

Reverend Toni Pate
Trinity Church “A Preservation Story”
February 27, 2017

I want to talk to you about the renewing of Third Presbyterian Church into what is now Trinity Church of Greenville. In 1916, the congregation of Third Presbyterian Church had walked together from their wood-framed church building, three blocks west, to this newly completed sanctuary. Though it was also a tremendous undertaking for us to move into this sanctuary in 2015, we came humbly and with great regard for those who had gone before us. Third Presbyterian Church originated in 1887 as a mission of the Young Men's Working Society of First Presbyterian Church of Greenville. A Sunday school was first begun near the Southern Railway station and was then moved to Hampton Avenue. In 1893, the Palmer Presbyterian Church was organized from the Sunday school.

W. Austin Hudson (1870-1948), a member of the church and owner of the Triangle Pharmacy – which was in the “V” right past McDonalds, between Buncombe Road and Rutherford – gave the church an acre and a half of land adjacent to his store in what was then considered the posh Hampton-Pinckney area of Greenville. Hudson wanted his congregation to have a beautiful new space after it changed its name to Third Presbyterian Church.

The plans for the interior of the sanctuary were based on a popular late-19th century model called the Akron Plan, a design for churches to better support their Sunday schools. Akron Plan churches had a set of wedge-shaped classrooms that radiated from a central platform. Doors or movable partitions could be closed to separate classes, largely by age or sex, or they could be opened to facilitate the participation of all the pupils in a single group.

The Akron Plan gave this worship space, which seats three hundred, its unique octagonal shape and provided the sort of acoustics sought after by both religious and civic groups. The Furman Singers used it as a practice space; community choral groups chose it as a perfect venue for concerts. I could literally turn off this microphone, and every word, every whisper, could be heard in every corner. Of course, the church was built at the absolute dawn of electronic amplification, so its excellent acoustics was of real practical benefit.

For thirty years, the growing congregation maintained the sanctuary as well as adding to its classroom space, and early members included residents of nearby mill villages. Following a church split in 1938, the congregation began growing again under the leadership of W. McLeod Frampton Jr. (1908-2003), who served until 1943.

But on November 19, 1946, the Ideal Laundry, located across the street, exploded with tremendous force, knocking down ten houses, killing six people, and injuring a hundred and twenty more. The explosion completely destroyed the west facing wall of Third Presbyterian Church. The pipe organ was mangled, and the two-story gallery was blown to bits. Less visible damage proved even more serious. One of the two main crossbeams in the attic was severely cracked. Third Presbyterian was uninsured for the damage and also had to meet in an elementary school for several months. Still, the church continued to grow and, by its 60th anniversary in 1954, it had more than 500 members.

During the '50s, neighborhoods around this church were gradually abandoned as residents moved to the suburbs. Beautiful Victorian homes put "For Rent" signs in their windows. By the late 1960s, the church voted to allow members who planned to leave to establish a church on the east side of town. A remnant of mostly older members continued to worship here, but they could no longer properly maintain the building. Such work that was done was invariably piecemeal, the workmanship was deplorable, and the massive beam over the altar continued to drop little-by-little.

Fast forward to 2014. A new, small congregation called Trinity Church had been holding services at Triune Mercy Center on Rutherford Road, just a stone's throw from here. We had started with twelve people in Melanie Tompkins' backyard, dreaming that we would found a new interdenominational group. We enjoyed being in Triune Mercy Center, which had a real sanctuary, real pews, and a real organ — but it wasn't home.

My mother's second husband, Dr. Colin Hudson (1915-2015), knew that Trinity had been looking for a permanent home. Being a Presbyterian, he suggested that I inquire with the Foothills Presbytery to see if Third Presbyterian was indeed available. His actual words to me were, "Toni, I believe if you'll become Presbyterian, they'll just give it to you."

The presbytery had named a commission to handle the disposal of the building, and there was a handsome offer on the table from a developer who intended to demolish it. The group suspended its decision and gave us a key. At that time, the congregation of Third Presbyterian had dwindled to five people who had valiantly tried to stem the abuse of the property, but the building was deteriorating faster than they could address its problems. Renters and homeless people had rendered it almost unredeemable.

When we first got the key, we looked at the other building first. The rooms were littered with needles, condoms and empty beer and liquor bottles. There were Sterno cans in the basement under this hardwood floor. There was human waste that I cannot describe and urine soaked sleeping bags everywhere.

People lived here who did not want to abide by the rules at the Salvation Army or the Greenville Rescue Mission. They had broken windows to enter and lived here using the restrooms for three years after the water was turned off. The question in our mind was, "Was there anything here worth saving?" Then we looked at this building. And I almost cried. I couldn't imagine this historic building being considered for demolition.

William H. "Billy" McCauley II (1942-2012) of Creative Builders was a friend of mine, and I asked him to look at the property. When he came in, he said the building had "good bones," but he cautioned that the broken beam in the ceiling would have to be repaired as soon as possible. We contacted an engineer at Triangle Construction, and I figured that if they said the beam could be repaired, our church was ready to become the owner. The engineers said it could be done.

The presbytery graciously decided to spare the building from the bulldozer and allowed us the option to buy it, provided we continued to use it as a house of worship. In fact, the deed specifies that the building can never be anything other than a church building.

The purchase price was reasonable considering that building was in the city's revitalization district. Nonetheless, the price was a stretch for a fledgling group of 48 members. The presbytery agreed to be the bank, but the purchase price didn't touch the staggering reconstruction costs.



