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## **With prayers and holy water, St. George Greek Orthodox Church reopens after fire in Knoxville, Tennessee**



Four years after a fire gutted its sanctuary, St. George Greek Orthodox Church reopened in a special Saturday evening service filled with prayers and scripture.

The domed church has been a Kingston Pike landmark since it was built in 1968. It's known for both its traditional Byzantine architecture and its custom-made interior religious mosaics.

But the church faced an extensive restoration after it was severely damaged and its interior ruined in an early morning fire on the Orthodox Easter Sunday on April 12, 2015.

It took four years and more than five million dollars to restore the church. Insurance paid for the majority of the restoration. But the work was time consuming, mostly because of the detail required to replace the church's glass

mosaics.

But on Saturday, the tall wooden doors were blessed with holy water and then opened for a processional into the church and a special vespers service.

Afterward, around 275 people — St. George parishoners as well as members of other Orthodox East Tennessee congregations — sat down to a dinner in St. George's community hall. For the last four years, St. George held church services in the 1970 community hall adjacent to the church.

The fire four years ago left the two-floor, 7,706-square-foot church standing but destroyed its interior. While the building was gutted, the reconstruction was more detailed and expensive because the iconic Italian-designed mosaics had to be replaced.

Fire and heat melted or damaged the religious mosaics, including a signature large image of Jesus inside its dome. The fire also reduced the choir loft organ to a few metal scraps.

Stained glass windows were damaged, pews burned, parts of the ceiling's plaster lathe buckled. Three feet of water from fire hose runoff flooded first-floor classrooms below the sanctuary. Only a few items — including the pulpit and the marble-and-mosaic altar — survived.



Archbishop Alexios, who oversees the United States' southeast Greek Orthodox churches, came from Atlanta to preside over the services. The ceremony — sung, recited and chanted mostly in Greek — began outdoors at the church's front concrete steps.

Church members gathered in the afternoon heat and humidity at the bottom of the steps as Alexios, St. George pastor the Rev. Anthony Stratis and priests from other area congregations began the door opening ceremony.



During the ceremony, the archbishop held a handful of basil leaves dipped into a glass bowl of holy water. As a blessing, he flicked the water-soaked leaves at the church's tall double wooden doors. And after Alexios repeatedly knocked on the doors, they opened for the processional into the building for vespers.

Parishoners stood for most of the service. Some took videos and photographs from their pews.

Several people remarked that while the church's interior had not been changed, it appeared brighter. Some of that change may be due to the decades of smoke on the previous mosaics from candles and incense used during church services. But church leaders said new LED lighting and brighter-toned glass are the major factors in the more brilliant look.





The mosaics were created by Italian artist Sirio Tonelli's Tonelli Fine Arts Studio. Five decades ago, Tonelli designed and created the church's original mosaics highlighted by Apse's large Virgin Mary and the towering dome's Jesus.

Tonelli and his staff created St. George's new intricate mosaics in a near four-year process. Several church members said they learned Tonelli died last week.

The reconstructed St. George, they said, stands as his last church.

Local dignitaries at the Saturday evening included government officials and representatives of other faiths. Also attending as guests of the church were City of Knoxville Fire Chief Stan Sharp and Fire Capt. D.J. Corcoran. St. George leaders have said firefighters saved the church structure and rescued several artifacts from the building.

The special Saturday reopening service was held for church members. About 250 families are part of the church.

An event in August will be held to welcome members of the public to see the reconstructed building. In addition, tours of the church will return as a popular part of St. George's annual Greekfest to be held in September.

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