



## Fire-damaged church and soup kitchen re-emerge

BY ROBERT BEHRE  
Of The Post and Courier Staff

A year ago, a short circuit in a window air conditioner triggered a serious fire inside Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church at 77 America St.

Firefighters doused the blaze in half an hour, before it caused much structural damage. Still, the smoke and water fouled the building, rendering it unusable.

At stake was the future of a unique church.

It was clearly time for some mercy.

Housed in a 1912 structure originally built for Methodists and bought by the Catholic Church in 1928, Our Lady of Mercy is one of 10 traditionally African-American parishes among the 118 Catholic churches in the Diocese of Charleston, which covers the state.

It also was a church with a mission: The Neighborhood House soup kitchen was run from its ground floor -- directly below the worship space -- and helped many in the East Side neighborhood who otherwise might have gone hungry.

And it's one of the East Side's grander public buildings, an unusual structure with three equally imposing facades (though one is hidden by a neighboring house) and monumental windows that bathe the sanctuary in natural light and once helped keep it cool.

After the blaze, church officials estimated repairs would take up to six months and would cost about \$300,000.

The reality was more like double that -- 12 months and about \$550,000 -- but within the past few weeks, the building reopened to those who worshiped there or simply got a meal from its kitchen.

While the price tag was high for a parish of only about 65 families, Bishop Robert Baker chose to rebuild to show the larger church's

commitment to the parishioners and its soup kitchen, a ministry that began in 1915 as a social welfare arm of the St. Francis Xavier Infirmary.

The church was helped by architect Jerry English of Cummings & McCrady, himself a Catholic who volunteered his architectural services. He asked structural engineer Roland Kohlbeck and electrical engineer John Deden to do the same. "They're both Catholics, so I worked that side of it," English says with a smile.

The goal was to resurrect the church, to make it better while preserving what was familiar.

"We were trying to bring the parish back and say, 'This is your church -- just as you remembered it,' " English says. "We reused all that we could."

When the Rev. Peter Kulandai sifted through the cinders of his church a year ago, he feared most was lost. It didn't turn out to be quite that bad. The church's few decorative details survived and needed only cleaning and some repair. These include its two stained-glass windows, an African carved crucifix, the altar table and the tabernacle.

About 75 percent of its original curved pews were saved, and the others weren't replaced. "We salvaged, refurbished and adjusted the layout a little bit," English says. The church can seat about 160.

The oak flooring was replaced with new oak, and the doors were refinished. Structurally, a new subfloor was added to make it more difficult for any possible future fire to pass between floors. Also, the roof trusses were tied together, improving the odds for those inside the building during an earthquake.

The window air conditioning units, the cause of all the trouble, were replaced with a new, central system, and other fire alarm and code upgrades were made, English says.

There were a few cosmetic touches. The nave and sanctuary were repainted from beige to a subtle rose color, and the upper shutters were painted white instead of their former, darker, natural finish.

"There was acoustical tile on the ceiling. It had been stapled to the damaged plaster," English says. The plaster roof was redone with a coat of plaster over wallboard. "You would look at it and say it's a three-coat plaster system.

"The walls were plastered directly to the brick. We kept all that we could that was sound and replaced the rest. We probably retained two-thirds."

About the only change in its external appearance is that its main doors were slightly recessed so that they could open outward, as code requires, rather than inward, as they did when they were flush to the eastern facade.

There was one other change: A new cornerstone was added near the stairs. It reads, "Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church, Fire Damaged Aug. 20, 2002, Rededicated Aug. 24, 2003."

Change has been a constant for the church ever since it was built as the Hampstead Square Methodist Church, then renamed Cumberland Methodist Episcopal Church, then bought for \$10,000 by the Catholic church in 1928, integrated in the 1950s (according to a 1991 history by the Rev. Edward Morley), then saw its numbers dwindle through the 1970s when, Morley says, many families moved away, to its eventual revival.

"Fires are never good things, especially when you go through disrupting the parish," English says. "But the upshot of it all is they have a better building now, a safer building serving the same parishioners and the same clientele down in the soup kitchen.

"And it looks a lot better."

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