

\$500,000 match moves completion of St. Michael the Archangel Church renovations within sight; building could open in fall



Rev. Dennis Perkins, the pastor of St. Michael's Church, discusses next step in the rebuilding of the church during a tour. Construction work continues on the interior of the new St. Michael, The Archangel Church on Liberty Street in Pawcatuck, on Wednesday, January 2, 2019. Harold Hanka, The Westerly Sun



Interior view looking towards front of church and main entrance shows the wooden trusses and cabling supports. Construction work continues on the interior of the new St. Michael, The Archangel Church on Liberty Street in Pawcatuck, on Wednesday, January 2, 2019. Harold Hanka, The Westerly Sun

Rev. Dennis Perkins, the pastor of St. Michael's Church, discusses next step in the rebuilding of the church during a tour. Construction work continues on the interior of the new St. Michael, The Archangel Church on Liberty Street in Pawcatuck, on Wednesday, January 2, 2019. Harold Hanka, The Westerly Sun

Interior view looking towards the back of the church above main altar shows the wooden trusses and cabling supports. Construction work continues on the interior of the new St. Michael, The Archangel Church on Liberty Street in Pawcatuck, on Wednesday, January 2, 2019. Harold Hanka, The Westerly Sun

Interior view looking towards front of church and main entrance shows the wooden trusses and cabling supports. Construction work continues on the interior of the new St. Michael, The Archangel Church on Liberty Street in Pawcatuck, on Wednesday, January 2, 2019. Harold Hanka, The Westerly Sun

Rev. Dennis Perkins, the pastor of St. Michael's Church, discusses next step in the rebuilding of the church during a tour. Construction work continues on the interior of the new St. Michael, The Archangel Church on Liberty Street in Pawcatuck, on Wednesday, January 2, 2019. Harold Hanka, The Westerly Sun

Interior view looking towards front of church and main entrance shows the wooden trusses and cabling supports. Construction work continues on the interior of the new St. Michael, The Archangel Church on Liberty Street in Pawcatuck, on Wednesday, January 2, 2019. Harold Hanka, The Westerly Sun

Rev. Dennis Perkins, the pastor of St. Michael's Church, views the exterior of the rebuilt church . A second steeple will be placed towards the back of the structure. Construction work continues on the interior of the new St. Michael, The Archangel Church on Liberty Street in Pawcatuck, on Wednesday, January 2, 2019. Harold Hanka, The Westerly Sun

A second steeple will be placed towards the back of the structure. Construction work continues on the interior of the new St. Michael, The Archangel Church on Liberty Street in Pawcatuck, on Wednesday, January 2, 2019. Harold Hanka, The Westerly Sun

A second steeple will be placed towards the back of the structure. Construction work continues on the interior of the new St. Michael, The Archangel Church on Liberty Street in Pawcatuck, on Wednesday, January 2, 2019. Harold Hanka, The Westerly Sun

PAWCATUCK — With a \$500,000 match on the table until the end of February, St. Michael the Archangel Church is on the home stretch of its reconstruction and may reopen in the fall.

The match will help pay for the completion of the project's \$4.3 million Phase II, which includes installation of interior details such as electrical, lighting, plumbing, insulation, drywall, flooring, wainscoting, furniture and a second steeple.

The Rev. Dennis M. Perkins, who has been pastor of the church for 20 years as of the end of January, said Wednesday, he had hoped to open on May 26 to coincide with the church's original opening date of May 26, 1861.

"But I don't think we're going to reach that," he said, standing on the expanse of plywood underflooring in the church's main space where oak hardwood flooring will soon be installed. "I think we have about six months worth of work."

By December 2017, the church, located at 60-62 Liberty St., had completed Phase I, a \$4.3 million plan that included rebuilding the exterior walls, roof and steeple as they appeared on a postcard depicting the church in 1908. Phase I also covered restoring the church's stained glass windows, strengthening the foundation and building a 745-square-foot addition to make space for an elevator and accessible bathrooms.

The front part of the church, closest to Liberty Street, was built in 1861 and an addition was put on in 1867, nearly doubling the size of the space, Perkins said.

From the beginning, the church roof was unstable and in 1872, columns that were installed to stabilize

the structure.

Perkins said the church was three months into the first capital campaign to repair the church when the building was closed on April 23, 2012, after an engineer deemed the roof unsafe.

The project evolved after Vermont Timberworks was hired to make new trusses for the church while keeping the original walls.

“The idea was to pull out the structure and put the new structure in to hold the walls in place,” Perkins said. “But the walls had kind of bowed out and had a thick layer of plaster, which had asbestos in it.”

The engineers did a financial analysis showing it was more cost-effective for the church to start over with new steel-structured, insulated walls, which allowed for many other improvements, Perkins said.

“The project evolved but we obviously got a much better result because we’ve got better efficiency in the walls,” he said. “It also allowed us to adjust the placement of the windows so they align with the bays formed by the trusses, so now it looks symmetrical.”

The exposed wooden trusses also create a dramatic, soaring ceiling that is even higher than the previous one, Perkins said.

“The difference is that now the ceiling is open and we can see the timber trusses, which were hidden by the ceiling before. There was six and a half feet of space between the ceiling and the roof before,” he said.

The building now has many other improvement, including eight furnaces and eight air conditioner compressors. A series of thermostats, controlled at one central panel, monitor the temperature throughout the building.

In the basement, the floor was dug deeper so that the ceilings could be raised. A retaining wall was also installed to separate the interior walls from the old, granite foundations and the new space will have a commercial kitchen.

When the building finally opens, parishioners will recognize the old pews but they’ll be resized to accommodate wider aisles and the absence of columns.

“In the old church, the pews were such that our side aisles were 29 inches wide, so we’re going to make the 36 inches to make them more accessible,” he said.

As before, the church will seat about 450 people because “we’re still in the same footprint,” Perkins said.

The 14 stations of the Cross, which are being stored in the attic of the convent, will be reinstalled on the walls, he said. “People will recognize those right away. They’re probably original to the building. They’re

made of cast plaster.”

The church interior will also be painted with a special stenciled design discovered during the deconstruction of the walls.

“The pattern will run above the wainscoting and around the windows,” said Perkins. “People didn’t see that design before — it was covered up in the 1930s.”

The total project will come to about \$8 million, including the remaining interior work estimated at about \$2.7 million, Perkins said. With the hoped-for \$1 million from the \$500,000 match combined with \$500,000 in donations, the church will need to borrow about \$1.7 million as a 20-year mortgage, he said.

After seven years of planning and hard work, the project is a strong reflection of the community’s faith, Perkins said.

“It’s the restoration of things that have been here for so many years and things that are new, so the church becomes opened up to a new future,” he said. “The people are amazing, too. It was four years before anything started happening here and people kept contributing money to the capital campaigns. There was a firm belief that all this would come together.”