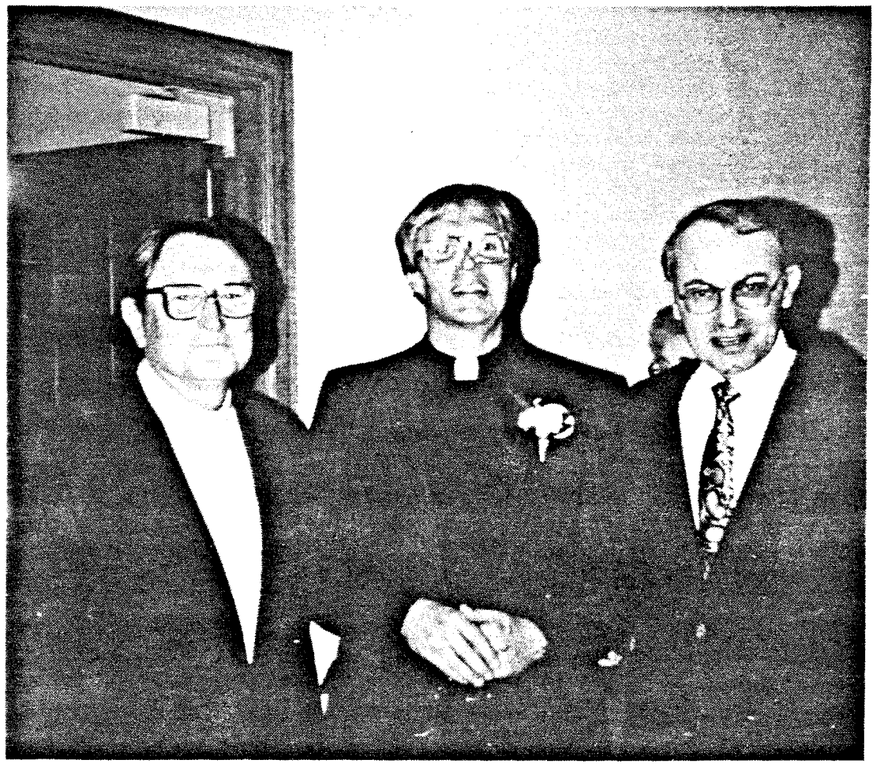


The Rev. Cortley Burroughs, pastor emeritus, the Rev. Ross Doyel, interim pastor, and the Rev. Kenneth Dobson, pastor-elect, at Ross's farewell lunch on March 15, 1987.

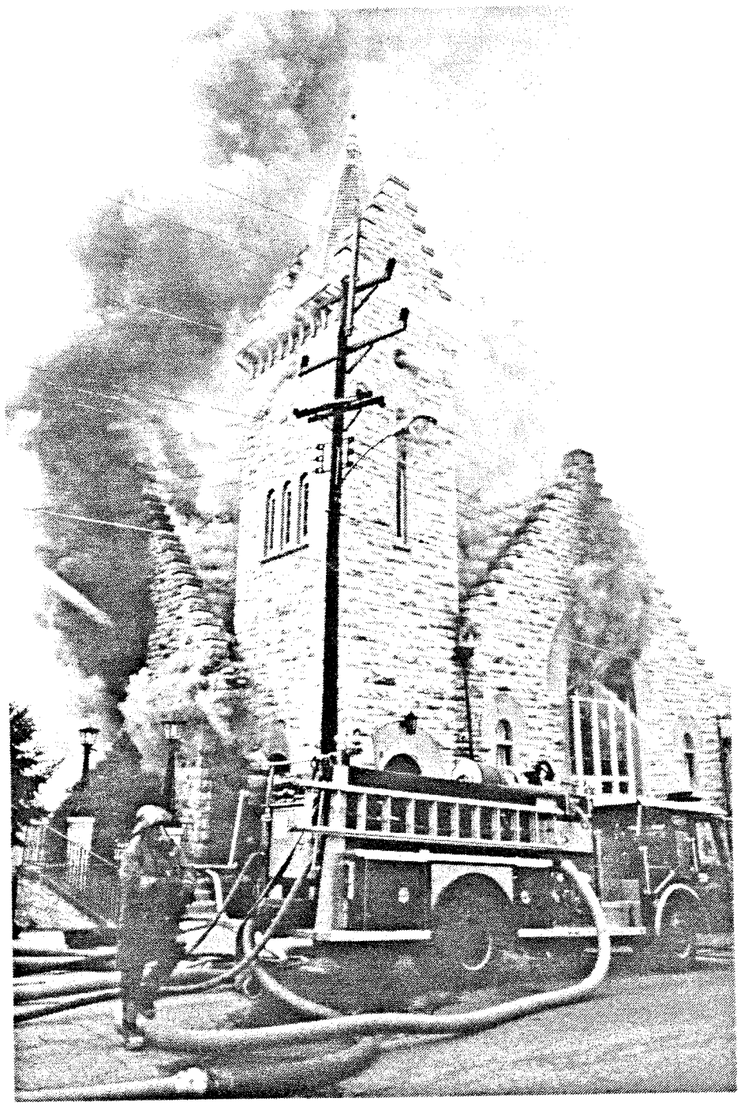
Chapter Three

FIRE AND RECONSTRUCTION

The Rev. Kenneth Dobson of Jacksonville, Illinois was elected by the congregation to be pastor, on the first Sunday of January, 1987. The Rev. Ross Doyel resigned and was prepared to leave Alton when Dr. Burroughs died, on March 21, 1987. The funeral was held on the Saturday after Ross's farewell Sunday. The loss of two pastors within the same week was a great shock to the congregation.

