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SEND TO A FRIEND

## Building 'Green,' building community in two California dioceses

By Phina Borgeson

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The Episcopal Church welcomes you in Willits, California (Photo by Bill Bruneau)

**ENS [Episcopal News Service]** The William and Mary Swing Hospitality Pavilion will be a welcome addition to the Diocese of California's retreat and conference center, Bishop's Ranch in Healdsburg, California, for a host of reasons.

"When people come here," said Sean Swift, executive director of the Bishop's Ranch, "they view proximity with nature as our greatest resource. We need to honor that. We need to minimize the impact of the building on our immediate environment and on fossil fuel consumption, as well as maximize the asset that is our natural setting."

The Ranch can accommodate 112 people, "but the largest gathering room holds 65 shoe-horned in," he added.

The pavilion design committee reviewed present and possible users, such as choir camps, a Scottish dance group, lecture series, and conferences with lots of break-out groups. This review led to plans that include flexible space with a sprung dance floor, a stage space, and good acoustics for music.

"It needs to function like a community center, and support positive interaction among those who use it," said Swift.

Architect Bob Theis, who consulted with Knight Wagner Architecture on the design, agreed. Theis, who will be addressing [Episcopal Camps and Conference Centers](#) at its annual meeting January 20-25, helps conference centers "organize their spaces so they function better as neighborhoods."

One part of his organizing principles is the notion of being "green."

"Green or sustainable building is the practice of creating healthier and more resource-efficient models of construction, renovation, operation, maintenance, and demolition," according to the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Green Buildings website](#). "Research and experience increasingly demonstrate that when buildings are designed and operated with their lifecycle impacts in mind, they can provide great environmental, economic, and social benefits."

Swift said, "There are strong philosophical underpinnings that go with green, but are not necessarily what you think of immediately as





Students from area schools give a weekend to help with the bale work (Photo by Bill Bruneau)



Malakai Schindel's mural of St. Francis and native Mendocino County wildlife on the side of the present church building can be glimpsed through the new construction in Willits, California (Photo by Bill Bruneau)



There is a job for everyone in straw-bale building (Photo by Bill Bruneau)

green."

Strengthening human community goes hand in hand with respecting the environment, he said.

The Swing Pavilion, named for recently retired California Bishop William Swing and his wife Mary, will have thick insulating walls of plastered straw bales. Computer modeling helped determine window placement to maximize the use of natural light. The building's hillside setting and Sonoma County's Mediterranean climate will be used to cool the building, which will itself become an energy sink; a natural convection will exhaust hot air and draw in cool at night.

The pavilion's south-facing roof for photovoltaics, and the multi-purpose nature of the building, led to a basilica design. "We didn't set out intending an ecclesiastical style," Swift said, smiling. "Form flowed from the functions we wanted."

"When you pay attention to social characteristics and the natural flow of light and energy," Theis said, "as often as not it draws you to classical traditional layouts."

Efforts to keep the project green in as many ways as possible are more expensive. Swift noted, for example, that the difference between sustainable lumber and conventional lumber for the project will be about \$30,000.

"There's been a huge amount of progress that's made this kind of construction acceptable to the building industry," said Swift. "There's experience and interest that wasn't there even five years ago."

"Northern California has the most acceptance of green building practices," Theis added. "It's not that we are more brilliant or motivated, but that our population supports it and we have a critical mass of professionals here."

The Ranch community is raising money for the project as it goes, completing work in stages.

Construction began this past summer with redeveloping the driveway and parking. Old asphalt is being reused as a bed for the new road, and work is underway to restore a seasonal creek swale and re-vegetate a small pond.

Gina's Orchard, the environmental-education program at the Ranch that teaches children from nearby schools, will benefit from this sensitivity to environmental impacts. The 343 acres of land, surrounded by dairy and vineyards, is the only nature preserve in the immediate area.

## Seeing more green

Out Westside Road to Highway 101 and north about 65 miles of the Ranch in the Diocese of Northern California, another green building is going up. At a busy intersection in Willits, [St. Francis-in-the-Redwoods Episcopal Church](#) is working on its new church.

