



THE DAILY NEWS

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Crystal pastor plans to open K-12 Christian school by fall

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Gazette editor

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CRYSTAL - A minister and his 20-member congregation have an endless amount of hope, enough to build a new school.

Pastor Todd Brooks, 48, of the Community Assembly of God, located at 9265 E. Stanton Road, has big dreams for the four students who currently attend the one-room school inside the church. He plans to open a new kindergarten through 12th-grade Christian school next fall.

But Brooks won't stop there.

Monitor Shirley Gunderman answers a grammar question from Serenity Allen.

If funding is available, he also plans to purchase a five-bedroom home adjacent to the church, open a Bible college, construct a 32-unit apartment building, open a child day care facility and house women's abuse and community centers.

"There's a lot of hopelessness in our community," Brooks said. "I hate seeing people the way they are. We're in the business to help people."

Passion for education

"Our goal is to buy the home next door," Brooks explained.

The purchase would center on a 10.5-acre parcel of land on the church's west side and would include the house, a two-car garage and a barn.

The home would become "The House of Hope," a facility for troubled boys and girls 14 to 17 who would receive voluntary counseling, daily spiritual guidance and educational instruction.

"The only children allowed are the ones who want to make the change," Brooks said.

He said likely candidates for the home would include children who have been abused, neglected or who have received poor parenting.

On the church's east side, by fall Brooks plans to construct the Hope Academy, a kindergarten through 12th-grade school with a day care center.

"Education is my passion," he said. "I see kids struggling and graduating from high school who can't read and write."

New school

Brooks said the day care center will provide certified Christian staff members, after-school tutoring and a safe environment.

The school will offer individual curriculum, individually paced learning, tutoring and biblical values will be taught.

Michael Stearn, 15, of Stanton, one of four students currently attending the school, looks forward to having more students alongside him in class.

"It'd be nice if we could get more people," Stearn said. "I love it here. There's less distractions. There's more help."

Stearn attended Central Montcalm Middle School during the 2005-2006 school year and said he's happier now at the church school.

"It's a lot different from public school," he said. "Here it's structured. You can take your time and learn instead of being rushed. There's a lot less distractions here."

Four students

Stearn said he still leads a normal social life, even though he no longer attends school with anyone his age.

All three of his classmates are girls 10 and younger.

Stearn also works at Missy's Brickyard in Stanton washing dishes. After graduating he wants to go on to Montcalm Community College in Sidney or to the church's future Bible college.

Shirley Gunderman, 68, of Riverdale currently serves as a "monitor," or teacher, for the four students. She considers the church her home and has been a member there for 10 years.

Gunderman said the four students are the church's "pilot program."

"They've succeeded emotionally and academically," she said. "These kids were really struggling when they got here."

Adult learning too

Phase 2 of the project will include building the New Hope Adult Learning Center to help "get families off public assistance and get them back into the workforce," according to Brooks.

He plans to expand the church's educational facilities to adults and to construct a 32-unit apartment complex for senior citizens and transitional families. The two-story apartment complex will have 15 ground level apartments for seniors and 16 second-story apartments for families who need emergency shelter or immediate assistance.

"Many residents are living in outdated mobile homes, with relatives, friends, in cars or on campsites," Brooks said.

The adults would have to agree to undergo training offered at the adult center and would be allowed to stay for 18 months.

"We want to teach adults budgeting, computer skills, reading and writing," Brooks said.

Dream projects

The church plans to reach out to the county's large population of senior citizens without families, income and homes.

Currently 12.4 percent of Michigan's population are senior citizens. In Montcalm County, 12.1 percent of the population are seniors, according to the Montcalm Alliance.

Phase 3 of the project will include a women's abuse center, community center, employee housing and free health care clinic - dream projects that Brooks hopes to accomplish by 2010.

The motivation

Brooks has collected grim statistics about the county's living conditions to support the importance of his dreams.

The church says more than 50,000 people have lost their jobs countywide since January 2006, that a two-person family receives only \$356 in public assistance per week and that four-member families receive just \$444 per week.

The church's statistics show that 10,000 county residents receive public assistance and that the average working income per year for a four-person county family is \$18,850.

A PowerPoint presentation created by the church shows images of closing factories and businesses, including Electrolux in Greenville, Hitachi in Edmore and General Motors in Lansing.

"We serve a big God so we are dreaming big," Brooks said. "If Jesus had 12 men to turn the world around, why can't 20 people turn the world around?"

Funding?

Brooks estimates that the entire three-phase project will cost between \$3 million and \$4 million to complete.

He said the church expects to qualify for grant money with help from EightCAP Inc. in Turk Lake and the Montcalm Alliance in Stanton, as well as contributions from the Crystal community.

However, Montcalm Alliance Executive Director Franz Mogdis said the church is in the first stages of applying for grant funds.

"Because of the budget situation, there's not much movement for money," Mogdis said of Gov. Jennifer Granholm's moratorium on state grant money.

Mogdis said he doesn't expect the church to be able to have access to grant money in time to open a new school in the fall. However, he said Brooks may be able to find funding elsewhere.

"There are some other options in terms of foundations that are aimed at providing assistance for faith-based initiatives," said Mogdis.

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