

Century-Old St. John's Church Remains For Sale — May Face Bulldozers

by Michael Thomas

Parishioners at St. John's Episcopal Church have been unable to find a buyer for their historic church building on Depot Hill, and are soliciting offers from developers who would demolish the building to make room for new residences.

According to Rector Steve Ellis, the congregation needs a larger space in which to grow. "It's more fun to stay in a lovely little place," Ellis explained, but "the church has had the foresight to consider it's future in terms of mission more than in terms of comfort."

The small building has been home to a congregation for 105 years, founded just about the time rail service became regular and H. Allen Rispin was developing vacation parcels in the small seaside town.

The plans to move were solidified in the early '90s when the congregation purchased property for a new church in Aptos. Then Rector Lawrence Mikklesen brokered the purchase.

Ellis took over after Mikklesen's death.

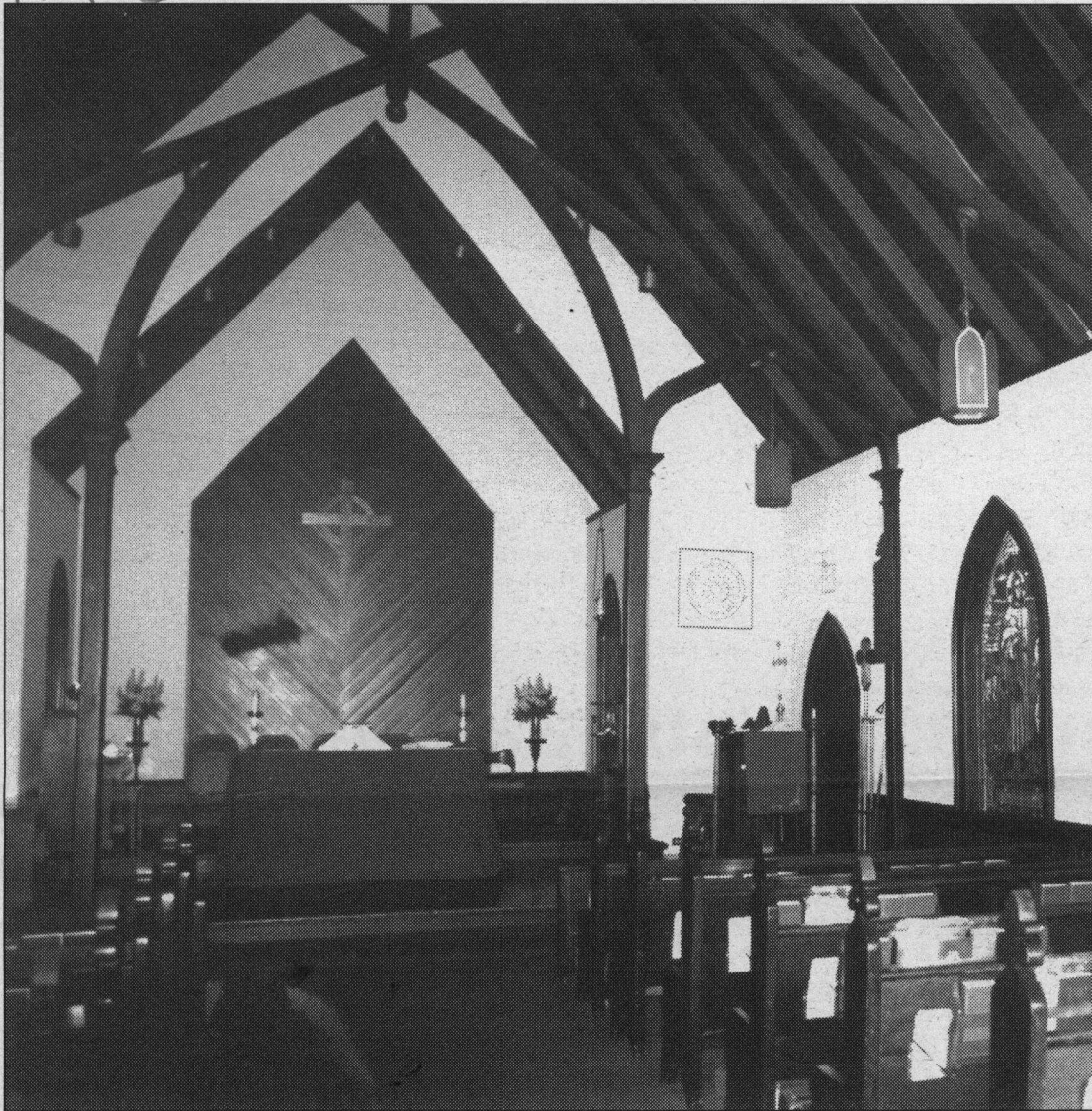
"I was brought here with the understanding that the congregation wanted to move and had to move to continue to be viable," Ellis explains.

