

HEALTH

## Northwood's Ebenezer Lutheran to break ground on new church

NORTHWOOD, N.D. -- In a big step forward in recovery from the tornado that destroyed much of this city, members of Ebenezer Lutheran Church will break ground this evening on a new church building on the site where the public school used to stand.



Ebenezer Lutheran Church of Northwood, N.D. Pastor Tim Johnson (left) and Mike Schwartz, president of the congregation, in the library of the old Northwood School. The church plans to covert the library into a social hall as part of a \$2.1 million building project to replace the church damaged by the 2007 tornado. Herald photo by John Stennes.

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**By Steve Lee**

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Lutheran Church will break ground this evening on a new church building on the site where the public school used to stand.

The tornado that hit Aug. 26, 2007 wrecked the school and Ebenezer's century-old brick, steepled edifice across the street, along with much of Main Street and many homes. One man was killed and several people were injured.

Now where Ebenezer stood for a century is a blank rectangle of black soil.

"Potato dirt," the Rev. Tim Johnson calls it, laughing. The hole left when the old structure was torn down was filled in with field dirt cleaned off potatoes at a local warehouse, and it included lots of left-over spuds.

"We got a whole barrel out of there," Johnson said, laughing again at the memory of the tasty taters his family enjoyed as a fringe benefit of living next to the site. "I think some others did, too."

The new church will go where the old school stood, right across the street.

The new school is almost complete, on the west side of the city. Students have been attending classes in nearby Hatton, N.D.

Ebenezer's members have been attending church in the other Lutheran church in town, Northwood Evangelical Lutheran. Not damaged as badly as Ebenezer, NELC opened its doors to share its space. The third church in town, Community Bible, escaped unscathed and housed emergency services after the tornado.

Construction on Ebenezer's brand new structure will start next week by Curtis Construction of West Fargo, which built an entry to the old church almost four decades ago.

Named after the Old Testament place name for a "stone of strength," set up by the prophet Samuel to mark how far God had

helped His people, Ebenezer is a congregation that holds to the old, proven ways, and moves deliberately.

When the old brick church was built 100 years ago, it took a few years because the congregation wouldn't borrow money, and only would build what it could pay for.

The new church will be built on to the former school library, a 7,500-square-foot addition only a few years old that survived the E-4 tornado. The congregation paid the city about \$90,000 for the site, almost a full city block.

The cost of the property and construction will be \$2.1 million, Johnson said.

Insurance on the old building, demolished last year, was \$750,000. The congregation took out a low-interest Small Business Administration loan for another \$750,000, and has raised almost two-thirds of the remaining \$600,000 needed, Johnson said.

Mike Schwartz is president of the congregation and will say a few words at the ground-breaking.

Mostly, he's a guy who does stuff. He's spent hours cleaning out the damaged library, ripping out the walls and Sheetrock and old insulation, putting in new insulation, helped by other church members.

Before the tornado struck, Northwood had a population of about 1,000, but lost homes and people in the aftermath.

Ebenezer's attendance hasn't flagged much, Schwartz said, holding about 125-130 each Sunday, despite having to meet early, at 9 a.m., at nearby NELC. For Easter and then confirmation Sunday last weekend, there were 200 or more in the pews.

The new church will have seating for 300 in a spacious, well-lit sanctuary. It will hang on to some of the old things.

"We will use the altar from the old church, and the columns," Schwartz said. Ebenezer has an unusually ornate carved wooden altar and fluted wooden columns that supported a curving balcony. Most of the large, intricate stained glass windows will be re-used, too, in the new building, he said. A modern tower will hold the bell from the old steeple.

The heating system will come from, maybe ironically, the nether regions of the earth: from 80 geothermal wells across the property, up to 200 feet deep, Schwartz said.

Ebenezer dates to 1898, when a revival went through the region and the old building dates to a century ago.

Losing homes and stores and the school was a big blow, but losing a church that's been there for generations can be traumatic in a deeper way, Johnson said. His office has been in the local nursing home. Like many, he saw his home hurt.

"We are still finding glass in the house," he said. "We don't know where it's coming from."

With a new, bigger school almost complete, and an old church ready to start a new beginning, recovery is taking clearer shape, Johnson and Schwartz say.

Within a year, Ebenezer expects to be in the new building.

But just breaking ground today is a big deal.

Schwartz stood in the former school library and looked around, picturing what it will look like and describing it.

"Once the work starts, and people can see something . . .," he said.

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## Groundbreaking

Members of Ebenezer Lutheran Church in Northwood, N.D., will break ground on the site of their planned new building at 7 p.m. today on the site of the former school, 220 Doheny St. S.

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