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 present and future are equally important in a church like his.

“Preserve the past, but be 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, which has grown from 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 par- ticipation 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 Johnson, associate pastor and youth and family ministries director, had proven invaluable in getting young families active in the church.

So many people, of diverse ages 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 renowned theologian and author will open the morning 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 Hwu 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 Kuebler 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 Monte Johnston, Margaret Brown, Beal Simmons, Eileen Ferris, Sylvia Evans, Emily Kelly, Nancy King, Joe Finger, Laura Fisher, Athalia Gravelly, Rosemary Rhodes, Lou Warren, Cynthia Swanner, Sue Nicholson, Dot Bog and Ellen 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-