

Fire-ruined A.M.E. church will rise again

By Joe Logan

Inquirer Staff Writer

An audience of about 50 huddled against the morning chill yesterday as African Methodist Episcopal Presiding Bishop Richard Franklin Norris stepped to the microphone at the groundbreaking of a new Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church in Haddonfield.

> "This is a day that has long been anticipated," Norris intoned. "And this is an occasion that normally would dictate an hour-and-a-half sermon."

> Norris smiled at the chorus of laughs and groans. Relax, he promised, he would let them off easy due to the "briskness of the air."

> But there was no shortage of high-spirited speeches as Norris, Mount Pisgah pastor the Rev. Mark-Anthony Rassmann, and a slew of church members, well-wishers and dignitaries celebrated a new beginning for a very old church rescued once by firefighters and again by the town itself.

> Mount Pisgah, at 238 Ellis St., was 126 years old when it was heavily damaged in a three-alarm blaze 18 months ago. A blowtorch fell over while workers were doing repairs. In no time, much of the structure was engulfed in flames.

> "What the fire didn't destroy the water decimated," Rassmann said yesterday.

> After the fire trucks left, all that remained were the sign out front and the little that parishioners could salvage: the church communion Bible, communion cross and the steeple, which was preserved to be set atop the new Mount Pisgah.

> Parishioners had no choice but to tear down what was left of the building. "Once we did that, the town came to our rescue," Rassmann said.

> Grace Episcopal Church in Haddonfield, led by the Rev. Patrick Close, offered its facilities to Mount Pisgah members for as long as they needed it.

> The town Council of Churches (more than a half-dozen pastors were on hand yesterday), Haddonfield Mayor Trish Colombi, and many local residents staged charity dinners, golf tournaments, dances - anything to help fund the new sanctuary.

> "We saw the very essence of life in Haddonfield in action," Colombi said at the groundbreaking. "Residents and business owners caring, caring deeply, about their community. Neighbors helping neighbors."



**TAKE A
SURVEY**

**RESEARCH
PURPOSES
ONLY**



> Although Mount Pisgah has only 44 members, it has an important history in the community. It was the first and only A.M.E. church ever in Haddonfield. The building was moved to the Ellis Street location a number of years ago from Lawnside.

> In Lawnside, Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church dated back more than 200 years, according to Rassmann, and was a stop on the Underground Railroad for slaves fleeing the South leading up to the Civil War.

> "The town of Haddonfield was built by Quakers, [who], in turn, had servants," Rassmann said. "That is where the town of Haddonfield created its African American population." It was to serve that community that Mount Pisgah was formed, he said.

> The A.M.E. denomination is believed to be the second largest - behind the Baptist church - among American blacks, Norris said yesterday.

> "We are Methodist in our doctrine, African in origin, and Episcopal in terms of our governmental form," he said. "That means we are clergy-led with bishops and elders."

> The new Mount Pisgah will be built by allRisk Property Damage Experts, a Somerdale company that specializes in catastrophic-loss cases. AllRisk has vowed to complete the 2,400-square-foot church by June 1, at a cost of about \$500,000, \$200,000 less than the next-lowest bid.

> "We undertook this project because we live and work in the community and we want to be part of the fabric of the community," said Frank Messina, who runs allRisk. "God has blessed us, and we want to do the little we can to give back to the community."

> With the help of Haddonfield, Mount Pisgah has raised about \$425,000 of the \$600,000 Rassmann figures will be needed to reopen.

> The church is planning several more fund-raisers: a spring dinner, a bowling event, a golf tournament, and a "Dancing With the Stars" party, where Rassmann hopes local politicians will cut a rug.

> "We are believing in God that we'll go into this building June 1 debt-free," Rassmann said.

> Yesterday, as the groundbreaking ceremony was winding down, a Mount Pisgah member, James Bacchues of Lindenwold, looked on with amazement and pride.

> "We just believed in our pastor and his vision," said Bacchues, a chef at the ZBT fraternity house at the University of Pennsylvania. "He was adamant from the beginning that this thing we considered a tragedy was part of God's plan."

>

Contact staff writer Joe Logan at 856-779-3220 or jlogan@phillynews.com.

>

Find this article at:

http://www.philly.com/inquirer/local/20071221_Fire-ruined_A_M_E_church_will_rise_again.html

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

consent of Philly Online, LLC is expressly prohibited.