

Church's sudden shutdown leaves parishioners scrambling

By **Marco Santana** Staff Writer

A nearly 100-year-old Orlando church abruptly shut down Friday, with leaders emailing parishioners to tell them that Sunday services would not be held.

On Saturday, church leaders at Reeves Memorial United Methodist Church, which sits at the northwest corner of Oregon Street and North Fern Creek Avenue, said the facility has become too “inward focused” but that they will reopen the church eventually.

“The intent is to get back on mission, which is making a difference in the community,” said Bob Bushong, who has been district superintendent for the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church for three years. “We have gotten away from that.”

But despite Bushong saying the church could come back, the email hinted at a permanent shutdown.

“I have become fond of many of the folks at Reeves, and I am saddened that we are ending this way, especially with such suddenness due to current circumstances within Reeves,” Bushong wrote.

Church membership has been on the decline, with Reeves right now serving roughly 30 people, Bushong said.

Volunteers who provided services at the church packed up their belongings on Saturday while a locksmith changed the locks on the doors.

Others browsed the church's thrift store, which will close for two weeks “with a decision made during that time about when and if it reopens,” Bushong wrote in his email.

Two groups that use the building, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, will continue to meet there, though members were erroneously told Saturday that they would not. Pastor Patti Thue later contacted the groups' leaders to tell them they could keep using the space, Bushong said.

Thue said she understands that some parishioners are upset but hoped they could support the church's move.

“We would love for them to walk alongside us and celebrate the re-imagining of this church,” she said. “We have engaged with them. Change is very hard and [their emotion] is understandable.”

The building will be renovated and the Trinity Christian Academy preschool will move in this fall at the location. Construction on that project is expected to start May 1.

Bushong said the decision to shut the doors should not have come as a surprise to anyone.

“It feels abrupt when you’re not receptive to change,” he said. “We are hoping some of them with hurt feelings will come back and engage in the opportunity we will provide. It hasn’t been abrupt.”

“This is about moving forward,” Bushong said. “It’s not about killing something. It’s about helping it come alive.”

In the email, Bushong cited a paragraph in the church’s Book of Discipline that advises how to proceed in the event that a property is no longer used as a divine place of worship.

“My genuine hope is that this decision to close ultimately will make way for God’s new thing to emerge and to flourish in ways that enable new ministry in the name and spirit of Christ to impact the surrounding community in healthy and positive ways,” Bushong wrote.

The website for the church, which was built in the early 1900s, has been shut down, but its Facebook page remains active.

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