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A faithful few attempt to save their beloved sanctuary

On Sundays at Sts. Peter and Paul Russian Orthodox Church, no bells ring and no incense wafts through the light-blue sanctuary. No cantor or choir sings psalms of devotion to God. Only a CD recording plays the Divine Liturgy and prayers. And only four people are usually there to hear it. Because of dwindling membership, there has been no priest at Sts. Peter and Paul to give communion and absolve the sins of this faithful four since 1998. “We keep waiting for a priest to come,” said Ann Mizerak, who hasn’t missed a 10 a.m. Sunday service at the church in St. Helena, a little town just south of Burgaw, in several years. “But I’m 79, and my husband’s 89, so I feel like we hate for it to just deteriorate.”

And she’s not just talking about the church’s membership. The building, built in 1932, is showing its age, the most visible sign being the flaking gold paint on the onion dome. The church is finding it difficult to hire a painter to fix it.

Mizerak, 79, and her 70-year-old sister, Mary Bakan, clean the church during the week and have even paid for some of its recent renovations.

“We try to keep the grass mowed so it looks like somebody lives here,” Bakan said, smiling.

But the story of a tiny parish struggling with the costs of an aging building is not unique in the Cape Fear region. And shrinking memberships make it difficult, if not impossible, to care for these places of worship. In October, Fifth Avenue Baptist Church in downtown Wilmington was demolished after members could no longer keep up with the deterioration of its roof, asbestos problems and water and termite damage.

The congregation of four at Sts. Peter and Paul, which also includes Mizerak’s husband, Pete, and son, David, don’t want that to happen to their church – the oldest Russian Orthodox Church in North Carolina. So they took on the responsibility of caring for the church, which Mizerak and Bakan’s father, Elias Debaylo, helped to build when he immigrated to the United States from Poland.

In the past five years, they have:

Re-painted the sanctuary. Cost: \$10,000

Installed central heat and air. \$7,500

Treated the church for termite damage. \$1,700

They also replaced two broken windows after a break-in and are trying to find a painter to fix the dome above the belfry.

But there is one thing they never have to think about fixing – the plumbing. There are no bathrooms.

“You just have to come prepared,” Mizerak said with a chuckle.

The family is light-hearted about their responsibilities, but asking four people to pay for nearly \$25,000 worth of work on a church is still a tall order.



Sts. Peter and Paul Russian Orthodox Church in St. Helena, a town about 10 minutes south of Burgaw, is deteriorating. Its membership is down to four people, and there is no resident priest for Masses.

Photo by Mike Henninger

A few former members who moved away send small amounts of money to the church each year, but it's not enough to cover expenses, Mizerak said.

So recently they reached out to the Historic Wilmington Foundation, which put the church on its 2007 Watch List of Most Threatened Historic Places. If Sts. Peter and Paul Russian Orthodox Church closed, "it would just be one those irretrievable kinds of losses," said George Edwards, the foundation's director. "Architecturally, it is a very unique building. We don't have anything else in this region like that."

In its heyday, from 1932 to the mid-1980s, Sts. Peter and Paul was filled each Sunday with devoted worshippers, many of whom had immigrated from the Ukraine to settle vegetable farms in Pender County. Wishing to continue their Orthodox beliefs, they built a church to serve their colony. Most of the services were spoken in Ukrainian until the mid-1970s, when English was occasionally used. But as the members' children grew up and moved away and original members died, the church has not replenished its membership.

Edwards hopes that the Watch List will "bring some visibility to the church and might even help the congregation and leadership focus on ways to stabilize and save the building." Since the church landed on the foundation's list, he's received three or four calls from Russian Orthodox people living in the area who didn't know about the church. In September, the foundation, in conjunction with Partners for Sacred Places, a national group that helps congregations preserve their buildings, invited local religious leaders for an informational session.

"We get many, many calls from historic churches who are struggling to keep up maintaining their building," Edwards said.

Though the effort is getting more strenuous, the Sts. Peter and Paul members have managed to keep a lovely sanctuary. The two-room church is tidy, an open, light-blue room with a choir loft that's used for storage now. An American flag stands to the right of the altar. The original wooden pews hold small army-green copies of the 1962 The Divine Liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Framed pictures of icons hang on walls around the sanctuary and on the golden front gate of the Holy of Holies, the most hallowed space behind the icon screen in an Orthodox church, where the altar is kept. But having so few members sometimes means you have to break some rules. In the Orthodox church, only the priest and Orthodox males are allowed in the Holy of Holies. Rather than let that space get dirty, though, Bakan cleans it each week. She said she thought God would be angrier that His altar was dusty than that a woman was cleaning it.

Mizerak and Bakan try to continue the traditions of their Ukrainian families who settled parts of this area in the 1930s. Both women were married in the church and feel the building is as much a part of their heritage as the Ukrainian language and Pysanky eggs at Easter.

Mizerak is teaching her granddaughter to say The Lord's Prayer in Ukrainian. And one of the church members still rings the bell in the belfry when someone in the Burgaw/St. Helena community dies, just like their parents did.

They still celebrate Old Christmas in their homes each year, though it's not a community event like it once was.

"Old Christmas was my favorite holiday growing up," Bakan said. "We got to stay out of school, and we had Santa come twice." (They celebrated Christmas on Dec. 25 and on Jan. 7, Epiphany.)

But what Mizerak misses most about the old days was the fellowship. She remembers staying up until 2 a.m. to have breakfast with her family on Easter, and she loved the community picnics the church held in the spring time.

“The church was the social outlet. Everybody got together at Easter time and had those special services all week,” she said. “The church was not only a place of worship but of education. The priest taught us how to read and write the Ukrainian language, songs, customs and crafts to keep the old tradition alive in this new environment. Our lives kind of revolved around the church.”

But even without a priest, Sts. Peter and Paul is still a holy place for its few members.. “I feel so devout here,” Mizerak said.

Amanda Greene: 343-2365
amanda.greene@starnewsonline.com