

First Presbyterian Church celebrates finished sanctuary

News Tribune · 10 Jun 2024 · A1 · By Ryan Pivoney rpivoney@newstribune.com

First Presbyterian Church “is starting to feel like home again,” according to Pastor Woody Berry.



The church dedicated its sanctuary Sunday, about two years after a portion of its ceiling fell in. Worship service shifted to the church lobby area while the ceiling underwent a \$200,000 repair.

Dana DeWeese, a piper with the Mid-Missouri Pipe Band, led the congregation into the sanctuary to start Sunday’s 9:30 a.m. worship service. Bagpipes and boutonnieres commemorated the church’s Scottish roots.

Berry said the collapsed ceiling was like a metaphor for the church itself. There was a “depth of division and misunderstanding and animosity, even,” when he arrived in December, he said.

First Presbyterian Church was still reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic and 2019 tornado, and was also dealing with flooding, skylights broken by hail, the fallen ceiling and a resigning leader.

The congregation got through it all by working together, Berry said.

“And here we are today, in the sanctuary, celebrating this glorious place brought together so beautifully,” he said during his sermon, called “A Church of Joy.”

Berry reminded members of the church they can’t do everything alone. It can be liberating to recognize strength in numbers, he said.

Fixing the sanctuary ceiling took monetary donations, time and prayers from the congregation, he added.

“It would not help without all of us,” Berry said. “You have made it even more welcoming and accessible.”

“I love how wide and open that center aisle is,” he continued. “Best center aisle in any church anywhere, I think.”

Berry encouraged the congregation to relish the fruits of their labor.

“Rejoice,” he told them. “Let joy fill you this day. Smile at each other. Be glad. Be proud. Say thank you to one another. Laugh at the reality that we made it to this glorious day.”

Natalie Mendez, Christian education director for the church, said Sunday's return to the sanctuary was "unbelievable."

"It feels different because it feels like it's a part of a structure. It feels like it's part of a routine," she said. "It feels like it's part of who we are in our faith."

Mendez said the ceiling fell where her family usually sat in the sanctuary. They were sitting in the pew just a few hours before it came down, she added.

That's not where her thoughts were Sunday, however. Mendez said she enjoyed being able to see the church choir, pastor and fellow members of the congregation.

"We all have pews so we can hold hands again," she said. "It's just very — it's amazing."

Mendez said she tries to teach her children and those in the congregation about serving others, and the sanctuary plays a role in that.

"Being in the sanctuary, to me, means that we have an opportunity to think about how we can go back out into the world, how we can help other people, and what it is we're able to do to help the greater good," she said.

Margaret Tyler has been attending First Presbyterian Church for more than 50 years. Lately, she said she's been attending the evening service outside the sanctuary.

Tyler entered the worship hall Sunday morning with a big smile.

"I just realized, I don't know how long it's been since I was here," she said, adding that last time there were bits of plaster hanging from the ceiling. "The new and fresh are nice, but it may be the least important thing that happened here this morning."

Tyler said First Presbyterian Church has given her the opportunity to pray and worship alongside all walks of life, and then share a meal together. With her family deceased, she said she looks forward to the experience each week.

"That phrase 'church family' means a lot to me," she said. "Here are older sisters and younger sisters, and motherly and grandmotherly figures when I was younger when I first came here. There are brothers in Christ — that means a lot. I'm grateful that it's here."