

syracuse.com

One of Syracuse's oldest churches closes on Easter

Published: Thursday, February 23, 2012, 1:40 AM



Dick Case / Post-Standard columnist
By



Ellen M. Blalock/The Post-Standard

This is the pipe organ at the back of First Presbyterian Church United, 620 W. Genesee St., Syracuse. The church will close on Easter, April 8. The organ is for sale.

One of Syracuse's oldest church congregations – it formed in 1824 – is closing .

First Presbyterian Church United, at 620 W. Genesee St., holds its last service on Easter, April 8.

Shutting down brings a new, smaller congregation to life, one devoted to serving First Presbyterian's Near West Side neighborhood.

"This is a story of a phoenix rising out of the ashes," according to Marianne Rhebergen, an ordained minister who is serving as transitional presbyter for the Presbytery of Cayuga Syracuse in the closing. "This is a time of tremendous change,

challenge and opportunity for urban churches. This congregation is leading the way to what it means to be a modern urban congregation."

First Presbyterian, which merged with East Genesee Presbyterian in the 1990s, fell under the weight of crushing financial responsibilities, according to Nancy Wind, an administrator called associate for congregational life at the church. At the end, it has about 85 members, down from close to 1,000 50 years ago. The congregation voted Oct. 2 to close.

The church is a complex of three buildings: the main sanctuary, built in 1905; an Italian villa building used as a parish house (built about 1865) and a property at the corner lot, McConaghy Youth Center, which the church bought from a car dealer and once used as a child care center. It's for sale.



When the church closes, all of these properties will belong to the Presbytery.



Ellen M. Blalock/The Post-Standard

First Presbyterian Church United, 620 W. Genesee St., Syracuse will close on Easter, April 8.

Marianne Rhebergen said officials are talking to another Syracuse congregation about moving into the sanctuary and parish house. She declined to identify the church but said “we are hopeful of an agreement.”

The new Presbyterian mission congregation will work out of the small Lee Chapel, at the rear of the main church, and a former choir room nearby. Early on, it will continue to operate a food pantry

and a breakfast program, which is to be moved to Saturday morning once the church closes.

Regular worship will be resumed this fall when the congregation – estimated to be about 30 people from First Presbyterian – will have a new name. Other members have relocated to other Presbyterian churches.

Marianne Rhebergen, whose husband Paul also is a minister, said she’s had previous experience in Poughkeepsie and Philadelphia in closing old congregations, which “give up life so that something new will be born.” She said the new mission will work out a non-traditional worship. Older members of the First Presbyterian congregation who can’t make it to services will be cared for by the Presbytery.

When the congregation was founded in 1824, Syracuse was a village. (We became a city in 1848.) In fact, according to the church archivist, Myrna Sullivan, says the official name of the church is the “First Presbyterian Church Society of the Village of Syracuse.”

She said the first house of worship was at Fayette and Salina streets. Prominent Syracuse families who’ve been on the rolls over the years include the Leavenworths, Formans and Mrs. Russell Sage. When the present church was built – it was dedicated in 1906 – the lot held an elegant house on West Genesee Street, one of several in the neighborhood. (The new church sat on quick sand and is supported by long footings.)

It was the home of the James Beldens, who donated the land and the house, which was moved to the rear of the lot by men and some 50 horses “without breaking the huge mirrors inside,” Marianne Rhebergen said.

She said the closing will leave two traditional Presbyterian churches in Syracuse, South Valley (formerly South Presbyterian and Onondaga Valley) and Elmwood Presbyterian. There are about 40 in Central New York.

Among the closing tasks at First Presbyterian is disposing of small pieces of church property, some of which will be sold, donated to Onondaga Historical Association or sent to the Presbyterian archives in Philadelphia. The church organ is for sale and packets of choral music from the church’s collection will be offered for sale to choir directors from other congregations.

Marianne Rhebergen said there are no plans to sell the stained glass windows in the sanctuary, which include windows by Tiffany and Keck Studios.

A Keck "Creation" window was partially covered when the organ was put in. Once the organ is sold, the full window would be seen, again.

First Presbyterian hasn't had its own pastor for five years. Guest worship leaders are rotated. Marianne Rhebergen said she will preach the final sermon on April 8.

Dick Case writes Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. Reach him at 470-2254, or by e-mail, dcase@syracuse.com.

© 2012 syracuse.com. All rights reserved.