



Pastor Mickey Lohr and volunteer coordinator Curt Hencye raise their hands and sing April 6 during the first service back in the building following the flood.

Resurrection Celebration: Lyons' church The River is back from the flood

'The best thing that's ever happened to this church'

Where the out of control St. Vrain River had poured in during September's flood, worshippers poured out thanks last Sunday.

They hugged and wiped tears of joy from their eyes as they scanned the sanctuary of The River Community Church, familiarizing themselves with the new paint and wood floors while the worship band sang about surviving the storm.

"Oh no, you never let go, through the calm and through the storm," they sang. "Oh no, you never let go, in every high and every low."

Less than seven months after the flood destroyed their sanctuary, most of the congregation's 120 members returned to the building for a service that was full of praise and appreciation.

Since September, dozens of volunteers from organizations across the country have helped repair the church, which Pastor Mickey Lohr describes as "better than before."

The smell of fresh paint has replaced the moldy fumes that filled the church in the weeks following the flood.

Light comes in through the new windows in the hallway instead of through a hole in the floor.

A new deck lines the main entrance.

The renovation allowed the congregation to come back together last weekend, but the church members are what made the old and new space a home, Lohr said.

"We are not a building," Lohr said. "We are a family, and there was never a question about that."

Now that members have had a chance to reacquaint themselves with the renovated building, the church is opening its doors for a new kind of resurrection celebration on Easter Sunday.

The public is invited to attend the April 20 service for an Easter message — the third service back in the building at 18668 N. St. Vrain Drive.

'Help was unbelievable'

Original repair estimates exceeded \$400,000, including labor, materials and engineers to assess the new river channel that ran through the sanctuary floor. The church has spent only about \$35,000 on the work so far, which includes cleanup, all of

the repairs to the building's interior and moving the river about 70 yards west of the church back to its original location. All of the church's restoration expenses have been covered by donations received since September, Lohr said.

Lohr credits volunteers and donors who gave money and materials for the quick repairs.



Flood damage at Lyons' The River church on Sept. 13.

"We could not have done this without every single volunteer who came to our aid," Lohr said. "The outpouring of help was unbelievable, and that's going to change our church family and the priorities of this church forever."

Christian Aid Ministries and Christian Disaster Response teams were just a couple of the groups that played a significant role in recovery at the church. But there was one group that has reshaped the future of The River Church.

"We had a team from a church in Joplin that was destroyed by the tornado," Lohr said. "They understood what we were going through financially and emotionally, and they were here helping us after all that they had been through. That meant so much to me, and we're going to take our cue from them."



A cross with the words "Amazing Grace" written on it is seen just outside the sanctuary as Pastor Mickey Lohr speaks to the congregation April 6 during the first service back in the building since the flood.

The River already has donated about \$35,000 of the nearly \$80,000 donations since the flood to the Town of Lyons and plans to provide support with about \$10,000 in remaining flood donations to local residents for recovery efforts, Lohr said. Once recovery slows in Lyons, Lohr is hoping to take members of his congregation to other disaster areas to "pay it forward."

'What God has done'

The sanctuary was the hardest hit section of the building. Mud and water damaged the floors and the lower part of walls throughout the hallway, kitchen, youth room and offices. The second level rooms were untouched and came in handy during clean up and restoration.



Volunteer Alan Mackay, of Parker, paints around a smoke detector at The River church in Lyons.

The rooms upstairs were used as storage at first but eventually doubled as bedrooms that housed volunteers.

"We had 19 volunteers staying up here at one point," Lohr said. "They were working hard all day, and we only had one shower, but we made it work."

Lohr teared up as he looked around the now empty room.

"You never wish for something like this to happen," he said, "but this really is the best thing that's ever happened to this church."

Helping to coordinate the massive volunteer efforts across Lyons are Curt and Mary Jo Hencye of Florida-based Calvary Relief Ministries.

Curt Hencye has been in Lyons since the end of September, doing damage assessments and facilitating repairs around town, including work at The River.

The couple has been working for the disaster relief group for about 10 years but said they have never seen anything like this flood.

"Usually the water comes up and then it goes back down," Curt Hencye said. "With cars turned over and debris everywhere, this was more like an earthquake where the earth shook and then imploded."

Before he began the April 6 service, Lohr invited Hencye to the pulpit to elaborate on the volunteer efforts.

"The reason we're here today is because this man was relentless that this church was going to be done by today," Lohr said as he introduced Hencye.

Hencye pulled his phone out of his pocket and took a panoramic photo of the room, full of smiling faces, as a reminder of the progress that was made.

"It blows my mind what God has done in six months," Hencye said. "Even the floor you guys are sitting on wasn't here."

'Our church is stronger'

One member of the congregation is making keepsake boxes from wood that was salvaged from the sanctuary floor. Each box has a cross and The River logo carved into the top and will be given to volunteer groups and other churches who assisted in repairs.

After giving the volunteers some time to recover, Lohr is hoping to bring those who were integral to the rebuilding process back to Lyons for a thank you celebration hosted by The River.

"They have become a part of this church family," Lohr said. "Our family spans the country now, and we can't wait to repay our debt to them by going out and serving others."

Even when disaster relief teams cease, the small congregation will finish the work.

Dirt piles and rows of rock line the courtyard to the west of the church where the river washed away all of the vegetation. Dirt and rock will eventually be replaced by grass and flower beds. A storage shed that was washed south of the building by the new river channel will be moved back to its original location against the exterior wall on the west side of the sanctuary. Exterior repairs will continue as funds and volunteers are available, Lohr said.

Lyons resident James McCurry has been a member of the church for about nine years and spent several days over the past seven months repairing his church home.

The week before the first service back in the building, McCurry spent hours holding back his emotions while he laid the deck at the front entrance.

"At first everything was a mess, the building and the members," McCurry said. "But everything has turned out OK. So much more OK than we ever could have imagined."

Since the flood, members have gotten to know one another on a deeper level forming an unbreakable bond that now sets the congregation apart, McCurry said.

"When you're on your hands and knees in a crawl space, you really get to know each other," McCurry said. "Because of all of that, because of everything we've been through our faith is stronger. Our church is stronger."

