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**CITY OF NEW BEDFORD**  
**Jonathan F. Mitchell, Mayor**

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## PRESS RELEASE

### New Downtown Theater Opens

*After 11-year revitalization effort, historic First Baptist Church  
transformed into The Steeple Playhouse*

NEW BEDFORD – The story of an 11-year-long effort to transform a crumbling, historic church into a modern performing arts venue began, literally, on a dark and stormy night.

It was April 2012, and heavy wind was blanketing Downtown New Bedford. Debris from the deteriorating steeple atop the historic First Baptist Church crashed onto William Street. More debris fell again in November 2012, forcing firefighters to use yellow caution tape to block off the area in front of the almost 200-year-old building.

Mayor Jon Mitchell and church leaders agreed that the building's worsening condition posed a public safety risk, and the [Mayor moved to place a tax lien on the church in 2013](#). The lien allowed the City to not only step in to stabilize the failing steeple, but City action spurred discussions among historic preservation partners on how to save the historic church from ruin.

Ten years and roughly \$3 million in public and private funds later, on Friday morning, Mayor Mitchell and other officials gathered for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to officially mark the end of the long journey that transformed the historic church into a new theater, The Steeple Playhouse. The extensive renovations and repairs over the last decade, driven by the City and the Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE), have resulted in a modern performing arts center that will be the home of Your Theatre Inc., a volunteer, non-profit local theater group that has educated and entertained generations of Greater New Bedford residents and visitors.

“Eleven years ago, we sought to kick start a more-focused discussion to preserve the First Baptist Church by repairing the steeple, which was damaged in a storm, and placing a lien on the building,” Mayor Mitchell said. “At the time, it was an unorthodox use of public funds, but it launched an effort, with the help of partners like WHALE, Reverend Dalton Said, and Your Theatre, that has resulted in the establishment of a new Downtown theater and the preservation of one of New Bedford’s most historic buildings.”

Funding for the nearly \$3 million renovation project was roughly evenly divided among City, state, and private sources. The City of New Bedford’s contribution totaled approximately \$900,000, with \$500,000 directed to the project from the Community Preservation Act (CPA) grant program, \$240,000 from the federal American Rescue Plan (ARP) grant, and \$150,000 from the federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. The state contributed a nearly equal amount, with \$400,000 allocated from the Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Fund and \$480,000 from the Commonwealth’s Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit program. Your Theatre and WHALE raised almost \$1 million in private donations and grants to cover the final third of project costs.

The new Steeple Playhouse theater offers modern lighting, sound, and performance space, and can fit more than 250 guests. Your Theatre has been in contact with several organizations interested in hosting performances there, and also offers a unique setting for weddings, meetings and other events. The architect for the renovation was Kathryn Duff of Studio2Sustain.

“For over 60 years, WHALE’s work has focused on some of the most important and threatened historic buildings in New Bedford and First Baptist was the epitome of our mission-based work. Shepherding this project for nearly a decade took incredible vision, creativity, and a collaborative spirit, all of which made the Steeple Playhouse possible. We are incredibly proud of what our organization, project team and the entire community has accomplished here, and our thanks go out to everyone who supported it. Now, we are excited to see this newly restored treasure brimming with life once more and wish Your Theatre, Inc. incredible success with the Steeple Playhouse,” WHALE Executive Director Erin Miranda said.

“Repurposing this building into an active performing arts, conference, and wedding space will not only help preserve the building for generations to come, but will provide much needed small and midsize performance spaces in the heart of Downtown with a transformable stage, professional lighting and sound array, and updated accessibility and utilities. We couldn’t be happier to have such great partners in WHALE, The City of New Bedford, and Studio2Sustain, to make this vision come to life,” said Eric Paradis of Your Theatre Inc.

**About First Baptist Church**

The First Baptist Church is a prominent landmark in downtown New Bedford. Built in 1829 in the Greek Revival style, it is the only church featured on the City of New Bedford's seal that is still standing today. Its signature steeple was a welcome sight for whaling ships returning to port many years ago. Its national significance is tied to a raucous 1863 meeting there that inspired then-Lieutenant Henry Martyn Robert, to create "Robert's Rules of Order," which has been widely adopted as the standard set of guidelines for parliamentary procedures.

**About WHALE**

The mission of WHALE is to foster historic preservation and continued use of the city's architectural heritage to enhance community and economic vitality in New Bedford. WHALE was established in 1962, when urban renewal threatened entire neighborhoods. Its founders were committed to saving New Bedford's history and architectural heritage from "death by neglect and the tyranny of the bulldozer." Since 1962, WHALE has facilitated the completion of more than 72 restoration and preservation projects in Greater New Bedford.

**About Your Theatre Inc.**

Your Theatre, Inc. is a non-profit, volunteer, community theater group in New Bedford. Founded by Mary A. Smith in 1946, the theater has been in continuous operation since, and produces four to seven shows each season. The organization also offers an annual scholarship for students pursuing the arts. Striving for the highest excellence, the group draws from the surrounding communities for the best talent, both on stage and off. The organization provides opportunities for both experienced and newcomers. Training is provided in all areas of theatre, including acting, set construction, make-up and theatrical design.

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