

The Boston Globe

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2004

Globe West

Steeple work unites congregation

As repairs are made, members learn more about historic church

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NATICK - The steeple on South Natick's Eliot Church tilted just a little bit at first, then more and more. Churchgoers began to lose their faith in what was up above.

"Some people began sitting at the back of the church and saying, 'I'm not going to sit over there because God knows what could happen,'" said Bill Seymour, a member of the combined Unitarian-Congregational church who is on the steeple repair committee.

Now, the church that has occupied hallowed ground at the village crossroads for 176 years is getting the steeple straightened out -- and a makeover that turned out to be more extensive than expected.

A structural engineer's report showed what many had feared: a strong wind could be disastrous for the white clapboard clock and bell tower. Then, last fall, when repairs began in earnest, more problems were discovered.

The steeple's tilt turned out to be an indication of other problems: The entire choir loft was unsafe and in danger of falling because it was not properly connected to the building's load-bearing structure. The sill of the building is also rotted through in at least one area, forcing the congregation to consider jacking up the front of the church to replace it.

"We were blissfully ignorant" of the additional problems, said church member Dave Dimmick, noting that the choir loft had hosted large groups of singers. "Somebody upstairs was watching over us."

Up in the choir loft on a recent visit, ladders ascended through a hole in the ceiling to the steeple. A massive exposed beam that had cracked under the weight of the tilting structure was reinforced with a steel truss. The organ was encased in plywood in the middle of a work area and was being used as a workbench.



The steeple atop Eliot Church, on the site of Natick's first meetinghouse, is being renovated. Members come from two congregations that merged.

Despite the inconveniences, churchgoers

are getting excited about the renovations. And there have been bonuses: The work uncovered an old arched window above the front door that no one knew existed. It was covered on the outside by shutters, which congregants thought were decorative, and on the inside by organ pipes.

After months of heavy work that included installing steel beams to reinforce the structure, churchgoers said they hope the work will be done by late March.

The project was seen as a good omen by the Rev. Adam Tierney-Eliot, who climbed the ladders inside the steeple with longtime church member Fred Schaller last year, while interviewing to be the church's first full-time minister in decades.

"You don't take projects like this on unless things are going well," he said. "It shows that people are excited, that they have a vision for the church."

Indeed, the project may finally erase some of the old divisions among members who were blended when two small congregations from two denominations, the Unitarian and the nearby Congregational, joined under one roof as a federated church in the 1950s, Seymour said.

Churchgoers from the two different congregations actually sat on opposite sides of the aisle. But some crossed over as the steeple tilted, erasing some of the decades-old distinction between the groups.

The project also sparked interest in the history of the church, which stands on the site of Natick's first meetinghouse, where Rev. John Eliot (no relation to the current minister) preached to Native Americans in their own language in the 1600s.

Along the way, people have researched the history of the 1828 West Medway-made bell, and learned about the clock, made in Cambridge in the latter half of the 19th

century. It has also sparked scrutiny of photos of the church, some more than 100 years old, which are sometimes studied on weekday mornings, when workmen meet in the parlor with the steeple committee.

Yankee Steeplejack Co. president Tom Evarts reassured the group at a recent meeting that finding the rotted sill isn't unusual. His company does about three jobs like this a year, while most of their work is installing telecommunications antennas.

"I think we're closer [to being done] than it may feel like," he reported.

As with any small church, funding is a concern. While there is some new blood among those who gather for one Sunday service a week, the total parish is still tiny, just 50 families. Dimmick said the \$150,000 cost of the project was significantly reduced by the donation of structural steel by church member Bob Brack.

The church is hoping to locate a second cellphone antenna in the steeple, which could double the \$20,000 a year income from that source. But the church's operating expenses are \$120,000 a year on top of the renovation loan payments it will soon begin making. Members of the church say they'd like others to know that there is an anonymous donor willing to match the first \$20,000 that is raised for the project.

"I always thought we were doing the project for ourselves, but then I realized the structure itself and the history of the building is a community treasure," said Dimmick.

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