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Church home is where family congregates

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Side seating area seen from the loft. (Rachel Zahumensky / Daily Progress)

There are homes that embrace a person like a grandmother's hug.

An abundance of flourishing plants, calming colors, polished wood and plenty of radiant sunshine help generate a sense of warmth and serenity in Susan and Josh Wheeler's home.

Some might credit the history of the Greene County home as another reason for its charm and welcoming atmosphere. During most of its long life it served as Mount Paran United Methodist Church.

For the past five years, it has been home for the Wheelers and their two daughters, Chloe, 7, and Katie, 4.

Susan Wheeler said she still wakes up in the morning, and almost has to pinch herself to make sure she's not dreaming.

The attraction she felt to the remodeled church was immediate. Within hours of first seeing it, she was reduced to tears. She now laughs about the cry that was brought on by fear of someone buying the home before they could.

"We had been driving our Realtor crazy looking at everything and anything with the criteria of being old, historic, rural and with a mountain view," Susan Wheeler said as the heavenly fragrance of a baking black Russian Kahlua cake added another homey element to the house.

"We were tipped off that this had just been put on the market, so I drove out immediately. I had gotten out of my car and was staring at the house when the owner came out and asked if he could help me.

"I asked him if this was the house for sale. He said it was and invited me in and showed me around. I fell in love with it, and went home shaking. I told my husband we could act right away and get it or do nothing and lose it. Then I started crying, because there were so many houses we had lost out on before, and this had our entire check list of everything we wanted and needed."

It was love at first sight for the husband as well, but he didn't want to rush into anything. Although he knew the dynamic housing market in this area rarely provides the luxury of a long deliberation process, buying the house was a major commitment.

"I called my parents to talk to them about it, and my mother gave me this great advice," said

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Wheeler, an attorney and associate director of the Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression.

"She said, 'Forget the money. If you can find a house you and Susan love, buy it, because it will be such a meaningful

connection for the two of you. And it will go a long way toward making your home a happier place.'

"When I got that advice, it just made great sense. We were lucky to get it for around \$200,000. We knew that was a great bargain for us, and we've been very fortunate that it has appreciated since we bought it."

The church was built in 1854. Robert Holbert, a veteran of the War of 1812, and his neighbor, Dr. J.F. Early, each donated half the land the church was built on.

The church flourished for decades, but by the 1980s the ebb and flow of life had caused the congregation to dwindle. Many of the parishioners who had once filled the pews on Sundays had gone to their final rest in the church's cemetery.

The church was deconsecrated and put on the market. The remaining parishioners merged with nearby Grace United Methodist Church.

Bruce Wardell, owner and president of BRW Architects in Charlottesville, saw the church in 1989. It was still filled with pews and the pulpit was intact.

Wardell said he and his firm like taking buildings that originally served one purpose and turning them into something else. Their projects have included transforming a warehouse into a loft residence and a barn into a home.

"When I saw the church, the view it had, the proportion of the space inside, the fact that it had been relatively untouched and not messed up made it very appealing to me," Wardell said. "I saw it in the morning, went home and asked my wife about it and, by the afternoon, we had a contract on it.

"We designed it as if we would want to live in it. The concept for the inside was: How do we make spaces that are comfortable for a family to live in and still preserve the kind of volume and proportion of the existing space?

"In the living room, our idea was that what makes a good living room is a fireplace and a bookcase, and that's what we put in. It was a project that was a ton of fun to do."

Wardell and his family lived in the house for seven years. Another couple lived there for three years before the Wheelers became the owners.

The current residents give Wardell all the credit for turning the church into a well-thought-out home. Susan Wheeler, who runs her own residential interior decorating business, gets most of the credit for decorating the inside of the house.

Tasteful touch

The dwelling is replete with tasteful touches, such as old-fashioned candle lanterns that grace a dining room wall. She also chose a paint scheme that's soothing and mindful of the light that streams through the tall windows.

"The owners prior to us had the walls painted caulk white and the wainscoting along the walls was a gray color," Susan Wheeler said. "The loft above the kitchen and the bookcase was a gray-blue, and it wasn't quite calm enough for me.

"It was very relaxing, but I thought the color choices could maybe be improved upon just a tad. The paint I chose for the walls is called cashew, but it actually looks more like French vanilla ice cream.

"The color of the wainscoting is Laura Ashley stone. Another color I've used is called Ventana. It's a very complex color that looks different in different light. Sometimes it looks putty, sometimes green and at other times it takes on a sage quality."

The Wheelers love the open floor plan Wardell designed. There's a feeling of spaciousness, and yet the fireplace and dining areas provide a sense of intimacy.

"Bruce did a wonderful job of maintaining the architectural integrity of the church by keeping the large open area," Susan Wheeler said. "Through simple, yet brilliant design, there are different areas that are obviously the dining room, living room and family room.

"An open floor plan like this is almost impossible to find in old, historic homes. In old homes the rooms are usually small, with little or no closet space. This is open and light-filled with plenty of storage space.

"It has a fantastic kitchen, and I love how Bruce used the supports for the loft he put in to cover the kitchen. Instead of the area beneath the stairs that go up to the loft being unused space, he turned it into a pantry."

