

First Presbyterian celebrates its past and looks to future

One of Washington's oldest churches has a wonderful history, says minister

By Jennifer Hughes
Staff Writer

Washington's First Presbyterian Church is observing its 175th anniversary with as much emphasis on the future as the past.

The celebration of the church's history is a way of looking forward, for the congregation - This is where we've been. This is where we're going.

"This church has a wonderful history," said Senior Minister Robert L. Morris. "It has a wonderful future, too."

With a heritage that reaches back to 1823, one rich with legend, tradition and history, the preservation of the past could become an anchor for the church. But Morris believes the past, present and future are equally important in a church as vital as his.

"This is not art for art's sake," he said. "This is something that is very much alive and growing."

He described the harmony he sees between history and growth. "We don't see the past as a stop sign, or a hitching post as much as we see our past as a signal, a direction sign for our future. It points us in a direction."

The church stays in touch with its roots so that might continue to grow.

"We're celebrating what Christ has done in the past for the purpose of looking at what he wants us to do in the future," Morris said.

The church has grown about 30 percent in the four years he's been in Washington.

Around half a dozen families joined First Presbyterian last week. Morris estimated membership between 650 and 850.

Many members returned to the church after decades of absence. They came back to Washington and the First Presbyterian Church, like Franke Rumley and Dhu Johnston, two of the chief organizers behind the 175th anniversary celebration.

"We're just two of many that have done that," said Ms. Rumley.

"I think that says a lot about the church and the community," said Ms. Johnston.

She couldn't be more pleased with the relatively new senior minister's contribution to the old church.

"He has created a growing atmosphere in this church and as a result we have had tremendous participation from young people. Churches whither and die if you don't have young people coming in," Ms. Johnston said.

Morris and the ladies agreed it takes participation from all age groups to keep a church healthy and growing.

They said Monte Johnston, associate pastor and youth and family ministries director, had proven invaluable in getting young families active in the church.

and denominations, have been active in the 175th anniversary celebration, organizers hesitate to list them, for fear of leaving anybody out.

Morris said the trick to planning the massive celebration was finding the right people to take leadership roles.

"Getting the right people in the right spot was the key," he said. "Getting Dhu and Franke ..."

For Sunday, a world renown theologian and author will open the formal observation of the anniversary with an appearance as guest minister during the 8:45 a.m. and 11 a.m. services.

"This week we're going to look at the past of our theology that brought us here. Next week (Oct. 25) is the present, with a homecoming. Then on Nov. 1 we look to the future. I'll be preaching. I'm going to be giving my vision of where I think this church needs to go," Morris said.

All the living former ministers of First Presbyterian will attend the homecoming. Reverend Huw Christopher will preach at the 11 a.m. service. Reverends Jerry Bron, Burke Kerr and Thomas Apperson will be in town to greet old friends and make new ones.

A dynamic music program, under the direction of David Kenney and Joyce Harris, will add to the celebration, Ms. Rumley said.

Throughout the three-week period, banners, created in honor of the occasion, will adorn the church.

Ms. Rumley is the chairman of the banner committee. She has a background in art and designed the banners with the help of long-time church member Harold Simmons, formerly dean of the School of Art at Baylor.

The banners took about nine months to create. Twenty people, including consultants, worked toward the completion of the banners, which Morris said would be pleasing to any eye.

He said he thought it would be worth swinging by the church just to see the beautiful series, but for the Presbyterians, the banners are something special.

"For those of us that see the sanctuary as a *sanctuary* it is a wonderful reminder of our history and where we're going," he said.

In addition to Simmons, Ms. Rumley, Ms. Johnston and Morris, Monte Johnston, Margaret Brown, Bea Simmons, Eileen Ferris, Sylvia Evans, Emily Kelly, Nancy King, Joe Fischer, Lois Fisher, Athalia Gravely, Rosemary Rhodes, Lou Warren, Cynthia Swarner, Sue Nicholson, Dot Boig and Elsie Dyer worked on the project.

Eleanor Rollins also contributed countless hours of her time in honor of the Church's anniversary. She is the editor of the extended church history, which is tradition-



Elmo Carawan photo

Washington's First Presbyterian Church celebrates its 175th anniversary this year. Not only is the church rich in history, but the interior of the sanctuary has a richness of its own that's been pleasing to the eyes for many years.

ally compiled by members of the congregation.

"She's a real child of the church," said Ms. Rumley. "Her family has been in the church for over 100 years."

The first two church histories celebrated the church's 125th and 150th anniversaries. By the Oct. 25 homecoming at First Presbyterian, the latest edition should be ready.

Ms. Rollins hasn't spared herself in the effort to prepare the 175th anniversary history.

"She's wonderful," said Morris. "She spent a lot of sleepless nights, a number of times, I mean, all night long."

At the homecoming celebration, the congregation will be given a copy of the new book and a chance to see another historical book - the church's original Bible.

