

HEALTH

A new day for Northwood church

NORTHWOOD, N.D. -- Church pews remain in storage and much of the new building is not quite finished. Still, it's time to celebrate for members of Ebenezer Free Lutheran Church, who will gather at 1 p.m. Sunday to dedicate a new meeting place. The...



The Rev. Tim Johnson talks about the new Ebenezer Lutheran Church on Friday morning in Northwood, N.D. There will be a rededication service on Sunday where they will welcome 31 new members to the congregation. The new church was built on a section of the former Northwood Public School building. Herald photo by Sarah Kolberg

By Kevin Bonham

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Still, it's time to celebrate for members of Ebenezer Free Lutheran Church, who will gather at 1 p.m. Sunday to dedicate a new meeting place.

The dedication marks a remarkable milestone in a journey that began Aug. 26, 2007, when a tornado destroyed the congregation's century-old building, as well as Northwood School, and annihilated or severely damaged homes and businesses throughout this community of 950. One person was killed and several others were injured.

It was just about a year ago to the day that church members broke ground on the new church on the site of the former Northwood School.

Today, the sprawling new church complex, which measures about 14,000 square feet, adjoins a 7,500-square-foot old school library saved and converted into a Fellowship Hall.

The new church sanctuary, with a 42-foot-high ceiling, blends new conveniences with treasures from the past, including the altar, Communion railing, pulpit, pipe organ, wooden columns and the original stained-glass windows.

While some stained-glass panes were broken in the tornado, most of the windows survived.

"It's remarkable," the Rev. Tim Johnson said. "It's like 100 years old, and they were able to find the same glass that was in it."

While Sunday's dedication is the official opening, it's not the first service. A Sunday service was held in the new Fellowship Hall in March.

More than a dozen people attending the Easter Sunday service in April had to stand because the 335 folding chairs set up in the sanctuary proved to be not enough.

Like other parts of the new church, the pews were salvaged. But they're not ready for installation yet. The pews were built to fit the sloped floor of the old church. The new facility has a flat floor, so the pews will have to be modified.

Volunteers will take care of that, probably as soon as spring planting season is over.

A focal point of the new church is an original stained-glass window that is built above the entrance, facing east.

"On Easter Sunday, the sun was shining through that stained-glass window right on the flowers placed at the altar," Johnson said. "It was surreal."

The construction project cost \$2.1 million.

Insurance on the old building provided \$750,000. The congregation took out a 30-year, low-interest Small Business Administration loan for another \$750,000, and expects to pay that off within eight years. The church also raised the remaining \$600,000 in donations.

It cost about \$250,000 to gut and convert the old school library into the new Fellowship Hall, and the old computer lab into a spacious kitchen.

In the nearly three years the congregation has been without a permanent home, it has held services at Northwood Deaconess Health Center, Northwood Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Northwood Community Center.

And when they return home for the dedication ceremony Sunday, they will welcome 31 new members.

As the congregation prepared Friday for Sunday's dedication, construction crews continued to work on offices and meeting rooms.

Outside Friday, a front-end loader hauled the old school bell from the new church property to the new Northwood School, which opened last fall on the west edge of town.

The old Ebenezer church bell, which was salvaged from the brick steeple that was destroyed by the tornado, awaits an addition that will be built outside the church this summer -- a metal frame that will hoist the old bell about 20 feet above the ground.

Meanwhile, youth members already had taken ownership of their meeting room, featuring brightly painted walls and their own painted handprints and footprints, offering a message for the future -- "Go Where U Send Me."

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