

Lightning Strike!

by David Irwin

It was a proverbially dark and stormy night, May 20, 2004, in Pittsford, New York. Spring had been unusually rainy, and thunderstorms were again drenching this western New York village near Rochester.

Music director James Douthit had just begun choir practice in the building adjacent to the sanctuary of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsford. In the same building, associate pastor Carrie Mitchell (M.Div. 2002) was meeting with Stephen Ministers. Pastor and head of staff Bruce Boak (M.Div. 1972) was on his way home from Pennsylvania, where he had been tending to parents who were ill.

The next few seconds would change the future of this church. The notes of the choir were suddenly shattered by a deafening CRACK-BOOM! A tremendous bolt of lightning had struck the roof of the church, setting ablaze the 141-year-old historic building and beloved house of worship.

By God's grace, everyone got out of the church without injury. Flames and smoke reached high into the night sky as the wailing sirens approached. Stunned church members watched in horror and sadness and activated a phone tree with the terse message: "Our church is on fire!"

Amid the commotion, Mitchell formed a circle of prayer with many who had gathered at the site, a spontaneous act of hope silhouetted against the raging fire.

"I felt like I was watching my own house burn," said one member. Boak learned about the lightning strike from his wife. As he approached Pittsford, he saw barricades rerouting traffic away from the church.

It was not the first time fire had struck this church, founded in 1807. Historians say the building burned down in 1861. In the recent blaze, the church's magnificent steeple was spared, a village landmark that had undergone a major restoration last year.

The outpouring of support the church received after the fire was overwhelming and heartwarming. From Pittsford's mayor and town supervisor came offers for meeting space and assistance with rebuilding. Presbytery leaders provided valuable emotional support and guidance, and churches from presbyteries across New York and from other denominations generously opened their hearts and buildings.

One of the strongest gestures of support came three days later when the church went to a local high school to worship for the first time since the fire. Eight area Presbyterian churches sent chalices from their sanctuaries to sit on the makeshift communion table—a powerful statement of unity and hope. Perhaps most touching, however, was a message from the Presbyterian Church of Pemba, Mozambique, that their congregation was in prayer for the Pittsford church.

"Last summer several people from our church went to Pemba and helped members of that congregation construct their church," says Boak. "They have now sent word of their desire to come and help us rebuild."

The nature of pastoral ministry is to be interrupted with urgent and unexpected crises. The cremation of memories, however, in a place where faith has been forged and community birthed is humbling for any seasoned pastor.

"Having to telephone couples who eagerly anticipated the summer celebration of their marriages in a place where they were baptized and confirmed has been among the most painful tasks," says Boak. "But I am encouraged by their resilience. Carrie and I have felt God's guiding hand as we comfort broken spirits and share a vision of hope."

Boak and Mitchell both say that their Princeton Seminary experiences guided their delivery of pastoral care in this time of need. Boak remembered a visit with retired Princeton professor Cullen Story when Boak was struggling as a student to balance study, field education, and personal challenges after an auto accident.

"Dr. Story didn't just teach Greek," says Boak. "He taught students. He didn't have much to say that night, but he listened and provided the comforting assurance of God's abiding presence. That evening has forever been a roadmap of pastoral care for me, a time for confirming God's providential call."

Mitchell contacted her Princeton "prayer sisters" around the country after the fire. "Their support was a much-needed boon," she says.

"Dealing with the aftermath of this fire has been easier because of the ongoing connections with a spiritual director, case-study discussions through the presbytery, the support of my husband, and the close ties I keep with friends and family," says Mitchell. "In caring for members of the congregation, I am recognizing moments of grace and transformation in their lives as well as in my own," she says.

The fire has unified the church with a clear purpose and resolve to move ahead. The congregation has understood their pastors' clear message that people, rather than buildings, make up the church, and this corporate spiritual maturity has been a true blessing.

"Here in Pittsford we are clothing a congregation with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and love," says Boak. "Our building burned, but our church is now truly on fire, and 'the phoenix shall rise again from the ashes' to the glory of God." ■



Photo: David Irwin

David Irwin is an elder at the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsford. He is on the steering committee overseeing the rebuilding and is in charge of communications for the project.