

Labor of love: Hundreds volunteer to build new Kingdom Hall



CAPTION: Jane Nordberg/Daily Mining Gazette

Volunteer crews from Wisconsin spread cement last Wednesday on the site of the new Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses on U.S. Highway 41 in Franklin Township.

By JANE NORDBERG, DMG Writer

FRANKLIN TOWNSHIP — According to overseers of the new Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses undergoing construction on U.S. Highway 41, the project is the perfect example of "many hands making light work."

Since breaking ground in mid-May, the \$300,000 project has been the focus of hundreds of volunteers from Wisconsin and Michigan who give up their time without pay, said Bill Michaelson, project overseer.

"These people have families and limited vacation time, but they come and support us entirely free of charge," Michaelson said last week while walking the site where sealant was being applied to newly-poured concrete.

"We feed them and room them and cover their expenses, but nobody's getting paid," he said of the volunteer concrete crew from Stevens Point, Wis., who were on hand for a second concrete pour last Wednesday.

Some volunteers have come from as far away as North Carolina, said Rod Yauch, presiding elder and chair of the local building committee.

Except for employees of Moyle, Inc., who did the preparatory site work and provided the concrete mixer, there has been no paid labor on the site, Yauch said.

"We're lucky that we have many talented tradesmen who make a living at their trade, but they'll travel hundreds of miles to do this for us without charging for it," he said.

Some of the design work has also been donated, courtesy of Michigan Tech University alumni Todd Dailey.

"While I was attending MTU, I was also a member of the local congregation, so when this project came up and I was contacted, I was not just willing but very eager to give something back," said Dailey from his offices in downstate Onsted, near Jackson.

Dailey, a 1982 structural engineering graduate, explained that the country's Kingdom Halls are divided into regions, with a Regional Building Committee assigned to oversee design and construction for new construction projects.

"When it came to the design, the RBC did not have an engineer with a Michigan professional engineering license, so that's why they got in touch with me," he said.

Not unlike a subdivision home, the RBC has standardized plans for the halls, which are then modified by the local building committee to fit the needs of the local congregation, site conditions or special needs, Dailey explained.

At 4,224 square feet, the new hall will be a significant improvement over the former hall on Cedar Street in Dollar Bay, constructed in 1968, Yauch said.

"We were outgrowing where we were in Dollar Bay," he said. "Parking was an issue, and we had outdated bathrooms that weren't barrier-free."

Plans to remodel the existing hall were scrapped when costs exceeded the building's worth, Yauch added.

With 88 door-to-door publishers and Sunday attendance regularly reaching 100 people, Yauch said the Franklin Township hall's congregation was the largest in the Upper Peninsula.

"We're growing all the time, and we're guessing that the increased visibility on the highway will bring in more witnesses who are traveling up here for the summer," he said.

The new hall has seating for 174, a 30 percent increase in space over its former structure, which has since been sold to Semco Energy. Since then, the witnesses have been meeting at Michigan Tech University, Michaelson said.

Construction is expected to be completed between Aug. 9 and 11, when hundreds of masons and volunteers will take trowel in hand to construct the building's brick walls. "It will be neat for people to see everybody doing the same thing at once," said Yauch of the 22,000 bricks being brought in for the construction. "In about two or three weekends this site will go from a slab and foundation to a to a completed building."

A dedication and open house will follow, so the public can view the building first-hand, he said.

Michaelson, a veteran volunteer who has helped to build halls and missionary homes in Africa, Turkey, South America and Jamaica, said it's not uncommon for the witnesses to offer tours of their new construction, particularly in remote areas of the world.

"Many times we have to arrange for classes and tours because the local people are so curious about what we were doing," said Michaelson of a hall he helped to build on the Caribbean island of St. Kitts. Dailey, however, warned curiosity-seekers not to expect a stained-glass spectacle or gilt-laden altar.

"The goal of the Jehovah's Witnesses and their Kingdom Hall is to have an attractive, modest structure that is designed to accommodate its purpose, which is mainly Bible instruction and worship," Dailey said. "We don't want ornate, but we do want a nice-looking, modest structure that fits in with the community, is comfortable and allows for Bible education."

Although Dailey participates in similar projects downstate, he regretted not being able to come up to the Copper Country until the fall. In the meantime, he said, it has been great to keep in touch with Michaelson during the design process.

"I'm looking forward to coming back when it's being utilized and attend a meeting of the local congregation," he said. "Being a part of that community holds a lot of special memories for me."

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