But the question of relocation continues to divide church members.

"There is a large portion of the congregation that is very opposed to moving," says Church member David Guy.

A Quaint Setting

It's easy to see why the Church's congregation would be attached to their current facility. The Church is tucked onto a small lot in Capitola's quaint Depot Hill district. Afternoon light from its stained glass windows illuminates austere pews and simple arch work.



St. John's Church Episcopal Church has been a place of worship since the 19th century.

Standing before the Church, it seems that at any moment a beaming bride and groom will emerge and walk from its doors to the sea cliffs, a short distance away.

"My son was married in the church," says Shelley Neate, "and two of my children were baptized there."

The possibility of losing the building is hard to swallow.

"It just breaks my heart," says Neate.

During the late 1800s, when the church was built, Capitola's population was small and fluctuated with the seasons. For most residents, the Village was a place to enjoy warm, breezy summers along the coast and escape the

sweltering heat of California's inland locales.

For years the town had no real church house, and pious locals held services in living rooms and parlors. Among them was Patty Reed Lewis, whose father helped to lead the ill-fated Donner Party to safety during the blistering winter of 1846. Patty was only eight years old when the Donner Party set out on the journey, but survived the winter and carried with her a doll that has become an icon of the ordeal.

After settling in San Jose, Lewis began to spend time in Capitola, and worked for the town's benefactor, Frederick Hihn.

When Hihn donated land on

depot hill for the construction of a church, Patty Reed Lewis was one of its founders.

Hihn contributed space for numerous schools and churches around Capitola, and he deeded the land to St. John's with the stipulation that it be used as a church.

Historian Charlene Duval describes the building as an "architectural jewel." Duval explains that the church has been recognized as one of about a dozen local landmarks, but hasn't been given official status.

"It was listed in the Capitola Architectural Heritage Survey in the 1980s and recommended for inclusion in what is now the California Register," she said.

Although Capitola's City

Council never adopted the results of that survey, the Church building county be eligible for some protection because of its age.

According to Carolyn Swift, curator of the Capitola Historical Museum, a thorough report on the history of the Church would have to be prepared before the structure could be destroyed.

"An architectural historian would have to study it to see if it's a rare example of a California church," she said.

While the architecture of St. John's church is unique in Capitola, St. Andrews Church in Ben Lomond is almost identical. Swift speculates that both churches were constructed using standard designs distributed by the Episcopal Diocese that oversaw churches in the area.

But, St. John's is undeniably special, and if it's demolished, it won't be the first in the area to disappear. Capitola's other historical church, St. Joseph's, is already gone. After extended debate during the 1970s, the St. Joseph congregation relocated, and the original 1930s era building fell to the wrecking ball. The site where it stood is now a bank.

If St. John's were to be lost as well, "it would be just a huge hole in Capitola history," Swift said.

Some Repairs Needed

To the casual observer, St. John's appears to be in good condition. Its foundation of rounded stones and cement has very few cracks and the old hand-cut siding is intact. But the church doesn't want to invest in some essential upkeep.

According to Guy, "termites have worked really hard on it, and restoring the building will be very costly."

Rector Ellis said that some essential repairs have been done recently.

"We spent a good deal about a year ago replacing plaster that was

continued on page 9

COVER

continued from page 5

falling off. The sweat and humidity leached the strength out of the plaster," he added.

But Ellis would prefer a more modern church.

"It's very dark inside," he said. "There are considerable problems: the wiring is old and the termites are out of reach unless we tent the whole place."

Ellis said that the Church was not user friendly.

"The place is crazy to heat and cool," he added.

New Site in Aptos

The congregation plans to build a new, modern church in Aptos. Initial blueprints have already been drafted for a spacious, octagonal church. The new building, referred to on St. John's website as the "Second Century — Canterbury Site," would have a central courtyard with a reflecting pool and space for classrooms and a café.

Ellis estimated the new building would hold about 300 people.

