

Steeple restoration in Bath serves as beacon to the community

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BATH — Leaders at the First Baptist Church of Bath knew renovations would be necessary at some point to the building's historic steeple. But it was the Patriots Day storm of 2007 that really hammered the point home.

It was during that violent nor'easter that David Pecci — chairman of the church's board of trustees — found himself tethered by rope to the bell base six stories above the intersection of Washington and Elm streets, trying to keep 20-foot sections of railing from being ripped off by 60 mile-per-hour winds and driving rain.

"The whole tower was moving six or eight inches in the wind," Pecci recalled Tuesday. "It was a wild ride."

One section of railing broke away from him.

"I didn't quite get the rope around it before it went crashing down," he said. "It landed flat (on Elm Street) and just disintegrated into splinters.

"We had plans of doing some restoration of the bell tower, but not this soon," Pecci continued. "When the storm hit, it accelerated things a little bit."

Fast forward to Tuesday, and just a few more weeks of work is left for the steeplejacks who — slightly more than a month ago — began the daunting rehab project in "chemical suits and respirators."

When Josh Taylor and others in a crew from Mid Maine Restoration arrived, they were greeted by dead birds, maggots and, by some accounts, nearly a ton of pigeon droppings. But Taylor said Pecci's adventure in the Patriots Day storm topped his "HazMat" drama.

"Sixty mile-per-hour winds, for what we do, is pretty much a day off," he admitted.

The \$94,000 project has included painting, new railings, an updated bell stantion, refreshed clock faces and copper roofing underneath the balustrade.

But as much as the finished project will be attractive, Pecci said the process of raising funds was as much a signal of the church's new direction as its shiny new tower will be.

He said that through volunteer labor — including a team of painters from a Stockton, Mo., church — insurance claims and grant money, the church avoided asking for money from parishioners and neighbors. A good chunk of the funding — \$40,000 — came as a grant from the Maine Community Foundation's Maine Steeples Project.

Focus on outreach

Meanwhile, regular donations and traditional church revenues have been diverted to an increased focus on outreach — such as a recent fishing workshop members held at the Bath skate park; an upcoming forum with state Sen. Paula Benoit, R-Phippsburg, on the topic of heating fuel costs; and a monthly movie night free to the public.

"In a matter of nine months, a \$94,000 project became completely funded," Pecci said. "We figured we were looking at a 30-month process to get the funds raised and get the project started. But it came together in about nine months, and not one cent was raised through baked bean suppers or yard sales or traditional church fundraisers.

"We want to be an asset to the community, not a detriment to it" by asking for handouts, he said.

A proactive approach

The First Baptist Church of Bath's new pastor, Stephen Rowe, acknowledged what he saw as a declining trend in attendance across many church communities.

But he said he favors a proactive approach to "getting the word out." The local group's ideology, he said, dovetails with the approach he utilized in a Caribou church prior to relocating to Bath six weeks ago. There, Rowe said regular attendance grew from about nine people to more than 40 over a period of two-and-a-half years.

"A lot of churches sit back and wait for people to come and be ministered to," he said. "But we have an obligation to reach out to the community, interact, meet people's needs and hopefully share the message that God loves them."

While a prime example of self-sufficiency, the steeple renovation has turned out to be a form of outreach in itself. Rowe said three weeks ago, two new faces appeared for the Sunday service.

"There was a couple who came to the service from Kentucky, and the reason they came to see us was that they were passing over the bridge to Woolwich and they noticed the clock tower," he recalled. The pair was on their honeymoon and took in their first service together in Bath because of the standout steeple, which appears on the same street as historic towers on the Chocolate Church Arts Center and Winter Street Center.

"David said one day, and I tend to agree, that we'll look back at this (restoration project) and think, 'This is something we did for the grace of God,'" Rowe said. "It's good to know that there are some eternal things we can do that last beyond us."