

# Neon cross, church offers inspiration for thousands along I-55

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The Rev. Ben Ball of Hamel St. Paul Lutheran Church and the congregation had their first Christmas church service Thursday since a fire in November 2013.

Each night, a cross shines brightly atop the Hamel St. Paul Lutheran Church, serving as an inspiration to tens of thousands of motorists and truckers while driving along Interstate-55.

The brightly lit cross was extinguished for a period back on Nov. 10, 2013, and days following when an intense fire broke out. However, a resourceful church congregation held together and rebuilt the church and turned the neon cross back on for all to see this past fall.

The fire broke out in the church's basement close to the boiler room during a gathering.

"There were about 2,000 people here when the fire broke out," Hamel pastor Ben Ball said. "I was in the fry shed and someone said, 'pastor the church is on fire.' I saw black smoke billowing out of the church. Thankfully everyone inside was able to get out."

The neon cross was initially donated by two women in the congregation who lost their sons in combat in World War II and had been there ever since as a symbol for the boys and the Lord. The church is located on Old Route 66 just outside Hamel and nestled in a community that once was called New Gehlenbeck. German immigrants settled there and opened the first church sanctuary in 1861. That sanctuary was used until 1931, when the present church was built and opened.

This marked the first Christmas for the congregation back in the church. The pastor said the congregation was determined to rebuild the church and get the cross shining again.

"The people here are very resilient and trust the Lord will provide," the pastor added. "If you look in the church cemetery, there are many grandparents, great-grandparents and even great-great grandparents buried here of those in the congregation."

After the fire, all the pews, pulpit and ceiling had to be sanded and stained again because the black smoke remnants. The task was daunting, but this is not an everyday congregation, the pastor said. The electrical system was burned out and needed replaced, along with many other items.

The church used insurance funds and donations to rebuild the church even better than it was before.

On Dec. 7, the church sent a letter out that funds were still needed to retire the debt and members came through.

"It showed the dedication and commitment of the people in the church," Ball said of the effort to keep the church debt free.

In October, the restoration of the outside cross was completed and it shined brightly again for those passing by to see and be inspired.

Once again truckers started honking horns after seeing the cross lit. For years, the cross has been a symbol that has drawn truckers and other passers by to visit the church and take a closer look. The church is visited every year from people from all over the United States and multiple foreign countries.

Ball's message to his congregation this Christmas was it would be one of the most joyful ones ever.

"There is a sense of peace that God is looking down on us on this Christmas and all things are made new," Ball said.

The cross shines brightly again each night on top of the church resting in a small town surrounded by soybeans and corn.

"The cross reminds us that Jesus died for us and there is no one outside his love," Ball said. He adds that the cross is there for people from Chicago to St. Louis and all over the country to see.

