

# Celebrating an Anniversary

## Restoration of Church Exterior is Nearly Complete

By Loretta Johnson  
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Even as the red dust continued to settle, a celebration took place on Thursday, Nov. 10 — the feast day of St. Leo the Great — to mark the 125th year of St. Leo's Catholic Church in Minot.

The bell from the original church, built in 1889, had been restored and sounded a death toll 125 times, beginning at 7 p.m. Following that the spires were lit and more bells rang.

There had been much activity at the church since May. The red dust, a result of workers cutting out the mortar between the bricks to re-point the church's masonry, has now settled.

### Evaluation time

More than two years ago a building committee was formed to evaluate all the properties of St. Leo's: the church, the school, the community center and the day-care building. The committee prioritized the needs of each facility and had experts in their field "really look at the church," Vetter said. The rectory had already been repaired in 2009.

"From the exterior the church looked like it was fine, but until we had someone really crawl around and see what shape it was in — some concerning issues with water damage inside the church and we weren't sure where it was coming from — we didn't realize how bad things really were," he said.

Grace Fisher, a member of the building committee at the church, has been a member

of the church for 79 years. The committee of eight has been meeting with Vetter for more than a year and a half.

"In those early days of the committee we talked about what needed to be done the most in the parish and it was determined to focus on the church itself," Fisher said. "The committee decided to fix the church because if it wasn't fixed we could lose it, and that would be a tragedy."

### First church

The Rev. Joseph Raith was pastor when the church was built. Fisher, who has compiled a history of the church for previous anniversary celebrations, said "People thought Raith was crazy and that he had grandiose ideas." Raith was pastor of St. Leo's from 1901 to 1941.

Since then many, many souls have been baptized, confirmed, made their First Communion, married and buried from there, Fisher said.

"I think restoring the church to the vision that Father Raith had for it — to serve the people — and Father Vetter's vision will renew the church for the future," Fisher said.

A fundraising campaign was the first order of business for the restoration project, which cost about \$3.5 million. Church members were contacted and asked to make three-year pledges toward the cost of the project.

### Restoration

Dave Cunnien, who is project superintendent for Building Restoration Corp., based in Minneapolis-St. Paul, said the Minot project is a complete building envelope restoration, which involves a new roof on the church and 100 percent tuckpointing, which means taking the white grout off the masonry and some of the old red mortar out and replacing it with the red mortar that matches the brick and the original historic mortar color.

"That's what the original mud was on the church when it was first built," Cunnien said. "Our objective is to get the church back to as close as it was to its original form."

He added, "The roof that we are putting on it now matches what that roof looked like when it was brand new. The old roof had been painted. It had rusted and had holes in it in many locations. This new roof is pretty close to what the roof looked like when the church was first born."

The material for the roof and steeples is steel with an acrylic finish called Galvalume, a 55 percent aluminum-zinc alloy, which looks like a galvanized metal with a matte finish.

A vestibule has been added on the southwest side of the church to deter inclement weather elements from entering the church. It also adds another handicapped entrance to the church. Other handicapped entrances include an elevator at the northeast corner of the church and a ramp entrance on the southeast side of the church, where the glass curtain wall has been replaced with a brick facade. The ramp was part of the 1984 "Project Voice," "Project Lift" and church remodeling project.

The vestibule and facade were designed by Paul Kramer, an architect with Anderson, Wade and Whitty PC, of Minot, and also a member of the church.

"This is really his project, his baby," Cunnien said. "In essence, the project as a whole is his design and we are executing his plan."

The restoration of St. Leo's Church has been a great undertaking for BRC. "It's been a chal-

St. Leo's Catholic Church is barely visible behind an immense amount of scaffolding. Submitted photo.



lenging project,” Cunnien said. “We knew it was going to be challenging going in and it was even more so than anticipated.”

As the project nears completion Cunnien is happy with the outcome. The building is “tight” for the winter and some of the workers will be back in the spring to complete the work. The number of workers on the job has varied. In addition to the Building Restoration crew, the masonry specialists, there were roofing contractors, electrical, carpentry, insulators and painters on-site. The numbers ranged anywhere from 60 to 80 different actual craftsmen, Cunnien said. BRC tried to incorporate as many local subcontractors as it could for the project.

