



Faith moves mountains - And a Church

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After nearly a month on the road between Box Elder and Billings, after miles of lumbering down narrow gravel byways and rural highways strung with low-hanging power lines, and after rains that left it stranded in the middle of nowhere, Faith Lutheran Church rolled into Billings just before 1 p.m. Wednesday to begin a new life.

The old Box Elder church started the final leg of its journey Wednesday morning from 24 miles north of Billings on Highway 87. At the old Kmart in the Heights, the procession turned right to bypass the worst of Billings traffic and most of the traffic lights and utility lines that would have presented major obstacles on a route down Main Street and onto Wicks Lane.

A year from now, after its original steeple has been repaired and hoisted back into place and the country church has been restored inside and out, it will become the centerpiece and spiritual heart of a new Heights senior-living complex.

Builders will construct a glass walkway to the church from the second floor of a two-story building that St. John's Lutheran Ministries plans to construct on a site east of Wicks Lane. Residents in the 48-unit complex won't even have to put on a coat to walk the short distance from their homes to their church.

In Billings, where a healthy share of senior citizens grew up somewhere else, the old Box Elder house of worship could serve as a reminder of hundreds of other little white churches in small towns all over Montana, said Kent Burgess, president and CEO at St. John's.

Its foundation will be poured on a 27-acre Heights tract purchased years ago by Atonement Lutheran Church in Billings. In a few weeks, the Box Elder church should be sitting on a foundation with a complete basement underneath, Burgess said.

The Billings congregation will soon start raising funds to build a new church on the property near Skyview High. As part of its campus, Atonement Lutheran donated 7.4 acres to St. John's for a senior living complex, Burgess said.

Over the coming winter, the Box Elder church will be restored to look as much as possible like it did after a pioneer congregation built it on the north-central Montana prairie in 1917, said Jack Beals, a St. John's employee in charge of the project. St. John's hopes to begin construction on the senior housing next summer. He said it will include independent-living and assisted-living facilities.

The venerable church with a distant view of the Bear Paw Mountains hosted weddings, baptisms, confirmations and funerals of five generations in Box Elder. But as rural Montana populations began to fade, so did its congregation.

In the summer of 2005, the four remaining families made the wrenching decision to close their church.

Burgess learned about the plight of the Box Elder church when the Montana Synod made the announcement a year ago. It wasn't much of a leap of faith to decide it should come to Billings, Burgess said.

The Box Elder congregation loved the idea that their church would be adopted by the Billings ministry.

"They were worried that if it was just boarded up, it would be vandalized, and it would break their hearts to watch that happen," he said.

St. John's officials met with the Box Elder Lutherans many times.

"This was an open adoption process," Burgess said. "It's a mother picking a parent for her child."

On Aug. 6, the Box Elder congregation gathered one last time at Faith Lutheran for a blessing and potluck. Burgess and other representatives from Billings joined them in a community farewell.

The steeple, too tall to have received much maintenance during its 89 years, was removed first and hauled to Billings separately for its first comprehensive repair. Then Duane Ostermiller, of Ostermiller House Moving of Billings, pried the wooden church from its foundations and loaded it up behind his truck for the 277-mile trip south.

"It hasn't been a tough job, just a different job," said Ostermiller, who has moved a solid brick bank from Vananda to Forsyth and the Lodge Grass train depot to the Big Horn County Museum in Hardin. "It just required a lot of coordination."

Complications, mostly involving utility lines, delayed the start until Sept. 12. Power and phone lines slung across Montana highways usually can't accommodate a 29-foot-tall church sitting on steel beams 4 or 5 feet off the ground unless someone from the power company agrees to raise the lines.

JoAnn Ostermiller, Duane's wife, was assigned the task of coordinating with power and phone companies along the route, which took the church across a good swath of Montana's most rural areas.

Between power lines, the church and its escort could make 25 mph, said Oscar Charbonneau of JCT Construction of Ballantine. He was hired to drive the final legs of the journey south of the Missouri.

All along the way, the curious and the faithful turned out to watch and welcome the church, Beals said.

The first day saw the procession of pilot cars, pickups and utility company vehicles 31 miles down Highway 87 and onto a gravel road that would take them to the Missouri. The convoy put in 24 miles the next day and crossed the Missouri at Judith Landing on Aug. 14. They worked their way up the Missouri Breaks that day. By then, they had already encountered 47 utility lines.

And then the rains came - hard, soaking rains that had been conspicuous by their absence across Montana most of the summer. With the ground soggy, the 42-foot-long church was stranded until Sept. 26, when Ostermiller got it as far as Winifred. The next day, a late start, a change of truck tractor and lots of utility lines found the convoy only 23 miles farther down the road, at Hilger.

Last Friday was a 70-mile day that took the church to Grass Range, and Saturday found the convoy in Roundup.

Perched on 10-by-12-inch steel beams, the church wound through Roundup and under 44 power lines Monday. Each line had to be raised to allow the little white church to pass under. Monday, the church was headed to Billings and arrived within 24 miles of its destination, when it was once again stranded by weather.

The cost of the move to Billings was estimated at \$60,000, but it will probably be about \$90,000 when it's done, Burgess said. Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, a fraternal nonprofit insurance company, provided a \$30,000 matching grant to get the ball rolling.

One of the first contributions came from Mildred Schmidt, a St. John's Lutheran Home resident who had been a member of the Box Elder congregation since childhood. Her son called Burgess and told him that Mrs. Schmidt wanted to talk.

"She handed me a check for \$1,000 and said, 'I want you to use this to move my church,' " Burgess said.

She died just before the move began. Her estate provided an additional \$10,000 toward moving and restoring the church.

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Faith Lutheran Church from Box Elder moves along the highway between Winifred and Hilger on Sept. 27. The church was moved to Billings Heights, where it will be made into a senior-living complex attached to a St. John's Lutheran Ministries building.



The church moves up Annandale Road in the Heights on Wednesday. The move from Box Elder took the better part of a month and will end up costing around \$90,000.



The cornerstone of Faith Lutheran Church in Box Elder.



Faith Lutheran Church, from Box Elder, is eased under utility lines in Winifred on Sept. 27.



Allan Roush, left, and Herb Freier examine the shingles on the steeple from the church. Freier, his father and his brother reshingled the building in 1940.