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Growing churches spreading their wings

Marketta Gregory
Staff writer

(March 26, 2006) — The largest building project in Greece is the First Bible Baptist Church expansion. Just a few miles away in Greece, Hope Lutheran Church is bursting at the seams and hoping to build a larger place, while Aldersgate United Methodist is finishing up its addition.

Throughout Monroe County, the same scenario is playing out as suburban churches grow. It's not as big as the church building boom of the 1980s, but it is the second generation of that growth, said Brian Ostling, a local developer who specializes in church construction and renovation.

And this generation is buying acres of land and making sure that buildings are welcoming to people of all ages and abilities.

First Bible's new 93,000-square-foot facility will be about the size of the Home Depot on West Ridge Road. It will sit on 96 acres and seat 1,200.

"We can see that the expansion of Greece is to the northwest, and that's where we are headed," said Bob Dyjak, project manager for the \$14 million expansion at 990 Manitou Road.

The church has grown to close to 2,000 members since it started 40 years ago, and it hopes to grow by 5 percent each year. Its new 10,000-square-foot commons area will allow plenty of room for mingling between Sunday morning services, and its theater-style seating is intended to get more people in the sanctuary.

"The tendency with pews is to spread out," Dyjak said. "You're more likely to fill your church to capacity with theater seating."

In fact, the standard rule is that once a church reaches 80 percent of its capacity, it won't grow anymore, said Ostling, president of KOS Development.

"We're Americans. We don't want to sit close to people," he said, and sometimes having more than one service on a Sunday morning isn't practical either. There's the extra traffic. There's the need for a hallway or foyer that's big enough for people to exit and enter. There's the parking lot to consider.

Plenty of parking

All of those things came into play at Mendon Presbyterian Church, which was built more than 100 years ago. Now its 200 members struggle to fit into a place built for 130 — even with two services on Sunday mornings. There's no room on the property to expand and it certainly can't lose any parking spaces. The lot has room for only 20 vehicles; the rest park along busy Rush-Mendon Road. "It's not very friendly when you are trying to get people to come in," said Linda Zarcone, an elder at the church.

But soon they will have a building that is three to four times larger and plenty of parking space on the 26 acres they bought at the corner of Cheese Factory Road and Route 64.

"To bring more people to Christ, we needed more room for them," Zarcone said, adding that 60 percent of the people who live within five miles of the church do not have a place of worship. "We feel that this is a huge evangelism tool."

While the congregation at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in the village of Pittsford isn't expanding, it does hope to expand its reach by adding an elevator and bathrooms that are large enough for caretakers to accompany people. They also had a laundry list of other improvements, including soundproofing their Sunday school partitions, a new sound system and a new roof and wiring.

"We wanted to give our church a better face in the village," said Harry Ruske, who has been attending the church for more than 60 years. "We've been handicapped-accessible for many years but this is greatly improved."

Congregants even took care to reach out to their neighbors and let them know about the \$1.3 million renovation project, said Ruske, who lives about a block from the church. The church got no complaints, but that's not always the case.

The biggest reason churches run into problems is the NIMBY — Not in My Back Yard — factor, said Roman P. Storz, a lawyer in Washington, D.C., who specializes in the First Amendment.

Sometimes places of worship will be discouraged from moving or expanding in downtown areas because they don't pull in enough traffic. Those same churches might be discouraged from moving to the suburbs because they bring in too much traffic.

Working with towns

What's next

First Bible Baptist Church, at 1039 North Greece Road, is holding a groundbreaking ceremony for its new facility at 3 p.m. next Sunday, April 2. The ceremony will be at the new location, 990 Manitou Road.

For more information about the building project, click on www.promisedland.org.

Other projects

Several churches in the Rochester area are involved in building projects, including:

- New building for New Covenant Fellowship, 2070 Five Mile Line Road in Penfield.
- New sanctuary and lobby for Risen Christ Lutheran Church, 1000 Moseley Road in Perinton.
- New building on 66 acres for The Father's House, 692 Paul Road in Chili.
- New gymnasium, kitchen and entrance for Faith Baptist Church of North Chili, 2954 S. Union St. in Chili.
- New building on 13 acres at the intersection of Chili Avenue and Route 252 in Chili for Calvary Assembly of God.

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Most of the problems seem to occur where land is more highly sought-after, such as in Florida and the Northeast, he said, and sometimes people will complain about the size of church property because it can't be taxed.

But places of worship have what the courts call "inherent beneficial land use," Storzer said. They have a good effect on society, thanks to their soup kitchens, ball fields and other programs.

So courts have said that just losing tax money is not a compelling reason to stop a church's construction.

Even with its 96 acres, First Bible didn't run into any problems with the town, said Dyjak.

"They made it clear that they are on our side," he said, adding that the church owns an additional 94 acres nearby that it uses for its Grace & Truth SportsPark, which is used heavily by the entire Greece community.

"The town has been great to deal with," said Dyjak.

Mendon wanted the Presbyterian church to make a few adjustments in its plans, and now the more than \$1 million building is on target for a May or June grand opening. St. Paul's Lutheran in Pittsford is nearing completion, and First Bible Baptist in Greece is hoping to move into its new place in the spring of 2007.

Some of the church growth is because the population is moving out to the suburbs, Ostling said, but not every church is growing. Some of the growth has to be attributed to what individual churches are doing to attract people.

"For (Mendon Presbyterian), it is our pastor and our gospel choir," said Zarccone, who came to the church in the mid-1990s, when there were 12 people in the choir. Now there are 36.

"They rock that little ol' church building," she said.

Once the church moves, there will be more room for the choir, more room for a fellowship hall, more room for almost anything its members can imagine.

"The possibilities," Zarccone said, "are endless."

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