

“WE GOT IT DONE!” A Sermon Delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, July 31, 2022

Congregation, today is a great day, an absolutely wonderful day. We got it done. That's what we celebrate this morning. The planning and commitment of almost two decades is brought to fruition in these moments of time. Our congregation not only has a handsome building addition that serves us every week. We've also paid the project off in full, thanks to the persistent contributions of many.

What addition am I talking about? None other than our 'Family Room' wing, also known as "A Room with a View," extending along the east front side of our church. As always intended, it not only encompasses an attractively furnished multi-purpose room used as a bridal room for weddings, a Sunday morning nursery for infants and toddlers, and extra meeting space for small groups. It has also provided us with a convenient wheelchair accessible restroom just off the narthex and sanctuary. Not to be forgotten either is the new ramped entrance which has been so helpful to many. For some it is their favorite church entrance, especially now with the small flower garden that has been planted at the foot of it.

In just a few minutes we are going to be shredding an I.O.U, representing repayment in full to our St. Paul Memorial Endowment Fund which was creatively used to finance the balance on the building project not already covered by previously donated funds. As agreed among ourselves from the outset, the building balance was repaid to our endowment fund with interest so that there was no loss or diminution there from the loan to ourselves. Honest stewards that we are of all resources, no robbing Peter to pay Paul for us!

Anyone with good memory knows well what an adventure the whole building project was. It was both a long time in coming and a long time in getting done, successfully culminating in this Covid time, which proves that church still matters to us even though circumstances may on some Sundays keep us away and apart.

Historically, on average, since its official founding in 1882, our congregation has undertaken a major building project every fifteen to twenty years. Twice we were forced into building projects. Our original white frame church building on this site was struck by lightning and consumed by fire in 1911. Our second church building, constructed from more fireproof red brick, lasted until 1948. But in that post-war year our church fathers and mothers were confronted by the widening of Goddard Road as a county throughfare. They had the choice to move the old church back from the road or build something new and even better. We are sitting in the wise choice that was made, albeit decorated with all the church pews, woodwork, stained glass windows, and chandeliers stripped from the old church and transplanted to this one. Our 1911 steeple bell, which calls us to Sunday

morning worship and tolls for our dearly departed, is also a cherished relic from our second church building.

One of the beautiful things about the 1948 building was its incorporation of a large fellowship hall for major events. No more going outside to the old adjoining cinderblock building where larger social gatherings, including church suppers, were held. Apparently, as planned, the new integrated Fellowship Hall was finished first, well ahead of this sanctuary. For the better part of a year, the Fellowship Hall was actually used for worship until all the fine finishing of the sanctuary could be completed. On regular display in our church parlor is a photograph of the Fellowship Hall when we were worshipping there. All the pews were set up, row upon row. The Fellowship Hall stage was used as the chancel where the altar was placed. Although not as beautiful as our present sanctuary, the Fellowship Hall, bedecked in pews, does look pretty good doubling as sacred space.

Not resting on laurels, our congregation made a commitment to build more as soon as possible. In those baby boom days, more Christian education classroom space was needed. Only seven years after the dedication of the new sanctuary and fellowship hall, ground was broken for a Sunday School addition on the west side. This added the west lobby, the first floor West Room and two spacious upstairs classrooms that could be partitioned for maximal utilization in educating our young. I don't know where we would be without that classroom space. Many important moments in our children's lives happened in those classrooms. Both through their relationships with Sunday School teachers and what was taught each week about Jesus, many young people were nurtured in a life-sustaining faith. I know that I will always have wonderful memories of the confirmation classes I taught in our classrooms upstairs and down. Every so often, here at St. Paul, we get a knock on the door from those, who growing up here as part of our church family, have returned from afar and want to revisit those upstairs classrooms which were once a whole world for them where they learned about Christ's redeeming love.

I've been told that by the late 1960s there was much discussion about the need for more classrooms. A two-story addition at the back of our church was planned with full-architectural renderings. But what got built instead in the mid-1970s was an also much-needed commercial kitchen to support our church suppers and other all-church events. To this day, we are the envy of other churches which are not so well equipped. Happily, the new expansive kitchen did free up space elsewhere in our existing building for classroom use. The old kitchen was converted into a church parlor, which has been especially great and useful for our adult faith development programs, as well as meetings.

I only half-joke that there should be a couple of historical plaques in our parlor. It was in that parlor space that two of the Downriver's most vital, ecumenical projects got launched. Month after months, literally for years on end, Christians of all stripes met in that room to coordinate plans for both the ChristNet Homeless Shelter and the Fish & Loaves Community Food Pantry. Yes, in that special space under our roof, Catholics and Baptists not only shook hands but prayed together—in some cases, for the very first time!

Unfortunately, within a half dozen years after the construction of our church kitchen, bad times came to Detroit. The 1980s were a decade of economic retrenchment and loss as automation reduced jobs and others were exported overseas. The auto industry, which helped make Detroit, took a big hit. Rather unkindly, commentators began to dub Detroit and the greater Midwest as the “rust belt.”

