

Economic bell tolls for nation's church steeples

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(RNS) Atop the tiny, white-columned 1842 church where Glen Likens was baptized, where he married his wife, where their children were baptized, where they still worship on Sundays, the steeple is rotting.

St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Wadsworth, Ohio, hasn't dared sound the damaged 2,000-pound bell for a year. It may not sound again -- unless a congregation numbering 58 souls in a good week can come up with \$30,000.

"It's no easy amount to raise. We absolutely considered taking it off and capping the roof, but voices within the congregation want their bell, their tower. It's symbolic. It's part of our church," says Likens, who volunteers as St. Mark's junior warden in charge of maintenance.

Nationwide, church steeples are taking a beating, and the bell tolls for bell towers, too, as these landmarks of faith are hard hit by economic, social and religious change.

Steeplejacks, who specialize in clambering up to build or repair the soaring structures, see weather-struck, maintenance-deprived steeples chipped, leaking, even tilting.

Architects and church planners say today's new congregations meet in retooled sports arenas or shopping malls or modern buildings designed to appeal to contemporary believers turned off by the look of old-time religion.

Steeple may have outlived their times as signposts. People hunting for a church don't scan the horizon; they search the Internet.

St. Mark's, which has no website, has never needed to tell the 22,000 people in Wadsworth where it was because, Likens said, "everyone in town knows this is the church with the bell tower."

"But everyone also knows the Episcopal Church and congregations as a whole aren't growing," he says. "In fact, they are sliding and they are aging like St. Mark's. That adds to our decision dilemma: Where do you want to put your money as a congregation? Are we better off doing outreach programs? You want to keep your history, but you want to have a future, too."

St. Mark's repair estimate -- replacing water-laden timbers and rotting boards on the facing, repairing the bell's carriage, and having the nerve and skill to do it all from four stories up on a scaffold -- came from veteran steeplejack Michael Hardin of Litchfield, Ohio.

After three decades of repairing steeples, Hardin still considers it "a bit of joy to restore something so old and so beautiful and help it retain its integrity."

The average age of the churches he works on is a half-century. The older steeples, "built with top-notch lumber and a lot of heart," are holding up structurally, and more often need only cosmetic fixes.

In more recent decades, Hardin said, "church builders went a little haywire. People used shortcuts and cheaper lumber or they moved to the fiberglass steeples that claim to be maintenance-free. And if there's a problem they stand back and try to get band-aid repairs or they just remove it and cap it off."

To Jim Phelan, a third-generation steeplejack in Pacifica, Calif., knocking off a steeple "just doesn't look right. You can just see something is missing."

Even as Phelan teaches his 10-year-old son, Kells, how to don climbing gear and hitch up a 30-foot flagpole, he's not sure there will

be much steeple work in their future.

"It's sad. I'm not doing the same thing my grandfather did. We used to do six to eight steeples a year -- painting, repairing, waterproofing, regilding the crosses on top. Now I do one or two a year," said Phelan, who recently regilded a cross on a cathedral in San Francisco.

If Kells follows his father's 45 years in the business, he'll probably make most of his money on smokestacks and cell towers -- or church steeples masquerading as cell towers.

Providence Baptist Church in McLean, Va., a congregation of 450 in the Washington suburbs, managed to get a whole new aluminum steeple and \$25,000 annually for its maintenance budget by hopping on the leased-tower trend last year.

Senior Pastor Tim Floyd says the original steeple, which was moved from the church's original location, was "in good shape, but it was too small for the larger, newer church. And we needed to bring in more money for our maintenance budget. So what could we do? We saw that cell phone companies are using innovative methods ... to disguise their equipment and bring in cell coverage without unsightly towers."

Church leaders located a company ready to deal, negotiated the design and "now we have a steeple, hiding two cell antennas, that gives us a really big profile on the horizon. It's elegant and majestic and a win-win for us," Floyd said.

It's also a visual contrast to a massive, modern megachurch across the street that boasts no steeple.

That's no surprise, said architect Gary Landhauser, a partner with Novak Design Group in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, who worked on nearly 30 churches in the past 15 years.

"We have done a lot of church designs," Landhauser said, "but we haven't done a steeple design in 15 years."