

After Sandy, Historic NJ Church Still Struggling to Repair Damage

As bulldozers and power saws repair the sunny boardwalks of Jersey's vacation spots, one small piece of Sandy storm damage remains unattended: a weathered bronze church steeple.

The weathered bronze cross is silhouetted against the sky, bowing down as if in defeat.

It has been that way week after week, month after month, for nearly a year.

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With the first anniversary of Sandy approaching, a quick fix has been thwarted at every turn.

"Every time I drive by and see it, my heart breaks. I say, 'Lord, why is it so expensive?'" said Lily Ortiz, wife of the energetic pastor who bought the Belleville church in 2010 for their fledgling Hispanic congregation.

Relying on little more than faith and a handshake, Miguel Ortiz's Inglesia Pentecostal La Senda Antigua ("The Old Path") took ownership of a Dutch Reformed church whose roots predate George Washington.

What looks like a simple repair—perhaps just a hydraulic scaffold and a stiff yank to render the cross upright—turns out to be more complicated.

When Pastor Mike, as he is called, checked on his church the night Sandy struck, he saw the steeple swaying back and forth

in the wind. More ominous was the accompanying sound:

"You could actually hear the wood cracking," he recalled.

So he wasn't surprised when the local engineering firm hired by the town to stabilize the structure told him the wooden belfrey and steeple were shot. The cross remained affixed because of a strong rod at its core, but bending it back upright might cause it to snap. The 160-year-old wooden structure would have to be taken down, repaired or replicated, then hoisted back up and re-installed.

The cost: \$250,000.

It might as well be \$250 million. The small congregation can barely pay its bills as it is.

If the church had that kind of money, Ortiz wouldn't have allowed its property insurance to lapse in the months before the storm. He and his wife, who used to work for State Farm, knew they were taking a risk, but the money simply wasn't there.

"Every penny that came in was going out," he said.

They'd had to repair the roof of the fellowship hall ("You could see the stars at night"), replaster the walls of the cavernous sanctuary and install a handicap ramp.

FEMA will loan (but not give) money to churches, but Ortiz worries that if he were to get behind on his payments, he'd lose the church.

That's not in his plan. Moreover, he doesn't see it as being in God's plan, for God steered him to ownership of a church that is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ortiz originally wanted to remove the steeple and bent cross temporarily, replacing it with a flat roof. "But it's historical," he said. "The town said we can't."

The Dutch Reformed Church of Second River has been there, in some form or another, since 1697. During the Revolutionary War, lookouts in the original church tower sounded the alarm about approaching British troops, prompting villagers to drag their lone cannon to the churchyard facing the river.

The church cemetery contains the graves of 66 Continental Army soldiers. Next to those graves are a dozen burial plots for the Rutgers family. Yes, that Rutgers.

Whatever deep roots the church had in Belleville have simply dried up and given way to the forces of change.

The Reformed Church of America, formerly the Dutch Reformed Church, managed to maintain an active congregation until it celebrated its 300th anniversary in 1997. By then, however, it was more like an exhausted marathoner crossing the finish line – down to a few dozen congregants and actively contemplating a sale.

As an independent congregation, La Senda Antigua has no diocesan or synod emergency fund to tap. The local paper did an article about the predicament a month after the storm. In it, Ortiz asked for donations, listing his cell phone number. He didn't get a single call.

(Kathleen O'Brien writes for The Star-Ledger in Newark, N.J.)