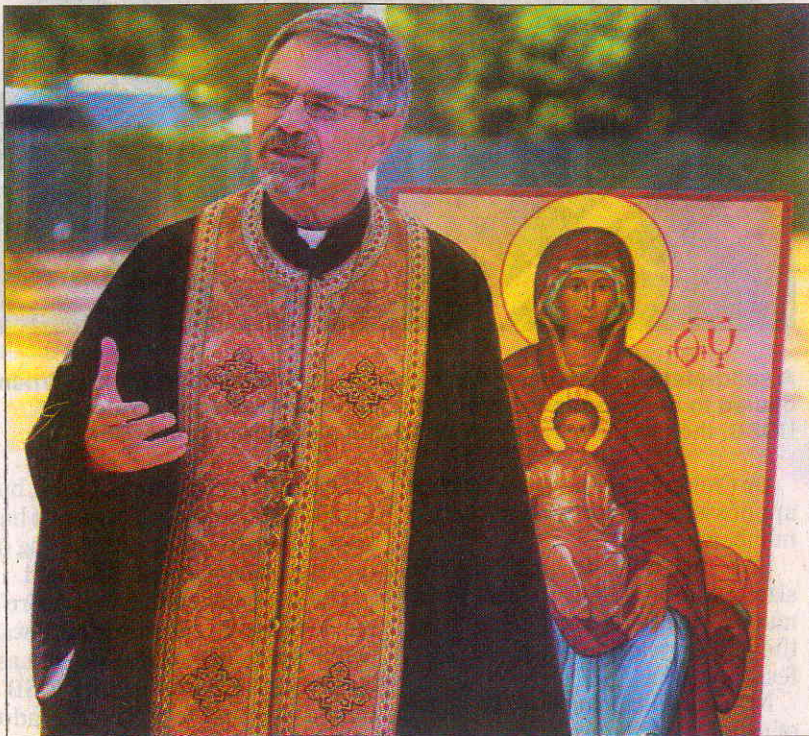


Local SANTA BARBARA COUNTY NEWS

Local church breaks ground after 30 years of planning



MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

At left, lead pastor the Rev. Nicholas Speier speaks to a gathering of friends and parishioners at St. Athanasius Orthodox Church's groundbreaking ceremony along Hollister Avenue in Goleta. At right, a cross marks the planned location of the church altar.

By **EMILY PARKER**
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

After 30 years, parishioners from St. Athanasius Orthodox Church finally broke ground on their new church property Saturday.

Three E-Z Up tents, a yellow tractor and a cross marking the future site of the church's altar were all that sat on the large dirt lot at 5441 Hollister Ave., but the church members could not have been happier or more enthusiastic.

"God has been patient with us and gracious to us," the Rev. Nicholas Speier, head pastor of St. Athanasius, told the crowd of 100 as he opened the groundbreaking ceremony.

"We really are here to thank God," he said. "We begin this effort by coming back to God. I believe God led us for these 30 years. We weren't ready. We were young and immature. All that we have gone through, we need to be grateful to God for the journey he took us on and have no bitterness."

Indeed, the prayers that followed the Rev. Speier's dedication speech were filled with praise and thanksgiving.

Saturday's dedication kicked off phase one of a four-phase building project.

The church should finish phase one — a 14,500-square-foot fellowship hall — by fall 2013 and will use the hall for church services until another \$3 million can be raised to build the main church building in phase two, said Scott Jacobs, general contractor and co-chair of the building project.

Phase three, an administration building, and phase four, an outdoor courtyard, will follow in time.

"We're not only on schedule, we're under budget," said Mr. Jacobs, who has attended St. Athanasius since 1976 and is a deacon.

The plans are based on a second-century design of a typical orthodox church, Mr. Jacobs told the News-Press, adding that he has been actively planning and designing the new church property for 15 years.

The Rev. Speier said this is the first church to be built in the area in almost 20 years and that "it's been a blessing to work with so many people in the community."

The church raised the \$3 million for phase one through donations from churchgoers, the sale of its original property and loans from the Bank of Santa Barbara, Mr. Jacobs said.

"We're a small, blue-collar parish," he said. "We're in this for the long haul. This is the perfect Santa Barbara/Goleta space."

Church members said they connected with the new church site.

"I was wishing (Handel's) 'Hallelujah Chorus' was playing as I drove in," said 23-year church member Carla Brunstead. "To be able to drive on a road when there used to be weeds and to see this defined space is exciting. It's wonderful to see something tangible after so much praying and hoping."

Rebekah Cash has been a church member for only a year but shared Ms. Brunstead's enthusiasm.

"I still feel a connection because we're so aware of the spiritual community," she said. "This is a physical representation of that community."

The congregation first began meeting in 1973 as a community of Evangelical Christians in the old Logos Bookstore in downtown Isla Vista. It converted, en masse, to Orthodox Christianity in 1987 and has since grown to more than 300 members, said Valerie Yova, parish administrator.

The church purchased the land on Hollister Avenue in 1996 and began site preparations in January.

"I remember my daughter, who's 36 years old, saying she remembers being in kindergarten and talking about building a church," the Rev. Speier said, adding that the building committee met throughout those 30 years.

"We spent lots of money at Denny's over breakfast over the years," he said with a laugh.

Parish council member Larry Lander said

that, for many of the parishioners at Saturday's event, it was the first time they saw something tangible.

"It's a big inspiration to go forward," he said. "This really is going to happen. It's a big day and also a sad day because we have a couple of fathers, who have been pillars in the church, who passed away recently. We've gone through a lot of trials and tribulations to be here today."

Mr. Jacobs agreed, saying the groundbreaking was more about Orthodoxy than the actual church building.

"It's the dream of bringing Orthodoxy to America," he said. "It's amazing to begin the sticks and bricks process — the church has never been buildings, but you need buildings."

While it constructs phase one, St. Athanasius will meet in a building at Calle Real and Kellogg Avenue in Goleta.

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