The steeple of Zion Episcopal Church in Oconomowoc is currently being restored by craftsmen using ancient engineering techniques. Pictured are Zion's rector Father Scott Seefeldt (left) and Tom Berget, owner of Approved, LLC Oconomowoc and general contractor overseeing the project, while Krause Konstruction steeplejack Wade Hirschfield works aloft in the background.

Rebecca Seymour/Special to the Enterprise

Steeplejack Wade Hirschfield uses a block and tackle pulley system to scale the 100-foot-high steeple of Zion Episcopal Church in Oconomowoc. The skilled craftsman admits performing work aloft isn't a job for everyone and to be being an adrenaline junkie.

The 10-foot-high metal weathervane on top of Zion Episcopal Church's steeple will also be restored to its original state during the month-long project.

Pinnacle pursuits

Steeplejacks use ancient engineering and craftmanship to restore Zion Episcopal Church's spire

Zion Episcopal Church has been a part of the Oconomowoc landscape for nearly 135 years. A focal point from the downtown boardwalk, its iconic steeple soaring above the treetops on a peninsula on Fowler Lake has served as a beacon for the faithful, neighbors and visitors.

Due to the height of the steeple and the location of Zion Episcopal Church on a peninsula in Fowler Lake, skilled steeplejacks are using ancient engineering techniques instead of scaffolding to restore the 100-foot-high spire and weathervane.

By Rebecca Seymour
Special to the Enterprise

OCONOMOWOC — Zion Episcopal Church has been a part of the Oconomowoc landscape for nearly 135 years. Its cardinal red doors and iconic steeple soaring above the treetops on a peninsula on Fowler Lake have served as a beacon for the faithful, neighbors and visitors.

The cream-colored stone façade of the Romanesque-style church offers a striking contrast to the green tapestry of majestic oaks, pines, hickory and black walnut standing sentinel over the grounds. Whether following towering trunks or a gracefully tapering church spire, the eye can't help but be lifted to the heavens.

Like many buildings in Oconomowoc, last June's severe hailstorm left its mark on Zion's roof and steeple, resulting in a full replacement a year later.

Restoration of the more than 100-foot-high church steeple located on the narrow piece of land jutting into Fowler Lake would require techniques handed down through the ages.

Tom Berget, long-time member of Zion Episcopal Church and owner of Approved, LLC, an Oconomowoc roofing and gutter company, is the general contractor overseeing the major project.

"Because of the height of the steeple and the church is surrounded by water on three sides, we are using a block and tackle pulley system rather than scaffolding. This technique has been used for thousands of years to get up and down sailing masts and by steeplejacks to scale the sides of steeples," said Berget.

Several steeplejacks with Krause Konstruction out of Coon Valley, Wis., rely on years of experience as they sit in boatswain's chairs suspended from ropes attached to the top of the steeple to perform work aloft.

Wade Hirschfield has been a roofer for 39 years and admits he is also a bit of an adrenaline junky.

"It's an interesting job to do, but it's not for everybody," laughed the La Farge steeplejack. "Working on steeples 80-to-100-feet above the ground is awesome. I get to touch materials that most people have never seen before. It's a neat job and so interesting because there's so much history in it."

Steeped in history

To maintain the historical nature of the church's façade, all of the steeple's roofing will be replaced with new cedar shingles, and the intricate, 10-foot-high metal weathervane will also be refurbished back to its original state. The project will take about four weeks to complete.

Father Scott Seefeldt has been rector at Zion Episcopal Church since 2016.

"Our steeple peeks out from the trees and can be seen from every angle of the lake. It sits in the heart of our community and people know that it is special," said Father Scott. "We use ancient and traditional forms of worship in our church, so it's appropriate that we use ancient and traditional ways to restore our steeple. It's a great opportunity to showcase our church. There's a buzz about it - people stop by and look up and are amazed at what's happening here."

Zion Episcopal Church was founded nearly 180 years ago, according to the church's website and information compiled by Oconomowoc historian and author of the Oconomowoc Area-Then and Now Facebook page, Laurie Muffler.

The first Anglican service in newly settled Oconomowoc was held in 1836, when the rector of St. Paul's in Milwaukee walked 30 miles once a month to conduct services for a small group of Episcopalians in a log schoolhouse north of the Lake Road Bridge.

In 1846, the Rt. Reverend Jackson Kemper established the Zion Episcopal community in Oconomowoc and appointed William Adams as the first rector of Zion.

In 1851, well-known Oconomowoc entrepreneur John S. Rockwell donated a parcel of land including the peninsula, coined "The Point" to the Zion parish for the purpose of building a church. The first service in the new building was held on Christmas Eve, 1853.

In 1889, the foundation of the old church had settled to the extent that efforts to save the building failed, and it was torn down. The cornerstone for the present Romanesque stone church was laid in July of 1889, and the first service was held Jan. 12, 1890.

Zion Episcopal Church, located at 237 N. Lake Rd. on the isthmus between Fowler Lake and Lac La Belle is one of the first churches established in Oconomowoc, and arguably one of the most photographed. Its beautiful location was the original site for the annual Oconomowoc Festival of Arts from 1970-1973.

"Our church building facilitates our relationship with God, with one another, and with our community. We're stewards of this grand space, which has been a gateway for the whole community for a very long time," said Father Scott. "When you're on the boardwalk or walking around Fowler Lake, the focus is our steeple. From our perspective, the focus is outward as we serve the community."

Pharmacy & Your Health

David Eichstaedt, R. Ph.

Heatstroke and Heat Exhaustion

The persistent heat and humidity this summer can put everyone at a greater risk for heatstroke and heat exhaustion. Heatstroke, which is commonly referred to as sunstroke, occurs when the body's temperature is at 104 F or higher. Heat exhaustion is a less serious condition; but when left untreated it can progress into heatstroke, which has dangerous health risks.

Symptoms of heat exhaustion can include muscle cramping, nausea, excessive sweating and headaches. When it progresses to heatstroke, symptoms include a rapid heartbeat, confusion and loss of consciousness. If you suspect you may have heat exhaustion it is important to get out of the sun and heat, and hydrate immediately to avoid progression into the more serious condition.

There are many ways to prevent heat exhaustion, those include staying indoors during peak sun/heat hours and staying protected from the sun while outside. It is also important to drink the recommended amount of water, which is about half a gallon, plus an additional 2-3 cups of water while outside.

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