After Kenneth Dobson assumed his position on the first of May, work began on plans for refurbishing the church. A Centennial Capital Campaign Committee was appointed to raise an anticipated $300,000 to complete the work on roofs, furnaces, air conditioners, tuck-pointing, and interior redecoration. Meanwhile, a committee was working to secure a new associate pastor. The committee presented the Rev. Kurt J. Calkins of Paducah, Kentucky, a native of Kirkwood, Missouri, to the congregation in May, 1988, just as the refurbishing was beginning. Kurt was to be installed on Sunday afternoon, July 10. But the evening before a disastrous fire changed the course of the future for both Kurt and the church.

The church clocks stopped at 5:30 p.m. Twenty units of fire equipment responded to four alarms. The fire destroyed the sanctuary and the Alby Street entryway and stairs. Smoke and water damage was immense in the rest of the building. Virtually everything in the sanctuary was burned up, but the walls were still standing. It appeared that the fire had started in the wooden ceiling of the sanctuary just on the north side of the church tower. It proceeded under the slate roof across the back of the sanctuary, engulfing the ceiling. Section by section, burning debris dropped to the floor and ignited the pews and furniture, until the fire involved the chancel area and the front of the church. The intensity of the inferno was later clear. A three pound brass eagle from the top of the American flag which had stood beside the pulpit was found at the rear of the church. The console of the pipe organ was completely reduced to ashes, with a steel I-beam which held the keyboards, the only identifiable piece remaining. The tall steel girders which had been added in 1964 to expand the roof were twisted by the heat.



July 9, 1988

Fire Chief Don Twitchell and his crew, however, managed to contain the fire to the sanctuary. Working inside the Christian Education wing of the building, and from snorkle platforms outside, the spread north was finally stopped by around 7 p.m. and in another hour and a half the fire was virtually extinguished.

Investigations over the next few days determined that the cause of the fire was conclusively as the Telegraph had reported:

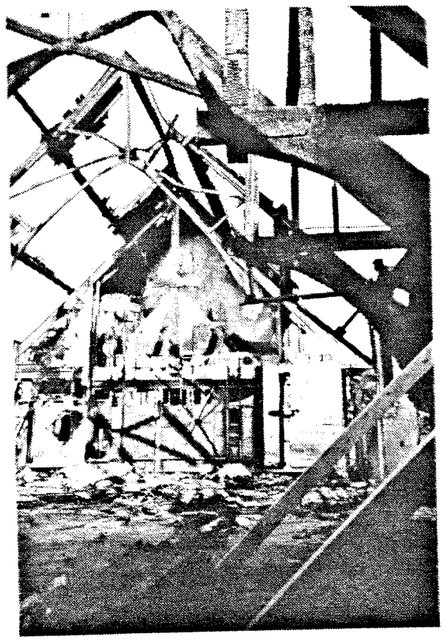
> The fire apparently started in the roof when a painter's ladder struck a utility wire, according to officials of the Alton Fire Department.

It seems that thousands of volts of electricity entered the church through metal rods or pipe which were under the foot of the ladder in the sidewalk. The charge was carried into the building where it "arked out of disconnected lead pipes that used to carry gas to the gas lights of the church." As in the tower, most of the arks created burns that quickly went out, but not in the ceiling of the sanctuary. The cause of the fire was an accident. The painter was severely burned and recovered in the burn unit of St. John's Mercy Hospital.

Expressions of sympathy and offers of help poured in the night of the fire and for several weeks afterward. Many of the most touching were from other Presbyterian churches who had experienced a fire in the past. All the presbytery leaders came by, many of them while the fire was still burning, having seen the news flashes on television. The most substantial offer of help was from the Metropolitan United Methodist Church for us to use their facilities for worship, for Sunday School, and for offices, for as long as we needed them. That offer was accepted on the spot for the next morning. Television newscasts began to announce the 9 a.m. service with the nightly news. A special joint meeting of the session and trustees was also called for 8:30, to get our act together.

Several members volunteered to coordinate the response to the fire as long as they were given the authority to be the church's agent in dealing with such official entities as the insurance company, city officials, and contractors. Frank Webb and Fred Renshaw, who had handled the last capital campaign were to head up the committee. The committee agreed, in effect, to take over, if given a free rein, in order that the pastors be given at least a portion of time to attend to pastoral responsibilities. The joint boards agreed enthusiastically. The formal motions were voted a week later.

