



Building God's house

BY KEITH BENMAN

kbenman@nwitimes.com

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Kwiatkowski Masonry owner Dan Kwiatkowski estimates that church-building represents less than 10 percent of his company's business.

But they are the jobs he cherishes most.

"So many of them are so unique," Kwiatkowski said. "They are really beautiful. It can be a lot of fun."

Kwiatkowski Masonry just finished laying more than 700 tons of stone, in addition to brick and block, at the new St. John the Evangelist Church in St. John. The work on bell towers, entrances and fountains provided the firm with 12,770 man hours of work.

The third-generation masonry business in Crown Point is just one of numerous building firms to profit from a strong market for church buildings in Northwest Indiana and Northeastern Illinois.

Local data on church building is not available, but contractors use terms like extremely strong and very active to describe the current market here.

CEO Pete Peuquet, of Chester Inc., Valparaiso, says when young families are moving in or moving up in a church or parish, a church building project will not be far behind.

New people want new activities, particularly for children.

"It goes in cycles, right now it's very active," he said. "And it will stay like this for at least the next couple of years."

Classroom and office additions account for much of Chester Inc.'s church work, Peuquet said. Gymnasiums and youth centers also are popular. Overall, church work accounts for about 10 to 15 percent of the Valparaiso firm's business.

A strong market for church buildings locally is defying the national trend, which saw a sharp drop in church building last year.

Nationally, religious construction dropped to \$3.64 billion last year, an 11 percent decrease from \$4.08 billion in 2006, according to McGraw-Hill Construction data.

It also is defying the trend for other types of building locally, such as homes, where construction activity has fallen markedly.

One of those doing its small part to defy the national trend is 1st Assembly of God Church in Portage.

The modest faith community of 280 souls on Willowcreek Road is in the midst of a \$1.5 million expansion project. It chose Chester Inc. as its design-build firm.

Work soon will start on a 13,500-square-foot building that will include a sanctuary for worship, a children's area, and an area for church gatherings, according to pastor Michael Bean.

A demographic survey of population trends was a key factor in the decision-making process that finally gave the green light to building, Bean said.

"It's no longer people from Kentucky and Tennessee coming here. It's people from Chicago and Illinois. People are coming from other countries and they are of other races and ethnic groups. It's been a real blessing, and we anticipate that continuing."

Valparaiso Nazarene Church broke ground in December on a \$7 million project that will include a sanctuary, office complex and nursery.

The average age of a church member at Valparaiso Nazarene is 32. The church is attempting to meet the needs of parishioners with its building project, according to Pastor Shawn Evans.

The design-build firm on the job is Cogun Inc., North Lima, Ohio.

The new sanctuary will seat 1,500, as compared to seating for 500 in its current sanctuary, Evans said. The new, approximately 40,000-square-foot sanctuary, will have a state-of-the-art sound system.

"It's no longer about just building a cathedral," Evans said. "You have to build something that is multimedia savvy. It's a little daunting."

In years past, churches lavished much of the building budget on stained glass. Now, they are investing just as much or more in high-quality, computerized sound systems.

The system must be able to handle dramatic plays, rock bands and the pastor's sermon without missing a beat.

Design and installation of the sound system at St. John the Evangelist particularly is daunting, because it will be a state-of-the-art system in a church of traditional design, according to Joe Cash, of R.L. Millies Engineering, Munster.

The towering vaulted nave, which will seat 1,200, has terrazzo floors, stained glass, and tens of thousands of square feet of curved wall and ceiling surfaces with which sound technicians must deal.

On a recent morning, Cash stood by, as architect Jim Maciejewski, of JMA Architects, South Holland, snapped pictures. Both men are parishioners and make frequent visits to the church on high ground overlooking U.S. 41.

"For me personally, it's a chance to be part of something that will promote our faith," Maciejewski said. ... A lot of great things will happen for this parish in this building."

"It will be around a lot longer than we are," Cash added.

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