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New Church To Rise On Green

February 18, 2006

By DAVID FUNKHOUSER, Courant Staff Writer

MADISON -- A million-dollar construction project this year will give parishioners of the Lutheran Church of Madison a new home for worship and put the first new face on the town green in nearly half a century.

The striking look of the new church comes as a small miracle in tradition-bound New England, where a town green can be considered sacred turf. The proposal earned unanimous approval at the church's annual meeting, and again, unanimous approval from town boards for the necessary permits and variances.

"It's a remarkable statement of faith," said Madison architect Duo Dickinson, who designed the building. "It's an extraordinary opportunity that's been met by the town, who's been extremely supportive of this, and a small but growing group of parishioners who saw the only way they can really grow is to build a new physical space that can really manifest their spirit."

The church will hold a groundbreaking at 2 p.m. March 5 at the site of the current structure, a low brick building with a thin white spire that sits at the west end of the green on Britton Lane.

The project will create a new, larger sanctuary for worship facing the green and turn the existing sanctuary into a fellowship hall. The recreated church will be more energy-efficient and handicapped-accessible. It will include more room for the nursery school, Sunday school and youth programs, and more parking space.

St. Margaret's Catholic Church has offered Pastor Volker Heide and the Lutheran church's 300 or so members space for worship in the St. Margaret's education center from May through the end of the year.

"The plan is to have Christmas services in the new building," said building committee member Layne Gobrogge. The church is still looking for alternative space for its nursery school.

He said the new sanctuary will have an entirely

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different look from the current building. An architect's model of the structure shows dramatic timber frame construction inside. Outside, above the brick walls, glass wraps around the upper portion of the building under a gradually sloping roof, giving the impression of an open-air pavilion.

"We're going to spruce up our tired old building," Gobrogge said.

Heide, who has been the church's pastor for eight years, said the church at one time planned to sell the church and move. When they could not find a buyer, they decided to stay.

The church has raised \$450,000 toward the project and will borrow the rest through a construction loan program run by the church's national organization, he said.

Heide said the town, Dickinson and the contractors have been very supportive.

"We're doing this as our response to what God has done for us in Christ," Heide said. "We're trying to keep a spiritual focus. ... I think people respond to that."

The town's Lutheran Church was founded in 1949, and the current building was built in 1955. The church was renovated in 1970.

The nearby First Congregational Church built an annex in the early 1960s, the last new structure to go up on the green.

Dickinson said he was designing the building for "a tiny percentage of the normal fee."

"There's a point in your career where you say there are things more important than making money, and this is one of those times," he said. Contractors Waverly Builders and Bensonwood of New Hampshire are making financial sacrifices for the project as well, he said.

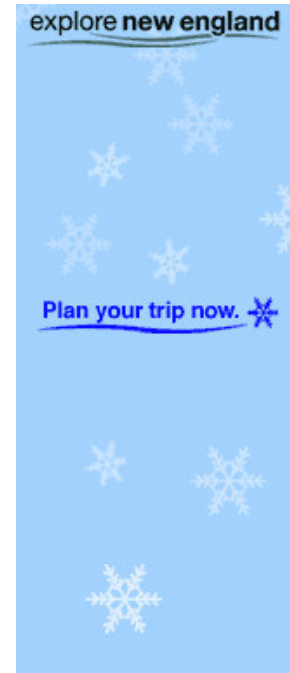
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