The morning after the fire several visiting Presbyterian pastors were in the congregation to join in the moving service. Evlyn Fulton, in her final appearance as Presbytery Executive expressed the concern of all the churches of the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy and offered material help as well, which has been received in several forms. Inside the sanctuary of the Metropolitan church reporters from the media took notes, and outside camera crews interviewed members of the congregation. Photographers took pictures of members peering into the burned-out sanctuary windows, and milling about.



The interior of the sanctuary , the week after the fire destroyed the roof.



At 3 p.m., as scheduled, the Presbytery conducted the service of installation for Kurt Calkins as Associate Pastor. The service was held in the sanctuary of the Metropolitan United Methodist Church. A reception in the social hall was served from punch bowls that had been cleaned of soot after being removed from the fireside room of First Church, where they had been set out the afternoon of the fire.

During the following week the skeleton functions of the church began to return. First, Barbara Bailis, an adjustor from the Atlantic Mutual Insurance Co. arrived, along with two investigators flown in from Dallas. Immediately, the adjustor took charge and authorized an initial payment of $75,000 to get things into storage and the clean-up begun. Still, there was work for scores of volunteers. Temporary offices were set up in a mobile construction office in the lower parking lot on Alby, behind the Nearly New Shop.

By the end of summer the cleaning out of debris was undertaken, and plans were well advanced for redecorating the West Wing of the church so that the offices could be used. That was attacked as the first project of the rebuilding. All the floor coverings in the wing, except those at the far north end had to be removed and replaced. Ceiling tile in areas close to the fire also had been destroyed. Otherwise, some of the furniture had to be replaced, and other furniture cleaned.

The West Wing of offices was ready for use by mid-November. Some of the redecoration of the Fireside Room was still unfinished until nearer Christmas, and the chapel was used for the first time after the fire for midnight services on Christmas eve. Shortly after the first of the year the organ in the chapel was completed by Robert Dial of Springfield.

The results of the redecoration of the West Wing provided for separate offices for each of the secretaries, and the removal of all the nursery rooms from that wing. A wall was removed from between the two nursery rooms so that the enlarged room might be available for choir rehearsals, for committee meetings, and for gatherings during the week. It was expected that the other centers of the church might not have to be heated or air conditioned much of the time, and that only the West Wing would be kept in the comfortable range day in and day out. In this way one part of the master plan for the Centennial Capital Campaign program was actually accomplished, mostly using insurance money.

Still, a chunk of the $125,000 that had been raised in the capital funds drive was used. Out of the funds came the money to remove the nursery wall. A new telephone system replaced the old one. A security system was installed. And in the midst of the rebuilding Agnes and Pat Vine contributed money for new furnaces, which were worn out, although not damaged by the fire.

Still more complicated was the renovation of the Christian Education building. Two concepts dominated the new design: that the building be made as multi-functional as possible, and that it be available for all sorts of programs in addition to Sunday School.

The second floor, according to this plan, would have most of the teaching cubicles removed, opening up the space. The first floor would have a new "state of the art" nursery and changing room near the entrance to the building, and a renovated lounge for informal meetings and talk, connected to a sparsely decorated recreation room. It was also suggested that handicapped accessible rest rooms be put in this renovation, since they would be needed somewhere in the building, and this center would be most likely to attract groups which might have (or even consist entirely of) folks with physical handicaps.

Meanwhile, investigation was proceeding on two of the most major rebuilding projects, the pipe organ for the sanctuary, and the stained glass windows. It was decided during the next two months to accept the recommendations of three committees working to proceed with the design on the sanctuary. In essence, the work of the organ and musical instruments taskforce was directed toward understanding the pipe organ market as much as it was toward developing a refined set of characteristics for the new organ. The taskforce accepted Greg Fletcher's credentials in this area, and also realized that some of the characteristics (or most of the characteristics) would depend on the interior of the new sanctuary and on the acoustical properties of the building materials selected, as well as on the nature of the music to be performed. It was agreed to ask Robert Dial, who had built the chapel organ and who had maintained the sanctuary organ for several years, to submit a proposal. Mr. Dial's work on the chapel organ was applauded, and when his proposal on the sanctuary organ seemed to offer more organ for the money available, the only question remaining was what the insurance company would say.

Virtually the same situation existed regarding the stained glass windows. A local St. Louis company underbid the company with a national reputation which had put in the windows in 1964. The firm of Emil Frei and Associates was then invited to submit drawings and to describe their plan of action. At a meeting in the spring the drawings and design, as well as their figures of cost and schedule for payments were enthusiastically approved.

