

St. Michael Church in Pawcatuck completes first phase of reconstruction



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The Rev. Dennis M. Perkins, pastor of St. Michael the Archangel Roman Catholic Church in Pawcatuck, tours the interior of the church as the first phase of reconstruction is being completed, Wednesday, Nov. 15, 2017. (Tim Martin/The Day)

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Stonington — The first phase of construction of the new St. Michael the Archangel Church in Pawcatuck is complete.

The Rev. Dennis M. Perkins, church pastor, recently gave a tour of the 166-year-old church, which now resembles the way it appeared in a postcard circa 1908.

The \$4.3 million phase 1 rebuilt the roof, walls and a portion of the basement while restoring and replacing the stained-glass windows. It took 16 months to complete.

Phase 2, which calls for the installation of mechanical systems, an elevator and all the interior elements, is estimated to cost about \$3.8 million and will begin once a substantial portion of the money has been raised. Perkins said phase 1 is paid for thanks to the generosity of donors.

The project comes at a time when Catholic churches are closing or consolidating. It is extremely rare for a new church to be built.



The first phase of reconstruction of the St. Michael the Archangel Church in Pawcatuck is complete. (Tim Martin/The Day)

The church was closed in 2012 after a structural inspection revealed it to be unsafe. Parishioners have since attended St. Mary Church in the borough.

“This is certainly a milestone,” Perkins said Wednesday, while standing inside the shell of the church, the late afternoon light streaming through the stained-glass windows, some of which have not been seen before by parishioners. “Looking back a few years ago, we were never sure this would happen.”

Perkins and his parishioners considered various plans to rebuild or renovate the church while looking for ways to control costs before settling on the current plan.

He pointed out that three months into a capital campaign, the church had to close. Still parishioners fulfilled their pledges. They then stepped up again to donate to a second campaign to raise the rest of the money needed for phase 1. With two capital campaigns complete, Perkins said it was important to complete the shell to show signs of progress.

Now they will be asked to help make phase 2 a reality so the church can reopen.



BUY PHOTO

The Rev. Dennis M. Perkins, pastor of St. Michael the Archangel Roman Catholic Church in Pawcatuck, handles one of the many stained-glass windows in the church Wednesday, Nov. 15, 2017. (Tim Martin/The Day)

“We owe this to the faith and commitment of the people here,” he said.

As for when phase 2 will begin, that will depend on how fast the church can raise the needed funds. Once that occurs, it will take about a year to complete the interior work and reopen the church.

While the capacity of the new church will remain at 425, it appears to be much larger due to the soaring ceilings framed with huge timber trusses, and the removal of the numerous columns that once dotted the main floor of the church.

One things parishioners will notice is the more than century-old stained glass window depicting the Last Supper that now has been placed behind the altar. It had been located in a different section of the church.
“We’re going back to the old church but it will be new to most people,” he said.



BUY PHOTO

Workers install clapboard siding on the bell tower of St. Michael the Archangel Roman Catholic Church in Pawcatuck Monday, October 23, 2017. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

Perkins pointed out that Rev. John Neale, who was the pastor when the window was created, had his likeness added to the apostle sitting on the far right of the scene.

The old pews will be reinstalled and the main church will have a hardwood floor.

During the excavation of the basement, numerous artifacts were uncovered and now sit on a display table in the middle of the church with written descriptions about their origin.

One is a bottle that reads J. Harvey and Co. that was found wrapped in newspaper from 1860. There is a ticket for an 1895 ice cream festival that was sponsored by the "St. Michael Total Abstinence and Benevolent Society." Other items are a rye and Bromo-Seltzer bottles, an old prayer book and a 1925 pamphlet about preventing diphtheria.



BUY PHOTO

Workers install clapboard siding on the bell tower and paint trim of St. Michael the Archangel Roman Catholic Church in Pawcatuck Monday, October 23, 2017. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

Parishioner Larry O'Keefe also has researched what is depicted on each stained-glass window and in whose memory each window was donated. Those descriptions hang under each window and are available on the church website.

Last weekend Perkins began leading 1 p.m. public tours of the church. Others are slated for Sunday, as well as Nov. 25 and 26 and Dec. 2 and 10.

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