of Santa Fe, to celebrate the end of a nearly 50-year dispute between the Catholic and Presbyterian churches.

Collie and Sheehan signed an agreement pledging a partnership toward the greater good of their parishioners across the state.

"We stand together as a voice for New Mexico," Collie said to the crowd after they had moved across State Route 75 to St. Anthony Church for the second half of a unique ceremony. "No longer do we need to remember the frictions of the past. And they were real."

The churches had a falling out after the 1951 "Dixon Decision." A group of Protestants, led by a Presbyterian, formed a school committee and brought suit in state court against the state Board of Education. The group sought to challenge the right of Catholic nuns, wearing habits, to teach religion as part of the curriculum in public schools in Dixon and other nearby towns.

Which is why hundreds of people descended on this quiet haven from surrounding cities and villages Sunday to join in the celebration of reconciliation.

"It's significant for this community and both denominations," said Ellie Lamb of Santa Fe, a Presbyterian.

Embudo's Doug Nelson, who



"NO GREATER BLESSING": The Rev. Jim Collie, left, of the Presbytery of Santa Fe, and Archbishop Michael Sheehan, of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, sign an agreement of reconciliation on Sunday at St. Anthony's Church in Dixon.

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belongs to the Embudo Presbyterian Church, added, "We're so together throughout our days, our work, our lives, that any split or schism is senseless."

It is a community so small, said

Nelson's wife, Judy, that all its residents' names take just two pages in the local phone book.

Those who are Catholics were equally pleased.

"It's a big thing," said 79-year-old

Reconciliation

Silviano Romero, who was born and raised in Embudo. "I never thought it would happen."

After Ortega took the pulpit at the Embudo Presbyterian Church, his counterpart, the Rev. Andrew McComb, addressed the crowd at St. Anthony's.

A copy of the agreement was then read aloud by the Rev. Ernest Falardeau of the archdiocese's ecumenical office.

Sheehan and Collie stepped up to sign it, shook hands and embraced as onlookers stood and applauded. Some were wiping away tears.

"More than any words," Sheehan said, "the reality today speaks loudly to us all."

Loudly enough to impress visitors to Dixon on Sunday.

"It's been happening in small and large waves the last 10 years," Joyce Kilgore of Peñasco said. "It's a day to celebrate."

For Sara Romer, the day took on special significance. She taught at a mission school in Chacon in the 1950s and remembers the Dixon Decision.

"It's an idea whose time has come," she said of the reconciliation. "Everybody was ready for peace."

Throughout the 90-minute ceremony, there was a sense of comfort and closeness on display.

"The sense of community you felt is the community, that's been here," Collie said. "The powers that be are just catching up to where the people here have led us. The task is to keep it going."