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Community comes to aid of Gainesville church after fire

By HEIDI BAUMSTARK
Observer staff

Alexander Graham Bell is credited with saying, "When one door closes another door opens."

That certainly rings true for the members of Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church in Gainesville. Because when their church was severely damaged by a recent fire, neighboring churches, volunteers, and a local business came pouring in to bless this tight-knit congregation that dates to 1877, and the community it serves.

According to Janet Robinson, one of the church trustees, the fire started on Aug. 10 and is still under investigation. Since the fire was around 4:30 a.m., no one was inside the building resulting in no personal injuries; but, there is significant structural damage. Crews contained the fire by 5:16 a.m.

After the investigation is completed, church members will determine how to proceed with the renovations. But the interior needs a complete makeover due to smoke

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Members of Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church and the local Gainesville-Haymarket Rotary Club gathered on August 22 at the Northern Virginia Baptist Center in Gainesville to hand out donated backpacks and school supplies. From left, front row, kneeling, Jamie Repesh with her son, Ethan Repesh, Maxine Allen (center, standing), Destiny Moore and Briana Coleman. Second row Ann Thomas, Johnny Moore, Mary Beth Eisenhard, Dorothy Peterson, Lori Powers, Lillian Blackwell, Janet Robinson and Denise Fuller. Back row, Donna Flory, Jennifer Edwards (of Five Below), Yolanda King and Gloria Moore. (Not pictured: Delores Peterson, Henry Peterson and Pastor George Carlisle.)

Courtesy photo

Mt. Pleasant church members go on after fire

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and fire damage to the plumbing, electrical wiring, walls and floors. "We've been told it could be nine to 12 months until we can occupy the building," Robinson said, whose roots extend way back to the church's history since her great grandfather, John Robinson, was a deacon.

Since the fire, the congregation has been meeting at Northern Virginia Baptist Center in Gainesville for their Sunday service, Sunday school and Wednesday night praise and worship and Bible study.

In addition to the interior damage, the church lost dozens of backpacks and school supplies they planned to hand out on Aug. 13. Each year Mt. Pleasant collects donations for school supplies for local families in need. But due to the fire, more than 100 new backpacks were destroyed.

"Word got out and the community rallied. Many, many churches helped, and other community organizations, too," Robinson said. Aid has risen from the ashes in the form of donations to replace the backpacks that burned.

Most of the backpacks that were destroyed were purchased at Gainesville's Five Below store. Maxine Allen, a Mt. Pleasant church member, returned to the store which replaced the backpacks. "We didn't know what to expect, but the manager, Jennifer Edwards, was so gracious," Allen said.

Elizabeth Romaine, director of marketing operations for Five Below in Philadelphia, said, "When we found out, we certainly sympathized and wanted to make sure they could give out the backpacks they purchased earlier."

Now here's where some real neighbors took action. Edwards' neighbor in Gainesville is Jamie Repesh, treasurer of the Gainesville-Haymarket Rotary Club. Over lunch one day, they were talking about the fire at Mt. Pleasant.

Repesh explained, "The church was kind of in a rush to replenish the backpacks since school was soon to start, so we had to act fast. I was literally on a treadmill and texting our Rotary members so we could get the word out and members could come ready to donate at our next breakfast meeting. It was such a pleasure working with them [church members]. We told them that we are their neighbors and wanted to help."

With the donated money from her fellow Rotarians, Repesh

bought more backpacks at Five Below.

Repesh and Edwards joined the church in the backpack giveaway that was rescheduled for Aug. 22 at Northern Virginia Baptist Center. "It was quite a community effort," Repesh said. Between Five Below and donations that poured in, Mt. Pleasant was able to replenish the backpacks—totaling 159—just in time for the school year. Help also came from volunteers of Gainesville Citizens in Action, a group that was started by one of Mt. Pleasant's members in 1999 and is now led by Allen. Over 100 backpacks plus supplies were distributed that evening. "It was really very, very nice," Allen shared.

Some remaining backpacks were given to Buckland Mills Elementary School in honor of the late Faxie Burke, a Mt. Pleasant church member, community activist and local historian.

A reading room at Buckland Mills Elementary School in Gainesville is named in Faxie Burke's honor since he often gave presentations to students and showed artifacts when the area was part of a thriving African-American rural community.

"I'm still getting school supplies," Allen said; "You should see my dining room table!" The church is continuing to collect so there are plenty of supplies for any new students who might move to the area and to keep their supply level full throughout the year.

Robinson and Allen shared some history of the church. Today, the church's pastor is George Carlisle, who came onboard in 2010. But the church goes back to the late 19th century when 135 years ago it was started by the Churchville and Brooks families; some early names include Miss Coates, Isaac Jackson, Mr. and Mrs. John and Henrietta Perry.

In 1877, a handful of devoted Christians first met in the home of Mrs. Sally Grayson, according to a church document. Originally, the church was given the name, Beulah, and was a small log cabin on VA Route 703 (Old Carolina Road) in Gainesville.

According to Tish Como, librarian in the RELIC Room at Bull Run Regional Library, a deed was made "the 17th April 1872 between Grayson Tyler and Sallie Grayson for \$100 for a parcel of land in Prince William County beginning at an old oak post on the east side of the Carolina [R]oad..."

Eugene Scheel's African-American Heritage Map shows a sketch of the church with the following notation: "organized 1877, built 1889, 1928." At the turn of

the 20th century, there were two "negro communities" named "The Settlement." One was south of Catharpin; the other community was west of Gainesville near Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church.

Scheel's map further describes these two settlements as "forsaken areas, allotted to ex-slaves who first rented, then bought." Some older marked stones in Mt. Pleasant's graveyard honor Anna Churchill, Estella Crawford, John Perry and Charles Randall. Other surnames include Berry, Berryman, Gaskins, Johnson, McPherson, Thomas, Tibbs, Tyler, Peterson and Strother.

When the community grew, in 1882, the highway department came through and the log church was disassembled. It was placed on a horse-drawn wagon and taken to a new location on Lee Highway (US 29) on land purchased by church members for \$10. The old church was reassembled and renamed Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church on the new site.

Shortly afterwards, it was destroyed by fire, but then rebuilt in 1889 at its present site, which is just a few yards west of the old building. But while church members waited for the building to be erected, services were held outside in a bush harbor. The present building was completed in 1928.

With the help of many hands and the community rallying together, Mt. Pleasant was able to once again be a blessing to families just in time for school. It seems that the tragedy of the church fire rekindled some hearts.

As Repesh puts it, "It's about pulling our resources together and helping others through fellowship. To accomplish this, it took a community of caring people."

The church's temporary meeting place at Northern Virginia Baptist Center is located at 14019 Glenkirk Road in Gainesville. Sunday school begins at 9:45 a.m. with a regular service beginning at 11 a.m. On Wednesdays, there is praise and worship from 7-8 p.m. and Bible study from 8-9 p.m.

On Oct. 28 at 3 p.m., the church will celebrate its 135th anniversary at Westfields Marriott in Chantilly. The community is welcome and ticket information is available by calling the church. In early November, the church plans to host a large prayer service and fundraiser; the community is invited.

Donations to the church rebuilding fund can be sent to Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church, P.O. Box 236, Gainesville, VA 20156. Call 703-754-4685 or go to www.mtpleasantbaptistchurchg.com.