

Church preaches accessibility

Mountville COB upgrades make its building more accessible to people with disabilities

Until recently, there was an elderly woman who worshipped at Mountville Church of the Brethren who couldn't attend Sunday school.

The sanctuary and the education wing are on different floors, and the only way to get from one to the other without using the stairs was to go outside and walk all the way around the building.

"She had to choose because she couldn't do steps, and her vision is not great," church board member Forrest Collier says. "But she can see the button for the elevator."

The elevator is part of a two-year, \$1.2-million renovation and building project that enhanced the accessibility of the church at 60 Clay St. to people with disabilities.

The updated building, freshly painted, will be dedicated in a service at 10:15 a.m. Sunday. The Rev. Rebecca "Becky" Fuchs, pastor, will preach; Collier, who also served on the building committee, will lead worship; and a brass choir will play.

An open house for the community will follow from 1 to 3 p.m. Classical guitarist Rusty Banks and violinist Holly Workman will perform, and refreshments will be served.

In July, the church received the 2012 Open Roof Award at the Church of the Brethren's annual conference in St. Louis. The award recognizes the congregation for making great strides in becoming more accessible to people with disabilities.

Nanette Bushong chaired the building committee for the project, which includes, besides the elevator, a curbless and covered entryway, a hospitality suite, new offices, handicapped accessible restrooms and air conditioning. The children's wing was revamped to be safer and more secure, and the number of handicapped parking spaces was doubled.

The church also offers hearing assistance devices and large-print bulletins and hymnals for worship services.

Bushong says the church received a \$5,000 grant from "Joni and Friends," a ministry serving people with disabilities around the world, for the elevator, which she said cost about \$80,000 to buy and install.

Mountville COB, with about 185 members and 110 worshippers attending on a typical Sunday, celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. The open house will include a video of construction in 1962 and 2011.

Collier, who retired from state government and also is an ordained minister, says the project began at an annual church leaders retreat in 2008.

"There was a new sense to look at the vision for the future, to increase hospitality and provide ministry for all ages," Collier says.

"We asked, 'How do we get ready for this?' We saw we had to do something about accessibility to move forward."

He says the church needed brighter hallways and air conditioning in the sanctuary.

"If you live in an air-conditioned house, work in an air-conditioned office and get in an air-conditioned car, you don't want to come to a sanctuary without air conditioning," says Bushong, who teaches second grade at Hempfield's East Petersburg Elementary School.

Fuchs, who has served the church for almost four years, says the congregation is "skewed toward elderly but with a healthy number of kids."

Bushong says the congregation backed every step of the project.

"We got a lot of feedback from the congregation, rather than one group making the decisions. That was sort of neat to get to the finish point and say to just about everyone, 'We couldn't have done it without you.'"

Fuchs concurs.

"We couldn't do everything everybody wanted, but we all agreed on the priorities. So now we can move on, because, just like a house, you're never done."

Collier hopes many young families will find the church attractive for children.

"It would be great if we could say we don't have enough space for all the children who come."

Originally Published Oct 20, 2012 Lancaster Newspapers

By JOAN KERN
Correspondent