

St. John's unveils restored facilities

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STAMFORD -- The restoration of St. John's Episcopal Church has been 60 years and almost \$5 million in the making, but the parish is confident it will unveil its newly revamped facilities in time for the Christmas season.

"This has been a really long time coming," said Alison Chaltas, senior warden at St. John's. "From here we're just putting on the finishing touches."

Chaltas has overseen the main thrust of the restoration project along with a seven-member building committee. Church officials discovered more than 60 years ago that St. John's foundation was sinking in on itself, but it wasn't until recently that a feasible and affordable restoration plan was put together, Chaltas said.

The crowning jewel of the massive project is the complete refurbishment of three large stained-glass windows, including the 40-foot tall panes located behind the altar. The window depicts the transfiguration, which according to the Gospel was the moment Jesus was revealed as the son of God to three of his apostles. The stained glass window was built by Louis Comfort Tiffany and donated to St. John's in 1901 by the Leeds, a prominent Stamford family of the time.

"This is a spectacular window," Chaltas said. "It's extraordinarily rare."

Tiffany, who was not affiliated with the jewelry company Tiffany & Co., was the preeminent stained glass window maker in North America in the late 1800s and early 20th century. His work is considered the "gold standard" for church windows and is notable for its use of Favrite glass, Chaltas said. The Tiffany window at St. John's is 109 years old, and the refurbishment process has made the colors of the glass more vibrant.

"Seeing Christ up there in the vivid colors of Tiffany really enhances our worship," said James Wheeler, the reverend at St. John's.

In addition to the stained glass windows, the church has completely overhauled the 12,000 square foot building connected to its sanctuary, which contains classroom space, a choir room and area for religious retreats, Wheeler said. The restoration work has brought the building up to code and fortified its foundation, giving the church space to conduct more programs and community outreach, Wheeler said.

"We call this project St. John's rising because the church was literally sinking, but also because it's really a revival for the congregation itself," he said. "We wanted to open it up to the greater community."

Workers discovered at the start of the restoration process that St. John's structural problems had been caused by the attached bell tower, which was slowly collapsing under the weight of its 9,000-pound bell system, Chaltas said. The refurbishment of the bell tower took about a year, and the parish is eager to once again hear the familiar clanging of the church's bells fill the streets.

"We take it for granted, to hear the bells chiming on the hour and every quarter hour," said Sean Jackson, St. John's music director. "It's kind of a sonic part of this community. It's something that people get used to hearing and we're looking forward to hearing them again."

Parishioners from St. John's have pledged about \$2 million in support for the restoration project, Chaltas said. The remaining funds were secured through a \$2.9 million loan from First County Bank.

"St. John's is a part of this community and we're a major part of this community," said Gene Schreiner, vice president in the commercial division at First County Bank. "When we saw this project we wanted to lend a hand."

Saint John's is the oldest Episcopal church in lower Fairfield County, Chaltas said. It was first constructed in 1744 but suffered damage after being struck twice by lightning. The building's apparent conductivity inspired church officials to rebuild the entire structure, this time in stone, in 1895. On Dec. 5, the congregation will invite the community to attend its annual musical Christmas show, which will also serve as the unofficial grand opening of the newly restored facilities.

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