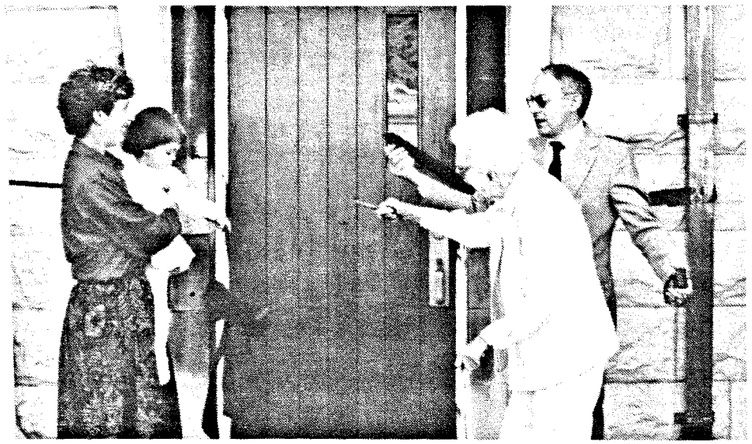
The sanctuary design taskforce was also working toward plans for a chancel design. A decision to have the organ pipes visible in the front of the sanctuary was already made, as was the basic seating configuration in the nave. Many questions of how to accommodate large weddings, concerts, pageants, communion, and other services which all demand a different chancel arrangement were finally resolved by accepting the suggestion that the chancel floor be flat, without permanent platforms for the choir or a pit for the organ. Everything in the chancel was to be moveable. Next it was decided to eliminate side walls in the chancel, but to include an arcade screen, without solid surfaces, to let in light from the east and west windows. This would transform the two passage ways into usable space, the east one with the bay window would be used as a prayer chapel, and the west one would be a space for handbell ringing, for choral introits, or for processions to assemble before directly entering the chancel.

All the plans were presented as "design concepts" to the session and were enthusiastically accepted. The work of the sanctuary and musical instrument taskforces was appreciated and the taskforces were dissolved. However, several members of the taskforces were on the church's building committee, and so they continued to serve as advisors. The building committee refined the basic design over the next couple of months and brought the whole project to a joint meeting of the boards of trustees and session early in the summer. The sanctuary floor was marked with masking tape and chalk to indicate where the boundaries of the chancel, the ends of the pews and the position of major items of furniture might be. A full color painting of the Old Testament stained glass window, and architects drawings of the design were also set up. The joint boards approved the plan, as enthusiastically as the session had approved the earlier design.

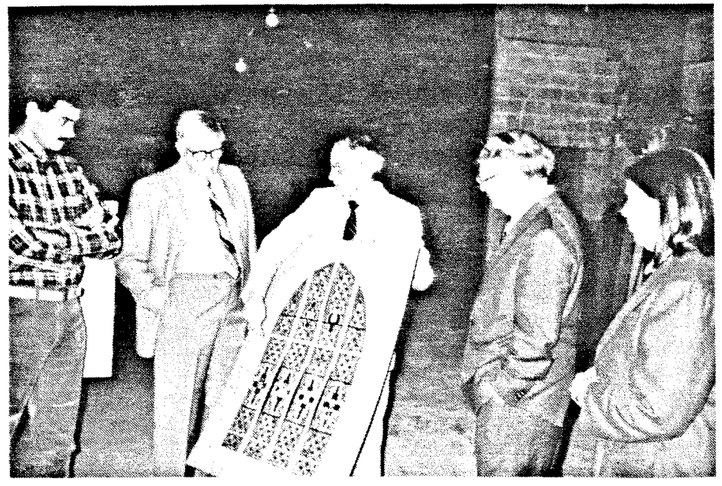
The task then fell to the rebuilding committee to proceed to work with the architects and the insurance company to develop a proposal on which potential contractors could bid, and to prepare a list of items not covered by insurance. This set of proposals took immense work. First it seemed that the bid might be signed in November, and then in December. Ultimately, it was the first week of 1990 before the insurance adjustor gave permission to Frank Webb and the committee to sign the general contract for the rebuilding of the sanctuary. The successful bidder, as was the case with the contract for the structural steel and roof a year earlier, was the Poettker Company.

While this work was taking its course, the congregation was provided two opportunities to "mark milestones" in the progress of the rebuilding. On Sunday September 24 a "Homecoming" celebration was held, beginning with a ribbon cutting ceremony to symbolically re-enter the renovated Program Center. The church sponsored Boy Scout troop marched the colors into their new meeting room after a ribbon at the Alby Street door was cut by Helen Emons representing the oldest members and Emily Sinclair, one of the youngest. Displays that afternoon "unveiled" the sanctuary plans for the congregation as they had been approved by the joint boards several weeks earlier.