From what church members have told me it all hurt our church too, making us for all our faith more wary about grand schemes. Yet God is good always, reviving hope where there might otherwise have been lingering anxiety and despair. By the mid-to-late 1990s our congregation was ready to move forward again, recognizing that any vital ministry really does need to be equipped with suitable facilities. The last thing any faith generation wants is to have a building become an obstacle to Christ's ministry.

Boy, in those heady go-go years of the 90s we were thinking big! Rather than being haphazard in our plans, our congregation retained a capable architect who could lay out for us a multi-phased plan for redeveloping our church structure, preserving the best of it and making a lot more of it. Still hanging on one of our church walls is a superb rendering of what we had in mind, long-term. It was a worthy goal. Yet everything comes with a price tag.

Ironically, just as we were poised to undertake—with the full approval of the congregation—bond funding to make a good chunk of the plan do-able, the Great Recession—another economic calamity—kicked in, with devastating consequences for many. Bonding companies closed their doors. Often hanging in precarious financial condition, awaiting government bailouts, banks stopped making loans, especially to non-profit organizations and churches. For us, it was like a carpet yanked out from under our feet. At the same time, I pondered then, as I wonder still: was there God's blessing in all this? What would have happened if we had gone ahead just a little earlier with bond financing and ended up as a church with a boatload of debt—overwhelming debt? In fact, all around us as the Great Recession deepened, there were many churches, especially larger ones, that went belly up—the equivalent of bankrupt, forced to sell their buildings or severely cut back their ministries because they were “church-poor” and struggling.

It's never pleasant to live through any situation where there is crushing debt. Yet with so much already invested in seeing our church improved and our faith in Christ to buoy us, how could we not go forward in some revised or simplified way? Ultimately, our steadfast, intrepid, and very faithful 'Building Our Future' Team identified a part of the original building plan with which we could still move ahead—an addition that would address intergenerational needs of our congregation as we continue to worship here. To fund it above and beyond contributions already made, and in light of members' financial pledges still outstanding, there was a decision to use our own God-given resources by borrowing from our church's longstanding endowment, which was not huge but sufficient because it has been so judiciously managed over the years. On this basis we did break ground on the "Building Our Future" addition and finished it in a timely way.

Very helpful was the willingness of one of our members, who was very knowledgeable in all matters construction, to serve as resident project manager. This—and other initiatives by volunteering church members—helped considerably reduce or curb construction costs so that we stayed within our budget. The handsome outcome, which is true to our church's original architectural design and incorporates one of our congregation's now-historic stained glass windows, should continue to be a source of pride for us all, even as we rightly thank God as the ultimate source of all our blessings. Although well-used by kids, parents, brides, and grieving families attending worship here, the room also provides a quiet, airy space for personal meditation—a place of ready, momentary retreat from the din of the crowd and sacred throng. If you haven't done so already, venture there some Sunday after worship or some other occasion when you briefly need to step away. It can and has served as a "room with a view" to the soul.

In decades past congregations, including our own, often used to hold mortgage-burning ceremonies when they had paid up on debt for building addition. Any fire and any smoke that goes with it doesn't seem to be ecologically friendly in our days of global warming. But it's still important to symbolically acknowledge our congregation's accomplishment—the fact that we have repaid our building in total with interest and our premises are now free and clear of any debt. Also important to acknowledge is the creative way we accomplished this, relying upon the faithfulness of member pledges, employing our own resources for self-financing, and trusting ourselves as God's servants and Christ's disciples to be honest stewards, not failing in our commitment to replenish what was lent. Thus, we finish our worship today shredding an I.O.U. to our church's endowment fund with the pieces presented to our St. Paul Council president as a keepsake of this happy day and wonderful event.

Shredders can be awfully noisy. The sound they emit can grate on the ears. Yet no shredder is noisier than the construction sounds that I used to hear from my adjoining

office as the new addition went up. I hope you'll consider the noise of today's shredding strictly happy noise, its own kind of sweet cacophony as music to the ears.

Unless we have an "edifice complex," we know that a building isn't everything. In its days of glory Israel successively built three great temples for worship. One of them was constructed at the behest of David's son, King Solomon. The Old Testament Book of Kings describes it almost down to the last rafter and stud. (*1 Kings 6:1-14*) Both that temple and its successor, constructed during the reign of Judea's King Herod, were regarded as true wonders of the ancient world. Yet, as we hear in our gospel lesson for this morning, Jesus foretold that that the Great Temple would not last. (*Mark 13:1-8*) Its magnificence would end in destruction and ruin. This is the ultimate fate of everything constructed by human hands. It's one more case of ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Nevertheless, while they do last and endure, the church buildings we construct can truly make a home for the spirit of God to dwell and for God's people like us to be morally encouraged and spiritual nurtured to journey faithfully and well through this life as we prepare for our next life at God's side, joining in the company of Jesus Christ and all the saints in their light. May God bless and prosper our ministry as we put our sacred space, old and new, to faithful use, serving his purposes for us in this world. We got it done! Yet, as God's servant people, we have much yet to do! **Amen.**