

SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN

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OUR VIEW

San Miguel Mission preservation unites the community

The scaffolding is down and the cement mixer's put away, ready for a future day's work at the beloved San Miguel Mission. For now, as winter creeps closer, the preservation of the mission is on break before the next burst of activity come spring and summer 2012.

And what a bustle of activity there has been already.

Any passer-by strolling down Old Santa Fe Trail from April until summer's end would have seen volunteers working through hot summer days, learning to mix the mud, make the adobe bricks and stucco the walls. From area school students to overseas visitors who decided to get their hands dirty for one day or many, hundreds of helpers have taken part in the restoration of one of the country's oldest churches.

All of this was made possible because of donations large and small, with oversight of the delicate operation by Cornerstones Community Partnerships. Committed to the project, and to the tradition the mission represents, is St. Michael's High School, which owns the church and has been active in raising money and sending volunteers out to work. There's even been some government in the mix — the restoration project won a \$200,000 federal Save Our Treasures grant back in 2010. (Cornerstones is still matching federal money and needs donations, by the way. You can read all about the project yourself at <http://cstones.org>.)

All told, the drive to preserve the old mission church is as much a community effort as building it was back in the 17th century. Like so many of New Mexico's historic buildings, the church was destroyed, rebuilt and destroyed again for various reasons. The current building dates from 1710. Despite mistakes over the years — we know now that concrete and adobe don't mix — the San Miguel Mission survives. The mission is *living* history, emphasis on the living. It's wonderful that thousands of visitors stop inside its mud walls each year, but more important that the building remains in use. On Sundays, there's the 2 p.m. Latin Mass or 5 p.m. New Mass, as well as other activities, depending on the season.

The work being done today by both visitors and locals ensures that this essential part of Santa Fe's history will remain functional for generations to come. Come spring 2012, preparation will begin for restoration of the south wall of the mission — the last bit of work for this project. It's involved, with chapel roof repairs needed before the wall scaffolding can go up; the chapel's bell tower also needs repairs, all of which will take time and care (and money).

Preservation, after all, is more than bricks and mortar, or in Santa Fe's case, more than dirt, water and straw. Preservation is about establishing the community will to maintain the legacies bequeathed by our ancestors. By doing so, we teach our children and their children to have respect for their history so that one day, they can pass it down once more.