

# Welcome to Church

Decade after demolition, replacement arrives.

By Jason Nark STAFF WRITER



Members of Mid-Town Parish United Methodist Church were celebrating on Norris Street in North Philadelphia as one of the modular units that will house their church came into sight. ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff Photographer



Deliverance came in the form of a wide load Thursday afternoon with police flashers on until its police escort peeled off and it was greeted with a hail of hallelujahs and arms raised toward the blue heavens.

To strangers pausing at all the fuss at a North Philly traffic light, the caravan looked like two nondescript modular buildings on flatbeds, hauled by Freightliner semis that blocked traffic. The lot full of gravel and heavy machinery at the corner seemed like any other.

For the faithful of Mid-Town Parish United Methodist Church, though, the pale buildings

Workers move one of the modular units onto the grounds of Mid-Town Parish. The old building had to be demolished after water weakened its supports.



Watching the arrival of their new church's components are Odessa Mungro (left) and Janice Gates. ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff Photographer

at the traffic light were proof that God answers prayers, and that their dreams for their own place had merely been delayed and not denied, 11 years after their grand church was demolished due to structural damage.

"God's never left this corner," said Ray Mungro, the church's historian. "He's been here since 1983 and he's not going anywhere."

The city had told Mid-Town in 2005 that its church, with its gables and bell tower and thick walls of Wissahickon schist, had to come down because water pouring down the steeple had weakened its supports.

"It was a really sad day, because no one knew what the future would be for this place," said Dana Clark, the church's lay leader.

It wasn't the first time Mid-Town had lost its church, either. A fire claimed the original building in 1919 and it was rebuilt

the following year. Mid-Town became known as the "Phoenix of Philadelphia Methodism" and today's members, with that same resilience in their foundation, said they sought a temporary house of worship, and prayed and planned for something permanent on the rubble.

"We knew we wouldn't go away. That was certain," said Clark, 60.

Mid-Town members have worshipped at the Eighth and Diamond Streets city recreation center for several years, grateful though weary from all the extra work. Chairs must be folded up and put away every Sunday. The cross rises and comes down.

The just over 100 congregants dug into their pockets to bring a building back to their holy ground. Some gave \$7 a week, Clark said, and others gave as much as \$10, and soon a little became a lot and proposals were sent to makers of modular buildings.

Five buildings will ultimately cover the lots, with room for 150 congregants. Three of them will be delivered Friday, following the same slow route up I-95 from Georgia. They will be used for Bible study and youth groups, for weddings and funerals.

"We're going to be the light of this community again. The lighthouse," Mungro said, standing beside the original building's cornerstone in the yard.

"We'll be the beacon," replied Millicent Clark, the church's administrative assistant.

Surrounding Methodist churches pitched in as well, marveling from elsewhere in the city or out far in the suburbs at Mid-Town's grit.

"I've often wondered if we'd still be here if we didn't have a building of our own for 11 years," said the Rev. Gary Knerr of Christ United Methodist Church in Lansdale.

Mid-Town's parsonage was spared from demolition, and all morning it was filled with nervous anticipation. Blueprints were spread across the Rev. William D. Jolly's desk, and across the hallway, women sipped tea and

coffee, asking for updates on that caravan heading north with the new home of the church that calls itself God's Powerhouse.

Upstairs, in a library named after a former pastor's wife, Millicent Clark, Dana's sister, thumbed through photographs, some faded by time, of Mid-Town members past and present. One showed her as a teenager, leaning on a car.

"That's not my car," she said with a laugh. "It was just a nice car."

News began to spread that the buildings were getting closer, in a holding pattern near the airport, then just 10 miles away. There came false alarms and then there they were, rising up from Norris Street.

Odessa Mungro, 87, entwined her arm with everyone who stood by her on Norris Street, dabbing her eyes with a tissue and blowing her nose as she hummed a hymn she knew by heart but couldn't name. She's the chair of the women's committee, a mother of eight who joined the church when her son Ray became a Boy Scout there.

She asked, "Ain't God so good?" [narkj@phillynews.com](mailto:narkj@phillynews.com)

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