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Steeple-raising helps keep promise

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Before she died, Carrie Frances Shorter made the Rev. Marc Anthony Rassmann promise to rebuild the Greater Mt. Pisgah Church of Haddonfield.

Two years ago, a fire destroyed the 126-year-old building that had served three generations of Shorter's family.

"My mom loved this church," said Shorter's daughter, Valerie Arnold, of Haddonfield. "My mother went to this church, my grandmother went to this church and this is where I went to church."

On Tuesday, Shorter's wish came a little closer to becoming a reality.

About 50 members of the congregation, elected officials and members of the community gathered at the church, where Ellis and Potter streets meet on the edge of Haddonfield, to watch the old church's steeple be attached to the still-unfinished new building.

"My mom, she would be a very happy woman today," Arnold said.

The steeple, along with a holy book and a worn cross, were the only things that survived the fire.

"With our church being a historic church, it was really another historic moment seeing that steeple being put up there," said Leon Butler, a lifetime Mt. Pisgah member.

The congregation, which has been meeting at Grace Episcopal Church on Kings Highway, celebrated with food and talk of what the finished building will look like, even though no one knows if and when construction will be completed.

"It was everything I wanted it to be," Rassmann said of the celebration. "Even though, at his particular time, we've spent the last of our money, we spent it in a good way."

Construction of the modest, 2,390-square-foot building, came to a halt in August, less than a month after the church's insurer, Iowa-based GuideOne, told the congregation it would stop all payments, Rassmann said.

A GuideOne spokeswoman could not reach the company official in charge of the claim on Tuesday, but Rassmann said the company paid \$343,000, enough to erect the building's shell and put up the steeple. The congregation is still \$307,000 short of finishing the \$650,000 building, Rassmann estimated.

Jeffrey Major, a public insurance adjustor the church hired to work on its claim, said the insurance paid only what the previous building was worth, not what it would cost to replace it.

Major said that according to his analysis of the policy, the church is entitled to up to \$700,000 more.

A roofer's torch accidentally set the blaze that destroyed the building.

GuideOne reached a settlement with that company for roughly \$300,000, but was not able to collect because the church has filed a lawsuit against the insurance company, Major said.

Both parties are scheduled to start mediation soon, Major said.

Seeing the old steeple above the new building served to renew the congregation's resolve to open Mt. Pisgah's doors to worshippers once again.

"I think that this is the beginning of something new," said Brenda Hailey of Delran, who has played the organ and been involved with the church's choir for the past 19 years.

"We're going to keep on working until those doors open up," Arnold said. Reach Lavinia DeCastro at (856) 486-2652 or ldecastro@courierpostonline.com
