

# The Statue Doctor

How AARP member Sheila Lehman became a saver of sacred artwork



Lehman ministers to statuary in her Arcadia, California, workshop. She has been an AARP member since 2024.

**O**NE SOS CAME from a little church in Simi Valley, about 50 miles northwest of where I live in California.

While setting up the church's Nativity figures, parishioners had crunched the lower lip of one of the sheep, made a big dent in the back of the baby Jesus' arm and broken the fingers on the Mary. I rushed over and got everything patched up in time for their midnight mass. Another time, a church in Whittier called because one of their statues had fallen off the wall and been completely smashed to pieces. I put it all together again.

So how did I become a saver of statuary? The former pastor at my church knew I had a vintage furniture store and could restore things. He had been given a wooden statue

of the Virgin Mary with a toddler Jesus. It was more than 100 years old and riddled with dry rot. The paint was chipping, some fingers had broken off, and the base was wobbly. He asked me to fix it.

I took it back to my shop and slowly stabilized and repaired it, bit by bit. There were decisions all day: What parts do I try to keep? What do I replace with Bondo? I had to learn as I went, and I loved it. I remember thinking, *If this was all I ever did, I could do this forever.*

I let churches know I was available if any of their statuary ever got damaged. And I started getting calls. There are all kinds of damage possible. Things fall. Plaster wears away. There's moisture, water, perfume, candle wax and soot.

It's rare that these jobs create a lot of drama. I'm actually often watching paint dry. That's how exciting it is. But that's a good thing, from my perspective. The more skill I develop, the less tension and drama there is. Skill is the eraser of drama.

By now I've restored scores of religious statues for churches and individuals from all over the country. Often when I meet private clients, they're devastated that their statue is broken. Maybe it's something that has been in their family for generations. I do my best to reassure them, because I'm confident I can help.

Everything is fixable. All it takes is time. —As told to James Bartlett

*Sheila Lehman, 58, is the owner of La Porte Vintage in Arcadia, California, and a parishioner at St. Bede the Venerable Catholic Church.*