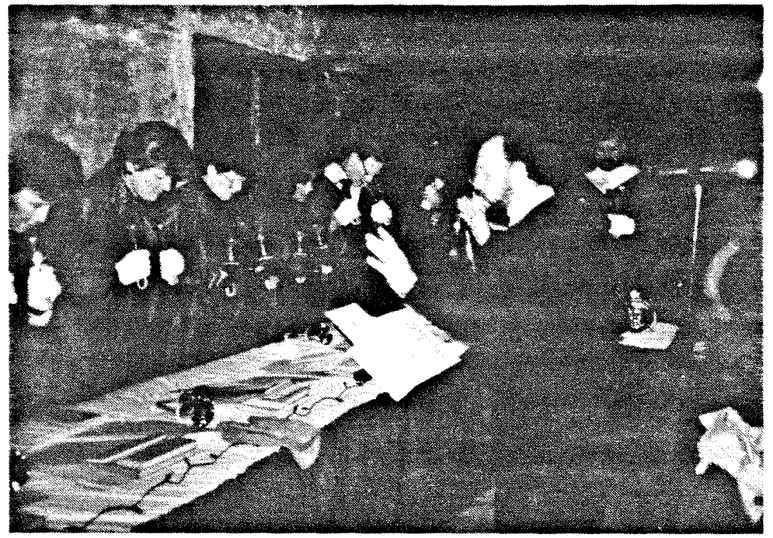
Second, on Christmas Eve, a service of Carols and Candles was held in the sanctuary. A record-breaking cold spell preceded Christmas, and the sanctuary was barely warm enough for people dressed in several layers of clothing. Large wreaths hung on the south window cavities, with purple advent banners rescued from the fire hanging below. A simulated altar with candles was prepared, along with seating for the choir, and bell tables skirted with bright red. Despite the cold, the sanctuary was packed with people, especially families with children who did not want to miss the historic event. Handbell music, then choral music, Christmas carols and scripture were followed by the traditional candle lighting. Although the service was at 3 p.m. the room was dark, with only plywood in the windows. The naked steel beams and unpainted wood loomed overhead, and the plaster blackened and streaked, hanging here and there in strands, added a somber element to the mood of the festival. The end of the service was turned over to the Masonic Grand Lodge of the state of Illinois for a formal cornerstone laying ceremony. Instead of proceeding outside, as had been planned, the ceremony was simulated in the sanctuary. Both the cold wind and the fact that the actual



Helen Emons, representing the oldest segment of the congregation, and Emily Sinclair (held by her mother) "cut the ribbon" in September 1989 on the first "Homecoming."



From the right: Mrs. Robert Frei, Bob Frei, the creator of the new stained glass windows, Ken Dobson, Bill Maxson and Jeff Matis. The whole design of the sanctuary was unveiled to the congregation in September, 1989 as bids were being proposed.





Christmas Eve, 1989. A Handbell Concert preceded the worship in the burned-out sanctuary. A Year later the church was re-dedicated and consecrated on Christmas week-end.

cornerstone had been delayed by a snowstorm and the cold the week before probably would have prevented any cornerstone ceremony at all, except for the fact that members of the Grand Lodge had come from all over the state on Christmas Eve for this event, which was being "covered" by KSDK-TV and the St. Louis Post Dispatch.

Immediately after Christmas, the first step was to demolish all the wooden flooring that had remained after the 1964 renovation, which had put the chancel on a raised platform over what had been the floor of the church social hall. All the kitchen fixtures had been removed immediately after the fire, and were stored in the fellowship hall under plastic sheets. These were taken for repairs, and so that the fellowship hall could be worked on, as well. Wooden floor along the East side of the sanctuary was also removed. The whole building quickly became a construction zone. The session and trustees had approved plans for church-sponsored improvements, which included marble flooring over the entire chancel area, a wood and leaded-glass screen across the rear of the sanctuary to form a narthex, and an elevator pit just inside the Alby street entrance for possible use later.

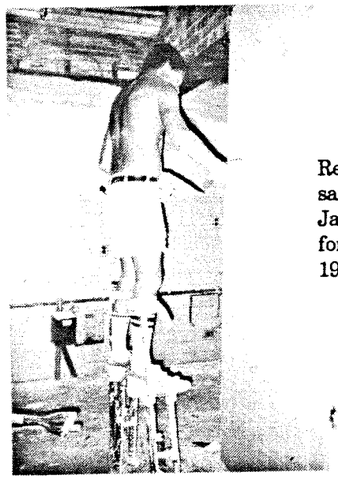
Construction planning now continued with intense conversations about the most obvious portions of the sanctuary, the furniture, organ, and stained glass windows. Through the past several months, Sam Schmidt had been compiling designs and refining drawings for the furniture. From a vast collection of pictures and books the interior English Gothic details of the sanctuary began to emerge. By the end of 1989 the package was ready to submit to furniture companies for consideration.

As the rebuilding committee considered church furniture, which included a pulpit, communion table, pews, benches and tables of several shapes and sizes, once again the choice was between a large firm with a national reputation or a small family-owned company in the area. The lower bid came from the Beckemar Church Furniture Co. of Blue Mound, Illinois, which was actually run by Bevin Aufrecht with the help of his brother. Bevin and Mark's mother and father, and grandfather all worked in the shop, as well.

