

Faith in the future

Church expands through renovations and new programs

By Catherine O'Neill
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The old church might be empty, but the congregation is packed. At 11 on a Sunday morning, you can find members of the Church of the Apostolic Revival International just a block down the road from the boarded-up church building on the corner of Main Street and South Holman Street.

As members of the 400- to 500-person congregation come together in what was once a newspaper warehouse, they grab each other's hands and repeat the words of their pastor John Bennett, glancing at their neighboring parishioners and saying: "Everything will absolutely, positively be all right."

As the music of their Sunday service fills the room and spills onto the street outside, the parishioners seem confident in this truth.

The Church of the Apostolic Revival International, which has been holding services in an old newspaper factory on Angier Avenue for seven years, is looking to expand church programs and outreach by renovating its former building.

Pastor John Bennett founded the Church of the Apostolic Revival in 1990 after coming to North Carolina to study at North Carolina Central University. According to the church's website, during the next five years, the church relocated a number of times, while continuing to grow. In 1995, the church purchased the building that now sits empty on Main Street.

As the parish grew and the existing building began to need more substantive repairs, the community looked for a new space to serve as their sanctuary. About seven years ago, the congregation relocated to an old newspaper warehouse at 1207 Angier Ave.

The church continued to expand their public ministries by purchasing properties in the neighborhood.

But Regina Hall, the head of finance for the church, said outreach goes beyond purchasing property. The church provides a number of ministries, including serving food to the homeless, conducting clothing drives, providing healthcare check-ups and coordinating employment fairs with local businesses.



The building, on the corner of Main Street and South Holman Street, is undergoing work on imminent structural concerns. (Photo by Catherine O'Neill)

"We're a ministry, so everything we do is catered to outreach and bettering our community and our people within and outside of these walls," Hall said. "Everything we have is catering to ministry and outreach of people—community-wide, statewide, worldwide."

Tonya Durham, who has been a member of the congregation for 21 years, said the neighborhood has not always been great. She said this focus on community is part of what makes the church so important.

"When [the church] came in, things started to clear up," Durham said. "Not that we ran people away, but they came and they joined. And that's how the church's name got out."

She said the congregation's commitment to service provides crucial support in the community.

"I think our church is a church that meets the needs of people holistically—not just spiritually," she said.

Although the church building down the road has been empty for years, Hall said the congregation never truly left and the building will continue to play a crucial role in their ministry.

"We will continually be improving, even when we say we're finished," Hall said. "We will continually be making that building and all of our properties better."

Hall said the church has made sure the building is structurally sound and will move forward with interior renovations when local fundraising permits. Part of the vision for the renovated interior includes more divided spaces to better serve the church's ministries and community programming.

Both Hall and Bennett said the con-

gregation plays an important role in the church's future.

"Although I'm the pastor and the visionary, you can see very clearly that the congregation have a great deal of the vision," Bennett said.

Hall said the church relies on a community of people who are willing to dedicate both their time and money to help the church's programs succeed. However, she said partnerships with local businesses and the city are also needed to develop the surrounding neighborhood.

"We would like to develop the area we're in. We would like to see progress here, and we would like to see crime rates drop," Hall said. "So we think these outreach programs that offer resources that enhance people, that enhance homes, that enhance everyday life—we would like to see more coming together to support those activities."

Although the church's mission is international—with programs reaching as far as India and Africa—Bennett said the Church of the Apostolic Revival International will always have an investment in the Durham community.

"Our foot will always be in this community, regardless of how large we eventually become," he said.

The old church seems almost a part of the landscape; people walk past its boarded doors without so much as a second glance. If not for the large wooden support beams that hold up one outside wall, an unobservant pedestrian might assume the church was abandoned rather than a work-in-progress. But this quiet exterior belies the vibrant congregation making plans for the future just around the corner.