

A monumental move of faith

Havre Daily News
By Angela Brandt
September 13, 2006

BOX ELDER — A moment nearly a century in the making occurred Tuesday morning in Box Elder. The Faith Lutheran Church building began a monumental move that will transport it 277 miles to its new home in Billings.

The transportation was set to begin in June but issues with power lines and other obstacles kept bumping back the date.

Past Faith Lutheran congregation member Deanna Bitz, who along with her husband Alvin Bitz recently moved to Havre and another church, said she felt an array of emotions while she watched the church drive down the narrow Box Elder street and turn onto U.S. Highway 87. "It's a mix of relief and excitement, relief that it's on it's way. Hopefully it will arrive safe and sound at its new home," Bitz said.

The Bitz's son, Wade, who was baptized at Faith Lutheran took some time off from work to witness the monumental move along with other former congregation members. "I guess it's going to happen," he said about the multiple start dates set.

"It's exciting with a tinge of sadness," he added. "Actually it looks so much smaller off of the foundation but it's not a big church to begin with. I'm sure it will look big driving down the highway." The route to be taken runs through Winifred, Lewistown and Roundup before reaching the final destination. The steeple is already down in its new home, a Billings senior assisted-living facility owned by St. John's Lutheran Ministries.

St. John's president Kent Burgess looked at the church sitting on a low-bed trailer and said he had "been waiting a long time."

Although the saga of the church began almost 100 years ago when the congregation formed in 1911 and the building was erected in 1917, the story of the monumental move started last year. Congregation members announced the closing of the church last October due to low membership and displayed a message on the Internet asking other Montana church members if any needed items from the church like pews. Burgess saw the listing and called Deanna Bitz to enquire about the status of the church building itself and came up with a "hair-brained idea."

Burgess asked Bitz what she thought of the idea of moving the entire church to a Billings location to be used as the centerpiece of a planned senior housing community. Bitz responded that all of the four remaining families of the congregation must meet with Burgess to discuss the move. They all approved and the planning began. The previous inhabitants of the facility said they will be pleased to see their beloved little white church used by St. John's instead of being a target for vandals.

The building, which is of simple design common for prairie churches in typical schoolhouse-style, will serve as the heart of the campus and will be set on a new foundation and restored as close as possible to its original construction. In order to make the building handicap-accessible, a glass walkway and elevators will be installed between the 48-unit senior living complex and the church itself.

The building will be used for worship services, weddings, funerals, bible studies and other activities.

Before leading a prayer in front of the church, Burgess told those gathered this story is "as much about the journey as the end result."

The relocation has been estimated to take anywhere from four to 15 days. Billings house mover Duane Ostermiller and his daughter Leah Bomgardner, who maneuvered the truck and church onto U.S. Highway 87 Tuesday morning with the guidance of her father, are in charge of the transport.

Ostermiller said he hoped to complete the move in a week. The fastest speed the church can travel is 35 miles per hour. In addition, power lines along the way will be either snipped or lifted to accommodate the church's height of about 30 feet, minus the steeple. It took more than an hour to move the building onto the highway.

This morning, St. John's representative Jack Beals said in a interview via cell phone from the road, that the first day of travel ended after about 40 miles.

"It's going really well," Beals said.

He said the caravan of two flaggers and a couple of cars containing St. John's and Thrivent Financial for Lutherans employees has gotten many stares and gawkers but "people have been accommodating."

The move is estimated to cost about \$60,000. Donors sponsored a mile of travel for \$100 and a benefit dinner held this summer was a success. Burgess said efforts have totaled nearly \$30,000 and Thrivent Financial has stepped in with a \$30,000 matching grant for the funds raised. Lee Christianson, financial associate for Thrivent Financial for Lutherans in Havre, said the response from the public "gives you a warm fuzzy" especially when one thinks of the small churches along the Hi-Line that are closing or already abandoned.

Box Elder homemaker Cathy Dilman drove to an adjacent parking lot to witness the kick start of the move. Dilman said she was sad to see the church leave but glad it is traveling somewhere to be used.

"It's a once in a lifetime thing. At least they got a beautiful day to move it," she said.



Billings house mover Duane Ostermiller guides his daughter Leah Bomgardner as she maneuvers a truck carrying the Faith Lutheran Church on U.S. Highway 87 in Box Elder Tuesday morning. Ostermiller said he hopes to complete the move of the church to its new home at a Billings senior living community in a week. The fastest speed the truck and church can travel is 35 miles per hour.



Northwestern Energy workers lift a power line to accommodate the Faith Lutheran Church on U.S. Highway 87 in Box Elder Tuesday morning. The church, which closed its doors in October due to a diminishing congregation, will travel 277 miles to its new home in a Billings senior living community.



St. John's Lutheran Ministries president Kent Burgess leads former Faith Lutheran Church congregation members and others in a prayer Tuesday morning in Box Elder before the building began its monumental move to a senior living facility in Billings. The journey of 277 miles is expected to take about a week."