

To My Dear Church Family,

April 19, 1974 - That's the day Rev. Carey Martin placed a directory beneath the wooden floor of this sanctuary as our church was in the process of rebuilding from the previous time it was struck by fire.

July 12, 2008 – That's the day the directory was discovered by a group of United Methodist Men demolishing that same water-soaked wooden floor after the fire of October 2007.

On page 8 of that directory, Rev. Martin wrote, "Outside my window I hear the workmen laying the brick for our new sanctuary and I visualize the strong walls that would support the roof that will finally give us a beautiful house of worship. As we look to the future in 1974 let us do it believing in our Christ and His Church. Giving ourselves and being obedient to the Holy Spirit as we are called to witness."

This passage reminds me of our present situation. We're not yet hearing the noise of workmen laying brick, but we can step right outside and see the foundation of the structure that will soon become our new church home, where our children will gather to worship our risen Savior, and – barring another electrical short-circuit – our grandchildren will one day meet and pray together.

Upon this foundation rests the very future of our church body, our hopes and dreams for advancing the Kingdom of God and bearing witness to His Glory, a Christ-centered haven for the people of this community, a place of acceptance, love and joy, a sacred refuge from a lost world where we can step through open doors as sinners who humbly yearn to seek the grace and mercy of our Heavenly Father.

Few days pass that I don't turn up Mattie Street just to see how the construction is progressing. And I know I'm not the only one because sometimes I see some of you doing the same thing. One day my son and I paused to watch the workers position some rebar into place. I began to think about how long the past 2-1/2 years have seemed and what we as a church family have been through.

Working together to meet this challenge, we have done what most families do when faced with a calamity of this nature – we've circled our wagons, we've rolled up our sleeves and we've gone to work. We have toiled in gunk and grime. We have picked through the ashes, mopped, swept, scraped, shoveled, salvaged construction materials, moved furniture, stored and cataloged what did not succumb to the flames, pulled nails, hammered nails, hauled broken concrete, filled dumpsters, carried boards, completed mounds of paperwork, scrambled to find education and office space and shuttled back and forth as we were hosted by our Christian neighbors down the street.

And in the process, with our focus fixed on a singular goal, we have met, planned, prayed, perspired, politicked, talked, fought, figured, cried, sighed, designed, criticized, organized, fretted, cursed, haggled, donated, sacrificed, worshiped, appealed, complimented, encouraged, supported one another, practiced our faith and shouted praises to our Lord who, as we have been taught and as we've continually reminded ourselves, always provides. Always. It has been one wild ride.

My thoughts go back to 1898 when this congregation was founded by 19 believers who gathered in a tabernacle erected by the Methodist Camp Meeting Association. That's 112 years and

several generations of this church family riding the crests and troughs, singing praises to our Savior while meeting and overcoming every challenge, including two fires and one flood. And by the grace of our God and the power of His Spirit, we are still standing - our hands a bit more calloused but our will unbroken and our faith unshaken.

Hear again the words of Rev. Martin: "O God, who hast built the church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets...It is for the unity of the Church we pray...and to her growth in grace, her building in love, her enlargement in service, her increase in wisdom, faith, charity, and power, we dedicate our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord."

My brothers and sisters, another significant chapter in the lengthy legacy of our church family is about to begin. Anticipation fills this space and the movement of the Holy Spirit spills over in our hearts and infuses our souls. Serving as the earthly head, heart and hands of our Holy Father, we have vigorously tackled the financial, emotional, organizational and spiritual obstacles we've faced since that dreadful night in 2007 and I believe the Lord has blessed this congregation and its members with energy, drive and passion, with talent and resources, with dedicated leaders, with abundant faith, self-sacrifice and connectedness, with love for one another and an abiding adoration for the Almighty.

Christians, there is excitement in the air today! There is great promise in this structure rising just outside these stained glass panes, a tangible testimony of our unwavering commitment to serve the community of mankind through the strength of our courage and devotion, without yielding to the dark forces of destruction that have sought to divide and dismember our church body; a brick-and-mortar affirmation of our intentions against all odds to preserve the sanctity of this church; a material offering to our God where all of His people are invited to fervently praise and honor Him without ceasing!

There is eternal hope that courses through our collective soul. What a grand journey we have taken together and what a unique opportunity we have been given to glorify our Lord! May God continue to bless and keep this congregation, my church family, as we enter this new chapter with our minds, hearts and spirits ardently cast upon our Father, our God, our eternal Lord and Savior.

Grace and Peace to you!  
Billy Gibson, President  
United Methodist Men