Wardell calls the section of the house that encases the kitchen and supports the loft a "middle pavilion." Its imaginative design has a large bookcase on one end and the kitchen on the other.

"The pavilion breaks the spaces down to a scale you feel comfortable in," Wardell said. "And yet you can still feel what the original space was like, and that was important to us.

"There are mathematical or geometric relationships that mean things - that have some relationship to scale and the size we are as human beings and patterns that happen in nature. For instance, the proportion of the living room area is a double cube. It's 16 feet tall, 32 feet from side to side, and 16 feet between fireplace and the bookcase.

"The proportion of that provides a certain feeling. It's kind of intangible, but it gives a sense of order to the space. When you are in rooms that have been well thought out in terms of proportion, you can't put your finger on it, but they're nicer, they feel better and they have a rightness about them that makes them feel like good places.

"I think a good amount of the warmth a person now experiences in the home is due to the way the Wheelers have lived in it. I think they have contributed in very important ways, such as in how they've furnished the place and the colors they've chosen."

Fine features

Wardell said when he started measuring the house and looking at the detail, his respect for the carpenter who built it began to grow. He saw certain proportions and other fine features that indicated to him that the man was careful, thoughtful, and well educated and skilled in his craft.

The architect said the remodeling design was made easier by the fact that he could put the sleeping quarters in a wing of the church that was added in 1950. Once used for offices and classrooms, the split-level addition now features two bedrooms and two baths on the upper floor, and two bedrooms and a shared bath below.

Another aspect of the beautifully designed and appointed home that provides a feeling of spaciousness without detracting from the welcoming ambience is the 16-foot-high pressed-tin ceiling over the main area. It's a striking feature for first-time visitors when they enter the main room through a door from the entrance vestibule.

"I like how when you come home and walk into the vestibule you have a chance to kind of decompress," Susan Wheeler said. "And then you walk in here.

"I love seeing the reaction of people when they step out of the vestibule and the house opens up before them. People have asked about our heating costs because of the unusually high ceiling.

"Bruce did an excellent job of weatherproofing the house and installing the right kind of windows. We have ceiling fans in three locations, and that helps the house be energy conscious."

Although the Wheelers' home is no longer a church, much of its charm comes from the fact that it still looks like one. Before they fenced in the front area, motorists often used the circular driveway as a turnaround point.

With pets and small children often playing out front, the fence became a safety necessity. A sign reading, "Mt. Paran circa 1854 private residence" has helped cut down on visits from strangers.

People still stop to take photographs of the house, but the number of unexpected visitors has declined.

The Wheelers caution people who are interested in buying an unusual home to expect curious onlookers and the occasional surprise knock on the front door.

"We've had a few people come to the door asking for the pastor," Josh Wheeler said with a laugh that suggested he might not be the best person to go to for spiritual guidance. "We've been in the yard and have had people who were visiting the cemetery come over and chat with us.

"They often mention that they had gone to this church for many years. We were told the front area in front of the wing was where they would have their church picnics.

"Since moving here, I've gotten a lot of ribbing from friends of mine. One of them wrote and said, 'Am I the only one who sees the irony of you living in a church?' "

No ghosts

Other questions the couple often gets pertain to ghosts or odd occurrences in the former house of worship. If there are ghosts, they're very quiet and keep to themselves.

"I don't believe there's any kind of spirits or things like that associated with this building," the attorney said. "But I do like to think about how much life these walls have seen in more than 150 years - particularly as a church.

"It has seen the highs and lows of human existence. Think about the happy times of marriages, christenings and things like that. How wonderfully happy that must have been.

"And then the truly sad times of grieving, like during funerals. Regardless of the whole spirit question, there's no doubt that these walls have seen an incredible amount of life, and it's nice to live in a building that has that kind of history."

The Wheelers have little trouble imagining what a Sunday morning might have looked like a century or more ago. In the stillness one can almost hear the shuffle of feet and rustle of movement as parishioners enter to pray.

A mounting block in front of the house once aided people in mounting and getting off horses and in and out of wagons and carriages. It now serves as a reminder of days gone by, as well as a convenient extra picnic table when needed.

"I must confess, I didn't know what the mounting block was at first," the man of the house said. "My first impulse was to remove it.

"When I learned what it had been used for, there was no doubt that it was going to stay."

When the baking cake was ready, Susan Wheeler placed it in a box for delivery. In addition to her design business, she operates Takes the Cake, which specializes in making old-fashioned desserts.

The carefully thought-out kitchen has plenty of counter space. She said this is a godsend when the chef hat goes on and she starts making her homemade pies, cakes and tarts.

When the day is winding down, the family enjoys watching spectacular sunsets crown the nearby mountains. Quiet murmurs of thanks are often sent heavenward by the family of four when they think about how fortunate they are to live in a home with such a sense of peace and embracing warmth.

"This is a very relaxing home," Josh Wheeler said. "I feel as if the outside world is outside when I come home.

"Susan has done a wonderful job of decorating and making it beautiful. Perhaps my favorite time in this house is when we have a fire in the fireplace and I'm sitting there with Susan and both the girls.

"It doesn't get any better than that."

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