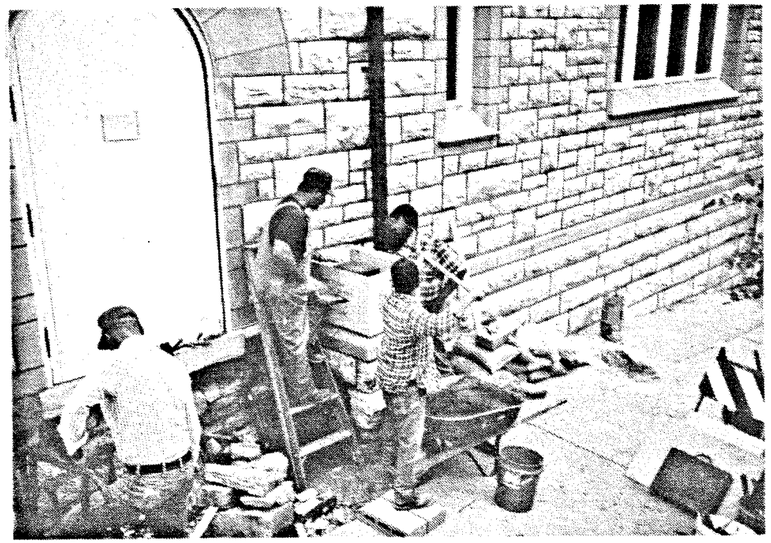
Meanwhile, the boards gave the pastor a green light to open a "Window of Opportunity" to contribute funds and designate memorials in the church. The First Hand newsletter announced:

> A "Window of Opportunity" is now open for First Presbyterian Church. During the three months of February through April a list of the furnishings and appointments for the sanctuary will be available for subscription as designated memorials. Many of the items in the sanctuary, naturally, were already contributed as memorials and will be replaced with insurance funds. But many new items are on the list, including several stained glass windows, chancel chairs, brocade communion table cloths, candle stands, two chandeliers, a carved eagel reading stand for the Bible, a facade of organ pipes, pews, and many other items.





Reconstruction began on the interior of the sanctuary, fellowship hall, and kitchen, in January, 1990, and was completed just in time for the dedication services on December 21-22, 1990.





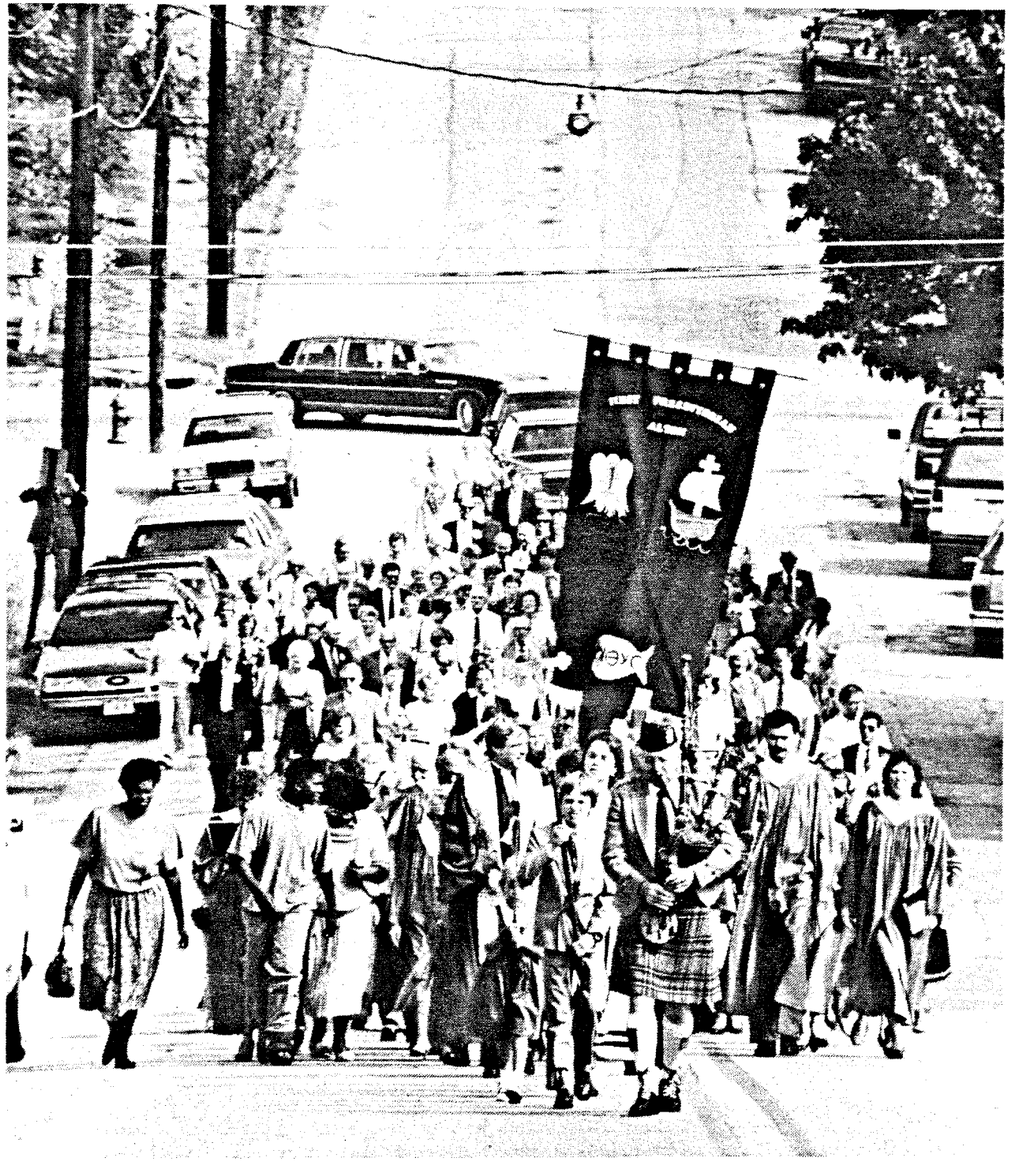
The stone-masons actually laid the new cornerstone in March, 1990. It is the church's third cornerstone, marking the third construction of a church within the same walls.

