



TONY PAVONE photo

St. Paul's Church at the corner of routes 202 and 209 in Bantam will celebrate its 190th anniversary as a parish next Sunday.

Litchfield parish to note 190 years of life, growth

By TONY PAVONE

LITCHFIELD — Decades of change and 34 ministers ago, a small group of Bantam settlers organized their first church on Oct. 30, 1796.

The building they erected across from Bantam Cemetery the following year was named West Church because it was considered a western branch of Litchfield center's St. Michael's Episcopal Church.

Today, the church name, site and parishioners have changed, but the community spirit responsible for its birth, growth and continuing change lives on.

Parishioners will renew that spirit next Sunday in celebration of St. Paul's Episcopal Church's 190th anniversary as a parish. A 10:30 a.m. Service of Holy Communion will precede an informal reception.

At the service, Richard Kilbourn, 67, a member of the church since he was baptized as an infant, will review the parish's history. Kilbourn, of Old Turnpike Road, has been a lay reader for 46 years, nearly a quarter of the church's existence. He was appointed senior warden in February.

"The thing that amazes me about St. Paul's is the sharing of the ministry by lay members," the Rev. Richard Nolan, pastor, said Friday.

"I'm convinced that I could drop dead, and St. Paul's would continue because of the strong involvement and leadership of its lay people," the Rev. Mr. Nolan said, chuckling. Noting the work of such people as Kilbourn as warden and parish administrator, he said the only thing he can't leave to others is administering Holy Communion.

Even Bantam had a different name, Bradleyville, when the parish was formed 190 years ago. Forty-seven years later, in 1843, parishioners built the church on the current site at routes 202 and 209. It was still called West Church when the first service was held in the new 46-by-32-foot building on Christmas Eve that year.

The church building started growing along with the

parish in 1897, when a detached parish house was built. The house became a part of the church in 1912 when an addition was built.

Changes to the building continued in 1952 and 1953, when the parish house was razed to make room for an underground vaulted chamber, known as an undercroft. Two south exterior doors were moved together and interior remodeling began.

By late 1962, construction of another upper-level parish hall was completed over the undercroft, and the interior was finished.

The church's 35 clergymen over the years have included full-time ministers, rectors of St. Michael's Church, interim and assisting priests, and vicars appointed by the Episcopal bishop.

The church had its own full-time minister until about 14 years ago, when a "Sunday Supply" minister, handling only Sunday services, was appointed. Church attendance dropped substantially for the next two years until the appointment of a part-time vicar, the Rev. Mr. Nolan, a professor at Mattatuck Community College in Waterbury.

The congregation has grown from about 100 members when the Rev. Mr. Nolan arrived in 1974 to 150 today. He said most of the new members are from outside Bantam, including elsewhere in Litchfield, as well as Washington, Morris, Warren, Waterbury, Goshen, Torrington and Bristol.

Robert Pingpank, church treasurer since 1975, said its governing body, the 12-member vestry, doesn't envision a great population growth in Bantam, but it hopes the church will continue growing.

Reflecting the church's continuing change with the times, it has been videotaping some services for broadcast on cable television Channel 5, the public access channel. Money is never requested on the monthly or semimonthly broadcasts.

Anticipating further change, church officials are considering an attempt to telecast every Sunday service for people who cannot make it to church.