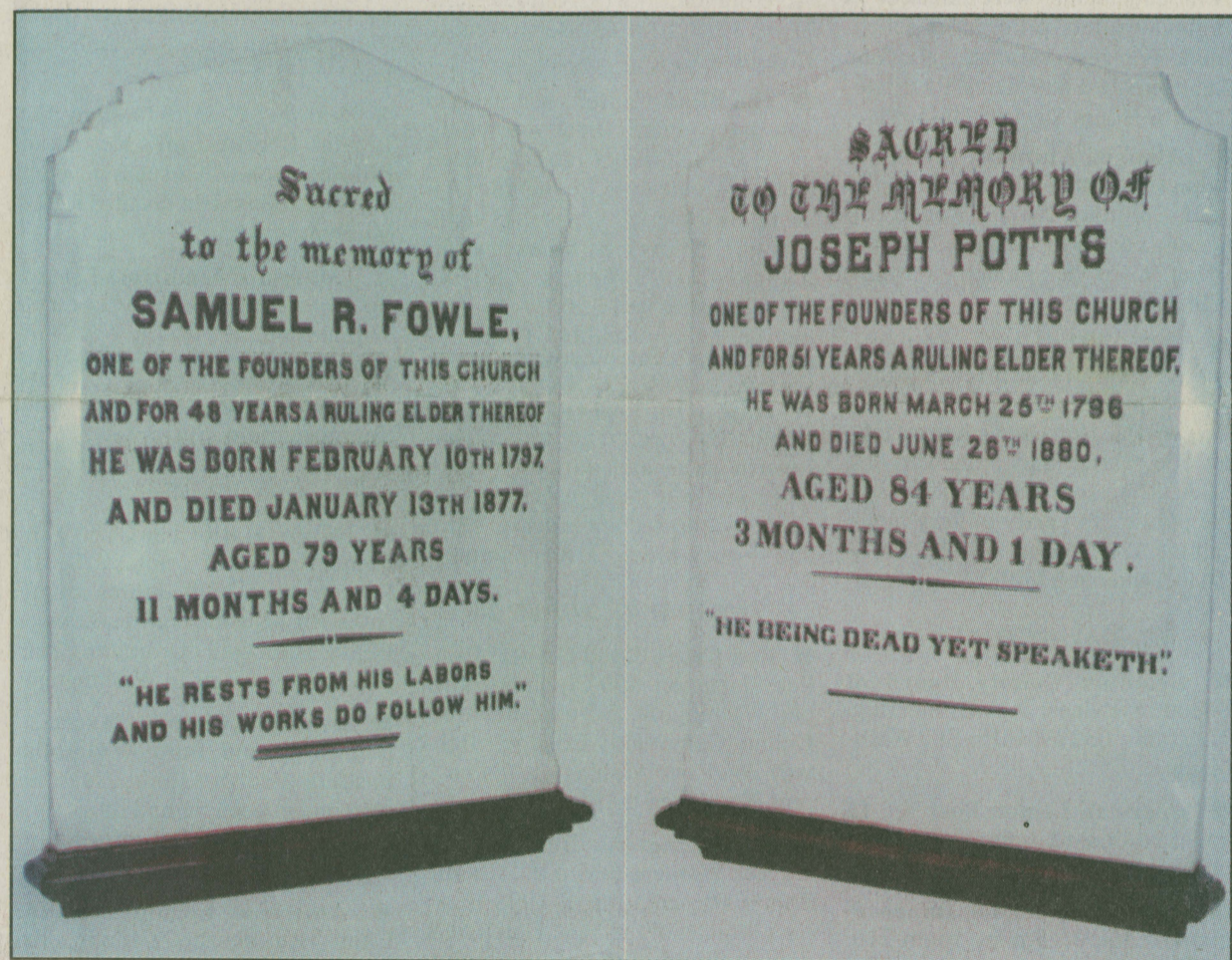
The Bible was recently returned to the church after about 160 years of safe keeping. It was entrusted to the Fowle family during the Civil War, and a good thing, too, since the church itself was burned. The Bible was printed in 1834 and holds the records of the John Orkney family. It was the church's pulpit Bible.

Bee Morton, a Fowle descendant, returned the Bible to the Church recently.

Tony Capehart restored the Bible as a gift to the Church. It will be displayed in a case which was purchased from Stewart's Jewelry Store, restored and donated to the church by well wishers in recognition of the anniversary.

Another donation came from Paul Funeral Home, which presented the church with the \$1,000 airtight container needed for the Nov. 1 service, when the 175th anniversary time capsule will be dedicated.

In keeping with the past/present/future theme of the celebration, the congregation is preparing a time capsule to be opened in 25 years at the 200 anniversary cele-



Elmo Carawan photo

Some of Washington's most prominent residents were active members in the church.

The capsule will contain current photos, bulletins from the 175th anniversary celebration, and memorabilia from the community.

"We're asking members of the congregation to write letters to the next generation," Morris said. The time capsule contents will be on display for the Oct. 25 service and homecoming.

Morris envisioned himself as an old man with a wavering voice when the capsule is opened. "They'll bring me in, I'll say, 'oooooh. So where did we bury that thing?'"

Should he actually forget, the capsule will be placed in the church lawn near the Sanctuary.



Elmo Carawan photo

This plaque gives a concise history of the church building.