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Historic foundation works to restore church

By SARA PAUFF, March 18, 2012
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When Jim Johnson came to the United Congregational Christian Church in 1985, it was in need of some minor repairs -- patching the front door, painting the front steps and changing the light bulbs.

Johnson, who worked as an electrical engineer, volunteered to help out. He went on to become a layperson, and then pastor of the small church on Beacon Avenue in the **Waverly Terrace Historic District**.

"I got hoodwinked into little areas of responsibility," he said. "God has a purpose for everyone, and in most cases we're not smart enough to see it."

The church is in need of more repairs now, but the responsibility and cost has become too much for the 81-year-old Johnson and his aging congregation to take on.

"When vandals knock out \$15,000 in heating and air conditioning units, there's just no recovery from that," said Johnson, giving one example of the maintenance needed on the historic church, constructed in 1908. The church didn't even have enough money to pay for the cost of demolition.

When word got around to the Historic Columbus Foundation about the church's plight, they stepped in, paid off the \$5,000 lien on the property and bought the all-brick structure for \$1.

Justin Krieg, director of planning and programs for the foundation, said though they've granted a few facade loans for houses in the neighborhood, renovating the church will be the organization's first major project in the Waverly Terrace Historic district.

"We thought, 'Hey this is a great way to get our foot in the door in Waverly Terrace,'" Krieg said.

The small church still has its original bell tower and cathedral ceilings. Using a combination of foundation funds and a grant, the foundation has been able to pay to stabilize the building, fix the masonry and the bell tower and put on a new roof. Krieg said they plan on fundraising to pay for repairs to the stained glass windows.

Once repaired, the church could be used as a meeting place for the neighborhood, Krieg said, or be rented out to a small church congregation.

“It could make a really cool house,” he said. “We’ll see what the needs of the neighborhood are.”

For Johnson, seeing Historic Columbus take over the church is a “mixed blessing.”

The building had fallen into such disrepair, Johnson and other members didn’t like to invite visitors to services and the congregation stopped using it completely in 2010. Currently, they hold modified services in local Burger King restaurants on a regular basis and take communion at members’ houses.

However, Johnson has fond memories of the old building on Beacon Avenue. He remembers one church member named John who used to always show up a little late for Sunday services. After he passed away, whenever the wind would blow open the church doors during services people would say, “Well, John just got here,” Johnson said.

Before central heating was installed in the church, members would abandoned the pews and sit in folding chairs around a floor furnace. Johnson said places in the floor mark where pot-bellied stoves sat when the church was first built.

“There are few churches that still remain 85 to 90 percent of the way they were built,” he said. “The people who built that church in 1908 to this day still have that church remaining. Their heritage will be preserved.”

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