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St. Luke's celebrates centennial

Members proud of congregation's diversity, outreach programs



Ted Schurter/The State Journal-Register
Father Shawn Denney lights candles in preparation for a New Year's service Thursday at St. Luke's Episcopal.

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By **JOHN REYNOLDS**
THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER
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A small church on Springfield's east side has reached a milestone.

On Dec. 27, St. Luke's Episcopal Church at 1218 South Grand Ave. E. celebrated its 100th anniversary. The church has seen a lot of changes over the decades, but according to the Rev. Shawn Denney, there has always been a special spirit among the congregation that has helped it endure.

"From the first time I came to this church, I felt the congregation was particularly loving and welcome," Denney said. "I think a part of that is because it's an old building, and the walls are soaked with the prayers of generations of people. There is just a character to the place and the community that was different."

St. Luke's building was built around 1900. The first congregation, however, disbanded, and the Episcopal Diocese in Springfield gave the building to a black congregation that had been meeting at other locations.

Some of the first pastors at the church were from the West Indies.

"Up until the mid-1960s, and perhaps even later, the congregation was almost exclusively African-American," Denney said. "Now, it's a wonderful mix of people. Most of our young people are African-American, and we have a number of African-American adults. We also have white members, a woman from the Philippines and a man from Nigeria."

Overall, the church has about 100 members, and Sunday services average 65 to 70 people. The mix of members, according to Denney, has its benefits.

"I think a lot of answers to society's questions and ills is found in people getting together and learning to know each other as human beings," Denney said. "... Here, we have a microcosm of the community."

While the current racial makeup of the church is celebrated, the congregation has not forgotten the people who helped build the church in its early years.

Pictures of former pastors and former members line the walls of the church.

"Obviously, they persevered through a lot of difficulties," Denney said. "They worked with rather limited financial resources, but they maintained a strong commitment to the congregation."

Denney became the pastor at St. Luke's after he was ordained in 1997.

Event Calendar

TUE 24	WED 25	THU 26	FRI 27	SAT 28	SUN 01	MON 02
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Previously, he had worked as a lawyer in the Illinois Attorney General's Office. He started attending the congregation in the early 1980s.

A few years ago, in an effort to reach out to the community, St. Luke's began hosting Vacation Bible School classes during the summer. The VBS program included a meal for the children, and during those meals, parishioners noticed that some of the children weren't getting enough food at home.

Church members decided to do something about the problem, and they began offering meals for children on Sundays. Tables were set up in the rear of the sanctuary, and the church now serves up to 40 children each week.

"There are a lot of things during the week like school meals and after-school programs. Sometimes on the weekend, there's a gap. We've found (the Sunday meal) is something we could do to be helpful," Denney said.

As St. Luke's begins its second century of service, church members are beginning to feel cramped in their building. Extra chairs have to be hauled into the worship area on some occasions, and the Sunday school classes are also cramped.

The church doesn't want to tear down or add to their existing building, but a new multi-purpose building just to the south of the church could be a possibility.

The congregation has no desire to move to another location.

"We've been in the process of looking for a vision to see what God would have us do. A couple of things came out of that," Denney said. "One is a strong commitment that this is where we need to be. Right in this community doing what we can."

John Reynolds can be reached at 788-1524.



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