Cunnien praised the tradesmen, especially the BRC crew. He said their expertise and 60-hour work weeks were an incredible commitment on their part.

“It was a real beehive of activity in August and September when we were really pushing,” he added with a chuckle. “The scaffold in itself was its own project.”

**Major project**

Chris Sachs, BRC senior project manager, who is overseeing all aspects of the project, said, “This was a major project. There’s an incredible amount of work with lots of detail work. It’s been a challenging project that has been wonderful to be involved in.”

There’s a night-and-day difference, he said. The old white grout over the mortar joints created wide, white fake joints has been removed and new bricks, which were specifically manufactured for the project, have replaced more than 5,000 bricks which were deteriorating.

“The church now has a historic look with red brick and red mortar,” Sachs said.

The church now appears as it did when it was first built, Vetter said.

“We went back to its original integrity and structure. We want it to last for another 100 years and to keep the dignity of the building. We believe they (the workers) have done a great job in keeping the integrity of St. Leo’s Church. The exterior is just gorgeous,” Vetter added.

He admitted, though, he had concerns when flooding was taking place in Minot. He had a meeting with BRC and asked if work could be stopped.

“It just didn’t feel right to continue the work when the rest of the town was struggling,” Vetter said. “And yet they told us, ‘We can’t stop. We have too much cut out.’ It was important to get it (the grouting) all closed in before winter because if that didn’t happen the building could be lost,” he added.

It was during that time that we felt more strongly than ever, once we were able to be at peace with that decision, that this could be a wonderful sign of new hope for downtown, Vetter added.

Vetter said he approached the bishop and asked if lighted spires could be added to project plans. “The bishop agreed when we told him it was important to show the people in a visible way that we are not going anywhere,” he said.

There will be eight lights on the outside of the spires that will light them from dusk until dawn. The pinnacles — the crosses at the very top of them — will be gilded in gold and will be put up soon.

“When the light hits them it’s going to be a beautiful sign and testament of hope,” Vetter said. “This isn’t our first flood; it isn’t our last flood. God has seen it all. It’s new to us, but it is not new to God or to his church. The church in her 2,000 years of history has been through every imaginable disaster with her people,” he added.

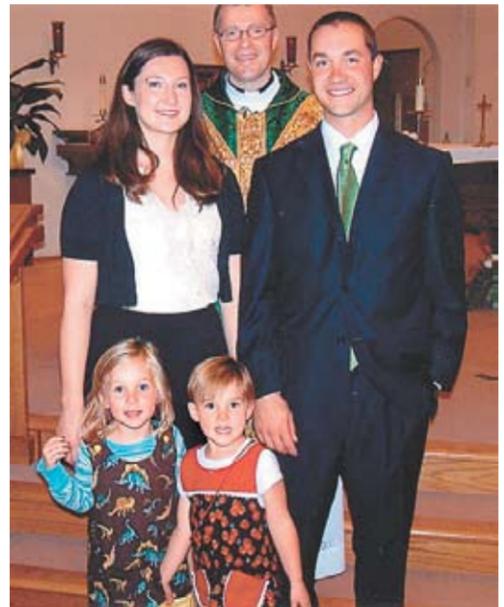
“We’re not going anywhere and this is a powerful sign that we are stable, we are strong and we are going to be here for a long time to come. The church is with us, doing what she does, offering the sacraments, being a sign of new life, new hope, of reconciliation, of peace and refreshment that comes only from God,” Vetter said.

The skilled workers have discovered beautiful, intricate metalwork, the detail work, and are just amazed at it. It’s not visible to many of us, but it’s there on the backside of spires ... all over the place ... that was simply done for the glory of God, Vetter said.

“First and foremost, this project is for God so that his people can gather together to worship him and to be nourished by the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist. The people of God are at home in his house and this is his house. We wanted to do the very best for our dear Lord and we also knew we wanted to do it for the long term, not a short-term fix. We want it to last well for the sake of the people,” Vetter said.



