

The following is a reprint of an article that appeared in Section B –Religion of the April 3, 2010 “The Citizen” newspaper in Conyers, Georgia. The newspaper serves Rockdale and Newton counties and the surrounding area.

Raising Grace

Volunteers help congregation to build church

It is a practice reminiscent of days gone by. Fellow farmers would pull their wagons into a neighbor’s field and have a big ol’ barn raising.

Well, the wagons now come complete with air conditioning, running water and inside toilets. The farmers are retired men and women from across the country who have pulled their RVs into a big field to help a friend — Abiding Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Covington.



Teams from Builders For Christ came to town last month and have been working ever since to help raise the roof on Abiding Grace Evangelical Lutheran's first church building on Ga. Highway 212 in Covington. They set up their camp on the site and have worked alongside church members to construct the 6,000-square-foot facility.

“The neat thing about this building is the members get to be a real physical active part of the work and witness God working through them to see this building come about,” Abiding Grace Lutheran Pastor Jonathan Scharf said. “It’s also a neat experience to swing a hammer yourself.”

Scharf is excited Builders For Christ volunteered to work on the church and said it has been a great experience for members of his congregation to be hands-on in building the place where they will eventually worship. They have also come to enjoy spending time with the volunteers and Scharf said everyone will miss them when they are gone.

“I call it a summer camp for retirees,” Scharf jokes of the band of volunteers who camp together across the country helping churches such as Abiding Grace. “One guy plays the guitar and another the accordion. One couple — she plays the keyboard and he the guitar — they all play music together. I like to stop by at night just to see what they’re doing.”

Volunteers have been on site since the slab was poured for the church foundation in March.

“We’ve been going ever since,” the pastor said. “We started with seven or eight couples (from Builders For Christ) and got up to 14. Now we have about 11.”

As soon as the group finishes its work at Abiding Grace, the RVs will leave town headed for Nebraska where another church is waiting for help.

Builders For Christ is affiliated with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and is made up mostly of retired men and women who travel around the country helping congregations build their first church buildings. They team up with the congregation and encourage church members and others in the community to join them in building the church. Most come in RVs and some stay with members of the congregation as they enjoy weeks of hard work, good food and fellowship, the pastor said.

Three members of Abiding Grace Evangelical Lutheran have worked with WELS on such projects in the past, including Ralph Kunz of Oxford who first heard of the group when the church pastored by his son-in-law began constructing its first building in Tulsa, Okla., in 1998. Kunz and his wife Audrey loaded up their motor home and traveled to Tulsa to work on their first Builders For Christ project.

“We started off just going for a few weeks at a time,” Kunz said. “Now we go for the whole project. It’s kind of habit forming. We’ve probably worked on eight projects since 1998. We don’t keep track.”

Kunz retired from the U.S. Forestry Service then went to work as a deputy sheriff for Newton County, retiring again in 2002.

Scharf said Abiding Grace has hired a contractor for its new \$1.2 million church and is thankful Builders For Christ volunteered to do the rough carpentry labor. He said hopes are that the volunteer labor will save the church around \$80,000.

Once completed, the facility will have a 200-seat sanctuary, a gathering space, two large classrooms with dividers to allow for four rooms, a small kitchen, restrooms, offices, a bell tower with a stained-glass window and a drive-through drop-off area. “We hope to use it in many ways to be a blessing to the community and a place to go for God’s strength and guidance through his word,” Scharf said. “... The goal is when people drive by and see it, they’ll see we think our God is a pretty great God.”

The church now meets at West Newton Elementary School on Brown Bridge Road, but hopes to be in its new church home at 5510, Ga. Highway 212, in Covington by mid-July.

As of this week, volunteers were putting up walls and getting the trusses up on the education wing of the building. Scharf said they were working on an extra storage room inside as well as working on the sides of the sanctuary.

Abiding Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church began meeting with the help of a neighboring pastor, who assisted the congregation get to a place to call Scharf as pastor in July 2003. The church presently averages around 120 in worship each Sunday.

Sunday the church will have its Easter celebration and an Easter egg hunt at West Newton Elementary. The service begins at 10:30 a.m., followed by a light lunch and the egg hunt for children. The church typically offers Sunday morning Bible study at 9:15, followed by worship at 10:30 and a Wednesday Bible study at 7 p.m.

Beth Sexton is a freelance writer based in Snellville. If you have a story idea, contact Karen Rohr, features editor, at karen.rohr@rockdalecitizen.com.