When the congregation received a sizable legacy and began to dream about a new worship space, it was suggested that they look for a lot on the edge of town with plenty of room for parking. But since serving the community is important to this shared-ministry congregation, they decided to use the lot adjacent to their existing building, which will continue to be used by 16 weekly twelve-step groups, as well as for parish meetings and classes.

"When Bishop [Jerry] Lamb led the ground breaking, he nearly got drowned out by a semi roaring by," reported the Rev. Betsy Bruneau, priest member of the ministry team.

"But," chimed in senior warden Carol Dawson, "the workers say it's already lots quieter inside with the bales only half way up the walls." She added, "It's going to cost more than our \$651,000 legacy, but there will be savings in the long run."

Believed to be only the third straw bale church in North America, St. Francis' new worship space will be cool, quiet and filled with natural light. Bruneau hopes that some of the members of the wider community who helped with the straw bale work will find it a calm and beautiful space for prayer and meditation.

On October 21 and 22, high school students earning service-learning hours, a team from Natural Builders in

the East Bay, members of the Willits City Council, and other volunteers joined parishioners of all ages in cutting, moving, placing, ramming, and tying bales, as well as sweeping up and bagging leftover straw.

Bales are placed and tied within the framing of the building. Some loose straw from cut bales is used to pack cracks and gaps. Remaining loose straw is bagged up to be used in earthen plaster on the inside walls. What is left may be used for erosion control and mulch, around the church, or by other environmental or gardening projects in the community.

"It's not the best for compost, since rice straw is high in silica and doesn't decompose quickly, but that's why it's good for building," said Senerchia, who traced the path of the straw from Willows, California -- where the air is spared when rice straw is no longer burned in the fields, but baled for use in construction -- to Willits.

Residents of Willits are no strangers to projects and initiatives in ecology, sustainability, and economic localization, so a straw-bale church seemed natural.

## **Building community**

Junior Warden Dr. Tedd Dawson said that one of the joys of the project is that everyone has been so cooperative. "Because of that we have been able to move ahead without delays," he said. "This is very important, because with every delay the cost of materials goes up."

Not only have Cal Trans (the California Department of Transportation), the Water Quality Control Board, and the neighbors -- the Willits Fire Department and a floor-covering retailer -- been good to work with, "the city has given us a \$10,000 beautification grant, and offered help with tearing up the sidewalk that needs to be replaced," Dawson said.

Ask anyone, including the Rev. Mary Fisher, retired vicar, what is the best aspect of this project, and they will say, "the community."

Local architect John Cross said that one of the key features of this project is "all the meetings we needed to have" when he realized that unlike most private dwellings, there was no single owner here. "But," he quickly added, "they have been an easy group to work with."

Kevin Rowell of Natural Builders has worked on Buddhist temples in Southeast Asia but never a church in the U.S. He said that in natural building "it's the process more than the product, to help communities solidify a sense of sustainability."

St. Francis' will also be sustaining the traditions of the Diocese of Northern California in its new tower, where the bell from St. Andrew's Mission in Redway will be hung. Members of St. Francis' joined the Episcopalians in southern Humboldt County in a final celebration in September, and returned to Willits with the bell, altar, and other furnishings.

Decisions still need to be made about use of space, but one thing is clear to Bruneau and others. "This will be a home for a community at prayer, not a space for performance for an audience," said Bruneau.

This is one of the lessons of shared ministry, he explained.

"Group decision-making skills are critical to this project, and to ministering together," said Bruneau. "You know, there have been some here who resisted a building project, and felt the money could be put to better use. Because of this, we know that what we do with this building can't be defensive. We can't say 'It's ours, we need to protect it.' This church building must help spread the kingdom of God. It is not a possession. And we must continue to listen to all the voices in our congregation and community."

**-- The Rev. Josephine Borgeson of the Diocese of Northern California is an educator, writer and consultant specializing in intersections of faith, science and the environment.**