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Belleville church celebrates 95th anniversary

By Ron Leir
Special to The Observer

Four decades ago, Belleville Cub Scout Pack 350 buried a time capsule under Fewsmith Presbyterian Church on the Little Street side.

Some years later, as the church was preparing to pour concrete for a disabled-access ramp leading to an entrance, a church congregant realized the vacuum-sealed, 18-inch-by-6-inch aluminum tube would be encased once the cement took hold.

At that point, longtime church elder Joseph Pospisil recalled, hope of retrieving that piece of church history was reluctantly jettisoned.

That loss notwithstanding, the Fewsmith flock have not given up on their venerable edifice which has now survived into its 95th year — a milestone the faithful celebrated Nov. 4 with a dinner at the San Carlo in Lyndhurst.

And the Belleville governing body recently issued a proclamation, congratulating the congregation on that achievement.

Plans for the church were launched in December 1924 when 250 charter members signed on to build a new house of worship at Union Avenue and Little Street as a memorial to the beloved Rev. Joseph Fewsmith, who served as pastor of 2nd Presbyterian Church of Newark from 1851 to 1888.

Born in Philadelphia in 1816, Fewsmith was the son of a flower merchant. He graduated from Yale in 1846 and became a professor of homiletics and pastoral theology. He was ordained after attending Auburn Theological Seminary in New York.

Members of 2nd Presbyterian had previously built a new church in Newark named for Fewsmith in 1889, but after the size of the congregation had dwindled, that property was deeded over to Pilgrim Baptist, an African-American congregation.

The land for the new Fewsmith Church, at Union Avenue and Little Street, was secured through the intercession of 2nd Presbyterian, with construction financing tied to a mortgage on the old church, arranged by the trustees of the old church and the Newark Presbytery.

As construction proceeded in 1925 at the new church's current site at Union Avenue and Little Street, congregants conducted worship services at the Masonic Temple on Joralemon Street.

The new building, which opened in February 1926, contains two stained-glass windows in the rear of the sanctuary dedicated to the late Fewsmith. It also is the beneficiary of an organ used previously at 2nd Presbyterian, which shut its doors in 1995.

The Rev. O. Bell Close became the first official pastor of the new church.

Over the years, the church has seen 10 pastors, with Kirk Woodward, a member of the Collaborative Ministry Team, designated by the Presbytery as pastoral leader in February 2018. Woodward earned a certificate in pastoral leadership at the University of Dubuque.

Highlights of the church's progress include full payment of the mortgage on its 25th anniversary in 1949, completion of an addition for use as a church school

Continued on the next page

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Continued from the previous page

in 1960 (for which that mortgage was paid off by 1971) and the appointment of its first female pastor, the Rev. Heather Finck, in 1996.
By the mid-1950s, church membership peaked with close to 800 congregants plus a Sunday School that enrolled as many as 175 children and a Scout unit estimated to be the largest in the township, Pospisil reckoned.
Since then, as is the case with many religious institutions, the church has aged and has found it difficult to fill the gap of members lost or fallen away. Current membership, comprising residents from Belleville and surrounding towns, is listed at 54.
But Pospisil, who lives in Nutley; Belleville's San-

dra Constantino, an elder whose membership dates from 1986; and Lila Gutches, of Clifton, an elder and moderator of deacons who joined the church in 1972, and Woodward point out that Fewsmith has served — and today continues to serve — the diverse needs of the community.
For the past three decades, for example, the church has hosted gatherings of the nonprofit Narcotics Anonymous; in years past, it provided space for Alcoholics Anonymous and the AARP. It still has Scouting programs for youngsters of all backgrounds and it opens its doors for public voting, serving as the polling place for three local election districts.
And on the religious front, the church is finishing the first year of its Twelve Months of Giving, dedicating each month to fundraising projects for

various causes, including AIDS children, emergency food pantries, winter clothing for the needy, SMILE Train charity for children with cleft palates, disaster relief, animal aid, etc.
“We are one great home of sharing,” Woodward said.
Then there are the Lenten breakfasts with guest speakers, Advent lunch, the Blessing of the Animals in June, prayer group, Bible Study, book club and Sunday choir accompanied by organist Paul Viscardo.
Woodward is optimistic about Fewsmith's future.
“I like to say God gives you who you need at this time as we spread God's word and helping people is part of that mission.”