But according to Guy, "it could hold 600 at its max."

The humble, one-room church on Depot Hill pales in comparison to the Second Century vision.

The old St. John's church has enough space in its pews for less than 100 people to sit comfortably. According to Ellis, the church has 250 members in its directory, but on an average Sunday only about 150 attend services, and they are split up into several services that are geared for different audiences.

At Easter and Christmas, he adds extra services to the schedule so that everyone can get a seat, but during special events such as memorials, the modest building sometimes overflows.

"There are people peeking around doors and sitting in the aisles," Ellis says. "It's insane to have people sitting outside."

The Rector sees new facilities as the only way to accomplish the dreams of many Church members — that of a large and diverse congregation. He looks to Twin Lakes Church as an example of a local church that has grown significant-



ly. Guy said that Twin Lakes has a special magnetism.

"There is just a tremendous draw to a lot people, whatever the

combination is, St. John's lacks that. The theory was to aggressively grow the congregation, but that growth has never really taken place," he added.

Many Congregations Not Growing

St. John's is still the same size as it was when parishioners first started talking about moving in the mid-80s. This isn't unusual, as few congregations in the state are actually growing these days.

Ellis admits that "Episcopal congregations are for the most part at a plateau [in terms of membership], and many are declining."

Signs reading "Reserved for First Time Visitors" label several of the parking spaces along the Church's exterior wall.

Special spaces for newcomers are a notable gesture considering that parking is extremely limited on Church grounds and nearby. The rest of the neighborhood is composed of closely spaced homes. These didn't exist 100

continued on page 9

The Mid County Post Feb. 11, 2003 - Feb. 24, 2003

7

COVER

continued from page 7

years ago, but today the little church feels cramped among them.

Parking is a challenge on Sundays, and though neighbors are forgiving, Ellis says this is a limitation that rules out some future uses.

"We considered selling it as a wedding chapel. But three or four weddings a weekend would cause too much traffic flow," he says.

The best option would be to sell the church to a religious organization that could maintain it and continue its present use. But Ellis explains that "we haven't been able to find anyone interested in taking over the building."

In addition to churches, Ellis wrote to convents, but no one is biting.

A group of monks expressed interest in the building, but Ellis says they were "in too big of a hurry." He needs a buyer who is willing to wait while a new building is constructed to house St.

John's congregation.

The monks chose to stay in their current location.

Now Ellis is considering pulling out the stained glass windows, the organ and some other details and selling the property to a developer.

While there are no firm offers yet, "there have been some nibbles, people are talking to us and their aim seems to be residential," he says.

The Question of Cash

The St. John's property actually consists of three parcels, each of which could be a home site. The old building occupies one plot, a community center is next door, and the third parcel, at 407 Escalona Drive, is a house that the church uses for special activities.

The church is hoping to get about \$2 million for the group of parcels and structures.

They'll need that money to complete the Canterbury site. Chris Cottle, a church member who is helping to plan the move, says there are currently no funds

set aside for construction but that "there are many ways that the funds could be raised."

St. John's purchased property

Neate, who once served on the Church's budget committee, says they can't realistically afford the ambitious construction project.

My family has been a member for a long time. When my wife and I started going, part of the draw was the charm of the Church.

**— David Guy,
Church member**

at the corner of State Park Drive and Highway 1 at an initial cost of about \$800,000. But Ellis says that legal expenses and interest have already driven the total cost of the new site up to about \$1.7 million.

"They'll be in debt for ever and ever," she cautioned, adding that "they're having trouble balancing the budget already."

Parting Isn't Easy

Whether the old church house

is torn down or not, there are some members of the congregation who will be unhappy to move out, and the excitement of a modern, octagonal church will undoubtedly be tinged with a bit of sadness.

When the congregation took a vote on whether to move, the majority approved, yet many are sentimental about the building they've worshipped in for so long.

"My family has been a member for a long time," explained Guy. "When my wife and I started going, part of the draw was the charm of the Church."

Neate explains that the controversy has left some feeling "marginalized."

Mildred Bourraigue is one of the church's occasional attendees who might disappear from the pews if the relocation moves forward. These days she stays apprised of church activities mostly through the monthly newsletter.

"I want things to go on as they are. It's familiar to me," she says. "It's the smallness of the church. I like that." □

The Mid County Post Feb. 11, 2003 - Feb. 24, 2003

9