

Thursday

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News

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Church restoration project to be marked

By Tom Kirvan, Editor

There is no tinkering with history, but there is a movement afoot to "perpetuate the past," which is glorified in a divine way just west of Saline.


There, this Sunday, Dec. 12 during the 10:15 a.m. worship service, members and guests of St. James United Church of Christ, 11005 W. Michigan Ave.,

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will celebrate the climax of a restoration project that has taken a page or two from local history books.

"We invite you to share with us what lots of prayers and many work hours of fun and fellowship can achieve," reads a public invitation to join in the celebration of the renovation of St. James Church. "We hope you'll come and share in the joy and the beauty of our little white church that has been a beacon of hope and joy to so many over the last 120 years."

The quaint church with the striking steeple has been a focal point for travelers along U.S. 12 for decades, and has undergone a historical transformation since August that puts it firmly in touch with its past.

"We have had tremendous support from the congregation over the past several years with this project to help restore the church," said Jane Finkbeiner, chairperson of the renovation effort. "It has been gratifying to see everyone pull together, pledging their time, talents and financial support for a project that we can all be proud of for years to come."

Smith Church Renovations of Janesville, Wis. designed and directed the project, which cost upward of \$120,000. The renovation work, which began in August and ended a day before a wedding at the church on Nov. 6, came on the heels of the completion of a \$420,000 addition to the facility.

The project also neatly coincided with the arrival of the Rev. Jeanne Murray as the church's new pastor. A native of New York, the 56-year-old Rev. Murray began her ministerial duties at St. James in June and now quips that she has had "her head in the clouds" since the renovation project was completed.

The reason rests with the handiwork of **Shawn McRaney** of Baltimore, who painted a sky-like mural on the chancel ceiling above the church pulpit. The owner of Paint the Sky Murals, McRaney has performed work at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and recently began teaming up with Smith Renovations.

Finkbeiner, a longtime member of the church who works for Peters Building Co. in Saline, credits Michael Smith of Smith Renovations for helping make the project a success.

"He came up with the design and was very meticulous in making sure every detail was carried out to his specifications," said Finkbeiner.

Smith, in turn, said his work at St. James was truly a labor of love.

"I can say that the design stage took me about 20 hours and that was the easy part," said Smith. "Every time I visit a church, I'm like a kid in a candy store. Ideas easily come to me from the years of experience and all the churches I have visited."

Chuck Gross, a Saline High alum who is retired from teaching in Tecumseh, served as the chairman of the design and construction committee for the project. Earl Roehm, an executive with United Bank & Trust, was the budget and finance chairman. Other key committee members included Fay Freshcorn, Marilyn Gordon, Sue Gross, Nancy Kohler, Connie Wiedmayer, Doris Roehm, Donna and Orman Roehm, Shirley Rothfuss, Lisa Wenk, and Linda and Bill Wiedmayer.

The goal of committee members, according to Finkbeiner, was to "restore the church to its original look," wherever possible.

"The walls and ceiling were returned to the original

plaster," said Finkbeiner. "That was done by removing the old wall covering and replacing it with vapor barrier and fiberglass," she added, noting that Robert Hill and his crew from Illinois handled "all the labor work on the walls" as well as the decorative painting.

"The original ceiling bead wainscot was exposed and restored. That was done with new base molding and chair railing. Pete Nicolazza, the restoration carpenter and wood smith, had new molding machined in Idaho to match our old molding. The New England classic wall paneling on the front of the balcony was exposed and restored."

In addition, the original chimes were discovered in the church wall. They were restored and now are exposed at the front of the church.

To the left of the pulpit, a wall was opened up with a Gothic arch to link the sanctuary to the "Old German School," which joins the recent addition.

"In 1958, when the church was moved back from the road and the basement was added, the German School was added to provide space for Sunday school classes," explained Finkbeiner. "The German School was built in 1890. The children went to Benton School across the road and also to German School located on the church property.

"Since no additional square footage was added to the sanctuary as part of the renovation, we not only wanted to open the area to the sanctuary to allow for overflow, but also to provide accessibility to the restrooms located in the new addition," said Finkbeiner. "The renovation included adding three arched windows which will have stained glass added to them in memory of various church families."

Gross noted that the church congregation shared in much of the work in an effort to control costs and to "feel like we were really invested" in the project. Members helped remove the old wall covering, wood paneling, and carpet, and also took out the pews and re-stained them.

"The project could not have been accomplished without so many of our members turning out to help," he said.

The same can be said for the roles of several local contractors involved in the construction work, said Finkbeiner. The contractors included Bridgewater Lumber, R.G. Wahl, Ormsby Electric, Washtenaw Glass, Creative Audio, and Carpet on Wheels.

Finkbeiner also credited retired St. James minister Rev. Judy Jahnke for "being instrumental in getting us going on both the addition and the renovation."

The church has a rich history, although it arose from humble beginnings in the fall of 1885. It was then that church was dedicated after it was built for the then worldly sum of \$1,600.

According to church records, on Aug. 4, 1884, a congregation of 18 families pledged their support (\$100 per family) to organize "St. Jakobus (St. James United Evangelical Church)." Later that year, the decision was made to build a church 28 feet by 46 feet with a steeple approximately 60 feet tall. J.Peter Wiedmayer and Chester Parson donated a tract of land on which to build the church and dedication services were held on Sept. 25, 1885.

The church was served by 15 pastors during its first 100 years. In the early years, it was affiliated with the Evangelical Synod of North America. In 1958, the congregation agreed to join the Evangelical and Reformed Church, beginning a ministerial

association with the organization that continues to this day.

While a relative newcomer to the St. James scene, Rev. Murray has quickly become connected to its past.

"This is a church that was built on the value of strong relationships and that has been so evident throughout this project," said Rev. Murray. "The congregation has been invested in the success of this project in so many ways and we thank God that we can now enjoy the fruits of all that hard work."

In this vintage photo from the church archives, some of the congregation members posed for a picture along the fence that separated the church grounds from the "mud-rutted road that served as the stage coach route between Chicago and Detroit," now known as U.S. 12.

St. James United Church of Christ, located midway between Saline and Clinton, will be the site of a celebration this Sunday, Dec. 12 for the recent renovation of the sanctuary.

Jane Finkbeiner and Chuck Gross were instrumental in helping coordinate the restoration work at St. James, a 200-plus-member congregation guided by Rev. Jeanne Murray.