

100-year-old stone church struggles to meet seismic retrofit requirement

James Figueroa, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 10-3-10

COVINA - One hundred years ago, church builders hauled stones from the San Gabriel River and meticulously pieced them together - without any mortar - to form the walls of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church.

The building is considered an architectural marvel, but church leaders are now struggling to meet city requirements for a seismic retrofit by 2012, and the congregation is worried it could end up locked out.

"This will be the most expensive thing this church has had to do," said the Rev. Judith Heffron, Holy Trinity's pastor and rector.

Reinforcing the stone walls will cost about \$250,000 to \$300,000, and the church expects to cover that amount through a loan. It's the ancillary costs such as building permits and consultant payments that will present hardships.

The church has already met deadlines to file retrofit plans, and must obtain a building permit by December. If it misses any deadline, the city could declare the church a seismic hazard and put up yellow caution tape to keep people from entering.

"There's been a little bit of grumbling and anxiety," Heffron said of the mostly middle-class congregation. "A majority recognize that this is non-negotiable. It must be done. We simply need to move forward."

To help raise funds, the church is inviting the community to a chili cook-off on Oct. 16, from 5 to 9 p.m.

Holy Trinity, the oldest church in Covina, is one of dozens of buildings affected by a 2008 city ordinance requiring seismic retrofits for unreinforced masonry structures.

Mayor Peggy Delach initiated the safety precautions after witnessing the destruction in Los Gatos caused the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

"It's really a safety thing for the people inside," Delach said. "When I got on the council, I wanted to make that a priority."

The Covina ordinance does provide for hardship extensions, and Delach said the City Council would be very willing to assist the church if it encounters trouble, possibly through discounted permits. The city can't provide funds for the work, however.

Holy Trinity is considered a high hazard because more than 100 people attend services on Sundays.

There is even precedent for stone church collapses in California. The 1812 Wrightwood earthquake destroyed the Mission San Juan Capistrano church and killed 40 Native Americans attending Mass, according to the Southern California Earthquake Data Center.

This isn't the first time earthquake concerns have impacted the Covina church, which was designed by famed

architect Arthur Benton. In 1990, the Upland earthquake dislodged stones from the belfry, requiring \$100,000 in repairs.

The tower was rebuilt at a lower height and within earthquake standards. Workers also added epoxy to the church base, but the walls of the building are still held together only by a single stone protruding from several buttresses.

Retrofit plans, drawn up by Arcadia structural engineer and historic building specialist Michael Krakower, call for temporarily removing exterior shingles to reinforce from the outside.

If everything goes as planned, the church won't miss a single service, Heffron said.