Steel reinforcements have helped stabilize the roof of the original Trinity Lutheran Church. (Photo courtesy of Rev. Toni Pate.)

The city forbade us from even coming into this room, even with hardhats on, until the beam was secured. The beam was tied into the masonry walls, so that if the beam collapsed, the whole church would collapse. The first order of business was to get three upright steel beams in place to prevent the entire structure from caving in. Every time it rained, the broken truss sagged a little bit more, an six additional inches since we had first seen it. Water poured in through the crack, and barrels were set on the floor to catch it.

After a year, we had enough money to order the steel beams and nothing else. Because of the way the building had been constructed, it was impossible to jack it up, and leaks in the roof caused plaster to roll off the walls in sheets. There were bullet holes in all these magnificent, hand-painted art nouveau stained glass windows – which are virtually uninsurable. The elegant 15-foot mahogany pews were mildewed, scratched, and in some cases broken. The pendent lights all had missing glass and didn't work. There was no heat, there was no air conditioning, and the balcony rail was only two feet high.



Interior of Trinity Lutheran Church during renovations. (Photo courtesy of Rev. Toni Pate.)

A couple from England put an ad in the *Baptist Courier* offering a free organ rescued from a church in Williamsburg, Virginia, of the same vintage as the organ that should have been here. The organ was disassembled and brought to this church, but we had no chamber to put it in.

We organized a “Raise the Roof” campaign, and after the *Greenville News* did a story, the response was amazing. A businessman and his wife gave \$50,000 and promised another \$50,000 if the church could match it. We raised \$63,000 in twelve weeks to put with his \$100,000.

We determined to maintain the historical integrity of the building regardless of the cost. So, when Kyle Campbell from Preservation South literally walked in off the street and asked if I wanted his help in maintaining the 1916 style, I was thrilled. He pointed out the limestone columns and their Doric capitals. He found a Charlotte-based company to redo the original internal gutter system at the edge of the roof. He insisted that the ten little cornices, the dentil molding on the outside of the building, needed to be cleaned by hand. And he helped us meet city codes without altering the historic design.

He worked diligently to educate our contractor, who with a small crew completed the organ chamber, the plaster, and all the trim work. They painted the ceilings and the walls, rehung the lights, posted the organ pipes, rehung all the doors, built a handicap ramp, refinished the floors, rebuilt the porch, and completed more than fifty additional repairs.

In 2016, the restoration of Trinity Church won a State Preservation Honor Award from the Governor’s Office, the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, and the Palmetto Trust for Historic Preservation. As a winner of the award, the church was allowed to nominate two people who worked on the project for the award, and we nominated Kyle Campbell and stained glass expert Lou Ellen Davis of LEB Glass.

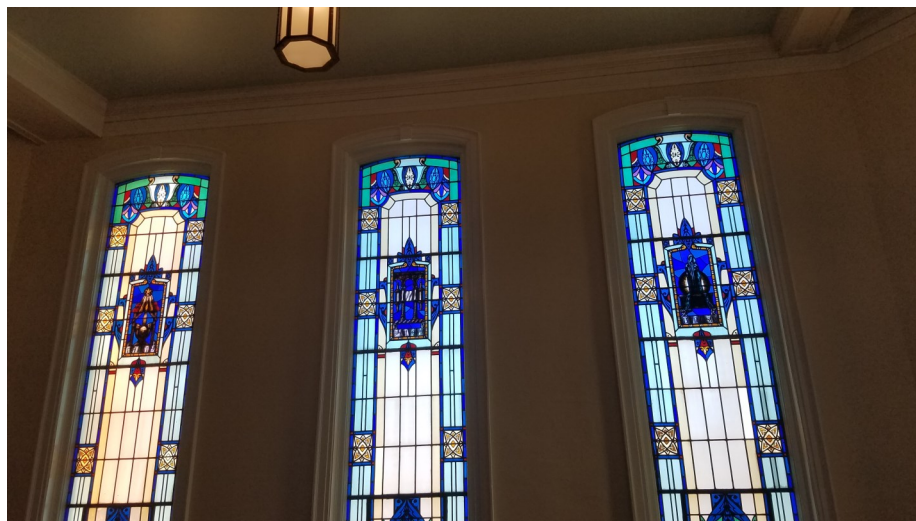
Appropriately, the project was completed on Thursday, November 26, 2015, Thanksgiving Day. On Sunday, March 13, 2016, our congregation celebrated the hundred anniversary of worship in this sanctuary. Simultaneously, on that same Sunday, our congregation celebrated our own fifth anniversary to the day.

The crack in the beam, probably created by the laundry explosion in 1946, is still visible. Although there was now no chance of the building falling down, I hated that one imperfection. I wanted to get rid of the scar. But with all the attempted camouflaging, that scar will always remain. That flawed beam is what I preach from the pulpit, that each one of us is flawed and that we face utter destruction unless someone steps in to restore us. That Someone is Jesus Christ. Jesus shoulders all the burden that we could never shoulder on our own.

This restored room, as lovely as it is, is not Trinity Church's mission. Trinity Church is not a building. But Trinity Church is delighted to have had the opportunity to preserve such a remarkable piece of Greenville's history in a place that people have counted as sacred for more than a hundred years. We are happy to stand at the crossroads of Greenville's past and her future, and we are proud to have played this part with you, staking a claim for our belief in things that last.



An eager crowd listens to the story of renovations of the old Trinity Lutheran Church during the public opening ceremony. *(Photo courtesy of John M. Nolan.)*



The beautiful original stained glass windows were restored during the church's renovations. *(Photo courtesy of John M. Nolan.)*