Masonry experts from Building Restoration Corp. are tuckpointing the south steeple of St. Leo’s Catholic Church. Photo by Loretta Johnson.



The Rev. Austin Vetter, center back, baptized Hayden and Dave Cunnien in early October in Minot. Their daughters, Charley and Aisley, will be baptized later in Minnesota. Submitted photo.

**A ‘faith’ project**

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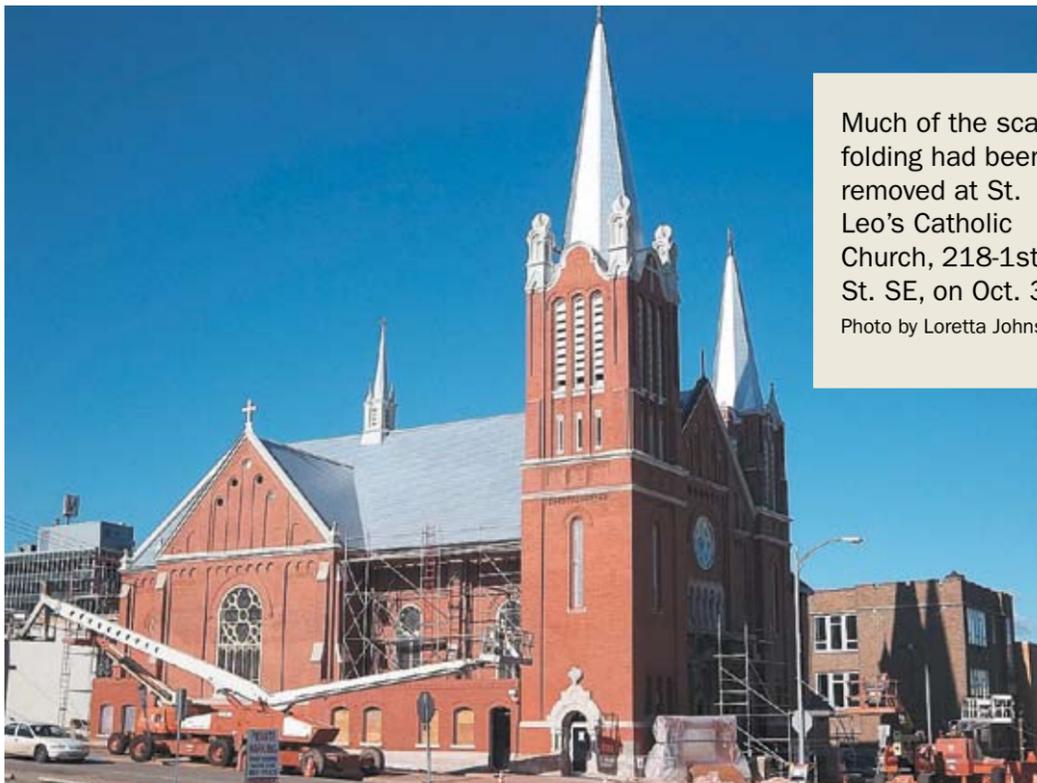
Dave Cunnien and his wife, Hayden, and their two daughters, Charley and Aisley, ages 4 and 3, started attending Mass in St. Paul, Minn., last fall and went about five or six weeks in a row. Last fall he received a call from Building Restoration Corp. project manager Chris Sachs, telling him of the restoration project at St. Leo’s in Minot.

“I don’t work out-of-town because of my small family,” Cunnien said. He and his wife talked about the project and came to the conclusion that “This could be a calling. Maybe something divine is happening. We decided it would be great to come to Minot with one stipulation — that we would come here as a family.

“We actually started going to Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church for the same reason. We didn’t want anyone to think we were motivated by anyone here.”

“Then when Father Vetter discovered that, he invited us to catechism classes. We were just pleased as punch because that was a goal of ours anyway. We have always thought of this project as divine in nature for us that we came here as a family.”

Dave and Hayden were baptized in St. Leo’s Church in early October and will have their daughters baptized in St. Paul so more of their family members can be present.



Much of the scaffolding had been removed at St. Leo’s Catholic Church, 218-1st St. SE, on Oct. 30. Photo by Loretta Johnson.