



# THE STONINGTON TIMES

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## Church celebrates a slow rebuilding

By **MARTHA SHANAHAN**  
Staff Writer

When the parishioners of St. Michael the Archangel walk into their new home in a few years, they'll walk into a "a new church on the original foundation."

The foundation, the Rev. Dennis Perkins said, was built there in the 1860s. It held the church up through a century and a half of worship and will be there as long as people keep coming to that spot.

But the new parts — the iron beams, wooden trusses, walls and roof — are the exciting part.

And now those trusses will bear the names of the church members who have stuck with Perkins, and St. Michael, through almost six years already without a building and another two or three to go.

More than 100 worshippers came to the church on Liberty Street on a recent Sunday last month, though it still looks more like a construction site than a church, to scribble their names in silver permanent marker on the the arched beams that will hold up the roof of the church.

A light rain fell on the site, and volunteers wiped the beams with cloths so the visitors would have a

dry place to write.

Perkins said he thought of the event as a way to involve people in the slow but steady process of rebuilding the church since structural problems forced it to close in 2012.

It would remind people, he thought, that soon enough they'll have a church to walk into again.

Joe Martin, who has been a member of the church since the 1990s, had that vision in his head Sunday.

"I'm looking forward to that first midnight mass on Christmas Eve," Martin said.

He had just stood up from writing his own message on the wood: "Our faith + works helped renew our church."

Then his name: Joseph T. Martin, and the date, 3. 26. 17, and the names of two friends who have moved away.

"We have to have the patience to get things done," he said, admiring his work.

Some people wrote messages of encouragement, welcoming or patience. Most of the messages were lists of names, like just a reminder for later that they had been there.

"God bless this house," one person wrote.

Others scrawled names of people who would never see the new church built.

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Andrew McCauley, left, holds an umbrella over his father Kevin Oliveira, both of Pawcatuck, while he and fellow parishioners sign the wooden beams that will form the ceiling of St. Michael the Archangel Church in Pawcatuck on March 26.

### PET PAL

Mason the dog loves cuddling and tennis balls.

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## Pawcatuck church holds celebration

FROM PAGE 1

Jacob Freeman, a high school senior who graduated from the St. Michael parish school across the street, signed his name in memory of, simply, "madame."

Madame was Sylvie Morton, who taught French at St. Michael School for almost 20 years, including all nine years that Freeman was a student there.

Morton died last month of leukemia. Signing her name seemed like a fitting tribute, Freeman said.

"She definitely had a big impact," he said. "This is all about community ... and she was a big part of the St. Michael community."

If all goes according to plan, no one will ever see the signatures. They'll be on the side of the truss that faces up, where they'll be a secret only the signers will know for as long as the church is standing.

"People will know, and they can tell their children and grandchildren they signed it," Perkins said.

At first, the parishioners thought they could just repair the old building, but when an engineering firm found that the walls were not straight they decided to spend \$6.5 million to rebuild it with a new steel-beamed structure that would restore some of the design of the original church that had been hidden by renovations.

The old walls and roof came down last summer, and workers spent the fall getting the foundation ready to hold the new walls



DANA JENSEN/THE DAY

Father Dennis Perkins arrives March 26 with towels to dry sections of the wooden beams so parishioners can sign the beams that will form the ceiling of St. Michael the Archangel Church in Pawcatuck.

and beams. The original stained glass windows will be reinstalled after getting restored in Iowa.

The steel bones of the steeple are up now, and this month the wooden trusses — made in Vermont by a company founded by a man baptized at St. Michael — were lifted into place with the blessing of the Most Rev. Michael Cote, bishop of Norwich.

There's more work, and more fundraising, to do. The St. Michael congregation has scattered in the years since the structural

problems in the church's roof and walls were discovered. Many followed Perkins to St. Mary church in Stonington; others joined Catholic parishes in Westerly or North Stonington.

But if the dozens of signatures are any indication, the whole St. Michael community will be ready for that first Christmas mass under the wooden trusses, whenever it comes.

"They'll come back," Perkins said.

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