

July 12, 2007 6:59AM

Place to meet, way to help

Granger church puts effort into Monroe Circle center project

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SOUTH BEND -- Inside walls are getting finished -- painted in coffee house colors. New flooring is going in. A deck out on the back is complete, except for steps.

The new Monroe Circle Community Center -- next to public housing -- is nearing completion.

But the center is going to be as much about relationships as it is about a building, says Rob Wegner, pastor of life mission for Granger Community Church, a fairly affluent congregation of 7,000.

"The people at GCC need the poor as much as the poor need them," he says.

"The poor give us a growing sense of compassion and generosity, and this kind of work provides perspective."

"Maybe one of the dangers of affluence is how quickly it can skew your outlook on life. We often take for granted what we have."

Volunteers from the church also have realized how they can have friends who just happen to live in public housing.



Tribune Photos/MARCUS MARTER

A new facade is in the works for the Monroe Circle Community Center at Western Avenue and Taylor Street in South Bend, which Granger Community Church is renovating.



Rob Wegner, pastor of life mission, talks with Jack Magruder, director of life mission, about the Monroe Community Center.

"When you meet the people (who live) here, you realize 'they're just like me. They've just had a harder time of it.' You don't get that without face-to-face communication," adds Jack Magruder, GCC's director of life mission.

That's why the center will have a café, where people can sip coffee and chat with volunteers in a dignified environment while waiting for food or other assistance.

Eventually, the café will have a stage and sound system for performers, too.

That's why the upstairs has a fireplace, and will have comfortable couches and a flat-screen TV, and an outdoor deck so volunteers and Monroe Circle residents can hang out together while teaching and learning.

GCC volunteers have already been working in the Monroe Circle area for five years, through a children's program called Son City Kids and a food pantry. But they have realized that such programs are "reactive" to poverty and more geared toward crisis intervention.

Now, with the community center opening sometime in August, GCC will be able to offer help with more long-term consequences:

- The Crossing Alternative High School for kids who've been expelled or suspended from public school or are at-risk

in some other way.

- After-school mentoring and tutoring for younger students.
- Life skill, GED and vocational training for adults that will lead to real jobs.
- Referrals to health and wellness programs in the community.

Entermission, a nonprofit group the church started to raise funds for the project, estimates that nearly 500 families live in the Monroe Circle neighborhood, with an average annual income of \$7,300.

Some 70 percent of households with children are headed by single parents or a grandparent. The high school dropout rate among black males is estimated at 90 percent.

Wegner says the church is committed "for the long haul" and realizes that it will take a while to break the cycle of generational poverty.

So far, there is no lack of volunteers, either.

Wegner and Magruder estimate that once construction is done, the project should be worth close to \$1 million. "But we've done it at around \$600,000," says Wegner. "Even some of the skilled work, like plumbing, was donated."

Magruder says the key to getting volunteers has been "giving people an opportunity to serve in their own shape," meaning letting them bring the skills they already have.

Concludes Wegner: "We feel that all the gifts to transform are right here. We're saying that (Monroe Circle residents) have resources, and we have resources, and together, we can make it happen.

"There is a connectedness when you serve together."