The purpose of the campaign was to respond to many requests to designate a gift toward the rebuilding of the church in the name of relatives, and to release funds from insurance for other rebuilding projects such as tuck-pointing, sealing the stone surface and to replace collapsing sidewalks. A brochure explaining the "Window of Opportunity" was sent to every home, and that was the first and only program for soliciting funds for rebuilding since the 1988 Centennial Capital Campaign was stalled in mid-stride the day of the fire.

Response to the Window of Opportunity was positive. Dozens of memorial gifts and designations were made. There was particular enthusiasm for the stained glass windows. Originally it was intended to replace the plain glass windows which had been in the old social hall, and then in side rooms and hallways outside the chancel, with low-quality leaded glass. But within two months all the new windows were snapped up as memorials, along with the windows in the rear of the sanctuary which had not been designated as memorials in 1964. Pews, choir stalls, tables, torcheres (flower and candle stands), and many other designations rolled in. By the end of April it was clear that the funds for reconstruction would be adequate and that no urgent further campaign would need to be held.

At about the same time, Pat Vine, daughter of Agnes and Ben Vine, in consultation with her mother, decided to contribute the funds for a new elevator in the church. And as spring proceeded things were beginning to look progressive. In March, the actual new cornerstone was finished, and laid across the steps from the original 1897 stone. Inside the new box was a preliminary draft of the history of the church up to 1985, a video-tape of the church's program, a set of signature cards of those who had attended services, the church's 1988 picture directory, a coin supplied by the Grand Lodge of Illinois, and a program of the Christmas-Eve cornerstone ceremony. By mid-May the outside of the church was nearly finished, scrubbed bright as new and treated with a stone sealant to prevent further erosion of the Ashler limestone. Plans were being pushed to have the sidewalks replaced where they were cracked and buckling.

A second homecoming was planned for the first Sunday after Labor Day. The day was clear and warm, perfect for the events of the morning. At ten o'clock both the congregations of the Metropolitan United Methodist Church and the First Presbyterian Church assembled in the Metropolitan sanctuary. The service began with an anthem sung by a combined choir, and with prayers. Jim Wheeler, pastor of the Metropolitan church, and Ken Dobson spoke for their respective congregations, and then the First Presbyterian congregation rose and left for a walk "back home." The parade was led by Mr. Bill Sandbeck playing the bagpipes, followed by the church's new processional cross, banners and pulpit Bible. The fellowship hall of First Presbyterian Church was arranged for worship. A crimson dosal cloth and a red oriental rug demarked the worship center, with folding chairs on three sides for pews. The communion table from the chapel and candle stands completed the center. The fellowship hall was used for worship throughout the remainder of the year.





Led by a bag-piper, Bill Sandbach of St. Louis, the congregation paraded back to their own home, after worshipping in the Metropolitan United Methodist Church for two years and two months.



Great plans were made for a festival of rededication on the week-end before Christmas. It was at that time that the sanctuary would be used. At last, around Thanksgiving, the marble work was done, and the rest could be finished. One of the large stained-glass windows was installed, and more were promised in time for Christmas. The organ installation began to get into high gear. And then the carpet and other floor coverings were put down, and the pews were assembled and installed.

The congregation and the public were uniformly enthusiastic about the lovely new sanctuary. Within the last few days, even hours, before the celebrations, all the rest of the stained glass windows in the nave were hung, and the towers and case pipes of the organ were put up. Workmen for the sound system and lighting company competed for space to finish their projects. And then, on the day before the rededication, a hundred (or so) church members descended on the building to dust, clean, arrange the chancel, arrange the flowers, bring out all the hymn books and Bibles for the pews, and convert the church into place fit for Christmas. The results were amazing. Within one day the sanctuary suddenly seemed ready for service.

All night before the great rededication service the weather worsened. It began with sleet and continued with snow. On any other occasion only the bravest would have ventured outside. But the church was nearly full for the 11 a.m. service. Lifting a page from the history which said that the first use of the sanctuary in 1897 had been heralded by trumpets, the dedication ceremony also included a trumpet fanfare, written by Sam Schmidt for the occasion. With a minimum of further ceremony the building was formally turned over to the congregation from the architect and contractors. Again recalling the ceremony in December 1897 when the church was originally dedicated, the contractor handed a set of keys to the building committee and then to the pastor. The remainder of the hour was spent receiving greetings from the mayor of Alton, the township supervisor of Godfrey, the stated clerk of presbytery, the president of the Alton ministerial alliance, the publisher of the Alton Telegraph, and from Evlyn Fulton, representing the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Letters were read from U.S. Senators, the governor-elect, the moderator of the General Assembly, and others. But the highlight of the morning was the introduction of several of the carpenters and contractors who had actually built the church, and the artist and creators of the stained-glass.

Services the next morning were the first to be held in the new sanctuary. Again the room was full, despite the fact that the weather had continued to be bad. It had been planned to use the pipe organ for the first time, but delays in construction had prevented it being finished. Instead, Greg had brought his own four-rank pipe organ from home to use for a few weeks. The choir processed in their new red choir robes with white cottas. The church was in use, two and a half years after the fire.[63]

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[63]The complete proceedings of the Service of Consecration are included in this volume under its own heading.

In order to give various aspects of the re-opening of the church their just due, and to invite the largest number of people possible to come back to church or to visit to see the church, a whole series of celebrations was planned. Beginning with the rededication on the Saturday before Christmas, the events were scattered across the calender through the 160th Anniversary Celebration on June 16, 1991.

One plan was to invite all four of the "sons of the congregation" who had grown up in the church, who had been ordained to the Presbyterian ministry, and who had entered careers of full-time ministry, to return to preach at their home church. The first back was Brad Wigger, ordained in the sanctuary and now a graduate student at Princeton Theological Seminary, after a term as pastor of a church in Colorado. Brad preached on the Sunday after Christmas, but only twenty-five people attended because the Christmas storm had resumed during the week and intensified on Saturday. Streets in Alton were nearly impassable from many sub-divisions, and remained so for almost a month.

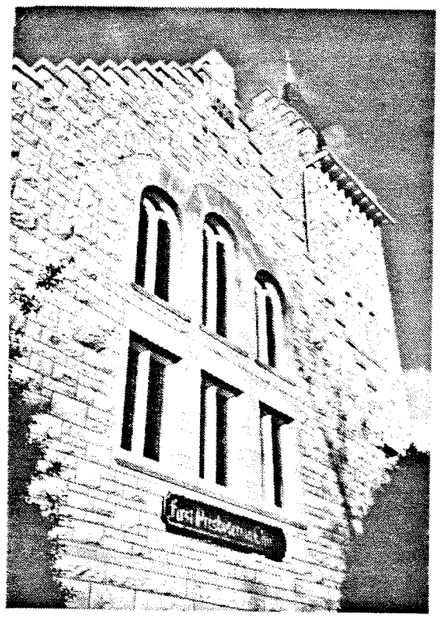
Charles Spencer from Union, Missouri returned to preach on the first Sunday in March. The weather was better, and so, of course, was the attendance. Hugh Burroughs was invited to preach in First Church on May 19, 1991, Pentecost Sunday. Hugh was on the staff of the San Francisco Theological Seminary. Jack Zerwas was scheduled for the 160th Anniversary Sunday, June 16. Jack had been ordained by Alton Presbytery at First Presbyterian Church on April 24, 1944. He retired from the pastorate of the First Presbyterian Church of Iowa City, Iowa after a quarter of a century there and 14 years prior to that as pastor in Minot, North Dakota.

Several events were held to allow others to share in the celebration of the reconstruction. On Epiphany, January 6, most downtown churches were invited to a choir-sing. The weather had continued to be bad, but the streets had improved just hours before the service, so six choirs and 120 people joined in the service. One of the lenten services at First Church marked another return of the church. Later, in April, the Spring Gathering of Presbyterian Women of the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy was held at the church, for which the church kitchen was used for the first meal of its type. In May presbytery itself met at First Church. Throughout Spring, plans proceeded for Christopher Brayne, recently appointed Organist and Master of the Choristers at Bristol Cathedral, England, to play a dedicatory organ concert on June 2.

Reconstruction, in the minds of many, was over on Palm Sunday, March 23. That day the new 45-rank pipe organ was played for the first time. The last ten stained-glass windows had been installed the week before. The pulpit and baptismal font had been delivered, along with the elegant communion table, matching stools and stands for flowers. The church was complete. On Palm Sunday the service dedicated all the memorials which had been replaced and not dedicated before. Mention was made of

every pew, window, parament, and item of furniture, naming the persons in whose memory they were dedicated.[64]

For others, the formal end of reconstruction was marked by the Appreciation and Recognition Dinner, held on Friday evening, April 26, 1991. Representatives of Metropolitan United Methodist Church were guests. Plaques and mementoes were presented to those who had served on committees and taskforces during the rebuilding, and a large walnut placque was unveiled which contained the names of "Major Contributors to the Centennial Capital Campaign, 1988-1990." It was announced that the plaque would remain hanging on the stair-landing between the chapel and the sanctuary, at least until the building's centennial in 1997. The printed program for the evening included the names of all the contributors to the Centennial Capital Campaign, which formally concluded that evening.[65]



[64]A complete list of memorials, honoraria and designated gifts in included in this volume. The printed list includes many which were dedicated prior to Palm Sunday, 1991.

[65]The program's list of "Contributors to the Centennial Capital Campaign, 1988-1990" is included in this volume.