

Holy Wisdom Monastery vows to be the greenest building in the nation

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MIDDLETON (WKOW) -- It is gleaming on the outside, modern, clean, and efficient on the inside.

"We'll, haha, probably get excited about it the day before it opens," said Sister Mary David Walgenbach. She is one of the Benedictine Women of Madison, describing the new Holy Wisdom Monastery that is set to open this Sunday.

"It's wonderful, all the dreams that were there for many years, all the hard work and the community have come to fruition," said the building's executive director Neal Smith, who said it took two years of planning and eleven months of construction.

As group begin to live, work, and worship here again, they will do so in a building that uses little energy.

"If you look around, we have no window coverings," said Smith. "That's because all the windows are custom designed in their location to eliminate glare and solar heat gain."

There's rarely a need for lights. Many fixtures through the hallways are actually skylights that use mirrors to reflect the sun.

On the outside, there are solar panels, rain barrels, and pervious pavement. There is even a sign indicating preferential parking for carpools and low emission vehicles.

"Benedict wrote a rule in the sixth century for people to live in common," explained Walgenbach. She added, "He didn't divide caring for the environment from the outside to the inside. They were both important."

The old monastery is virtually no more. The sisters basically demolished it, kept the basement for maintenance and storage, and capped it off with a green roof filled with plants.

The decision to built in the first place was also prompted out of practicality. The old building, an old high school dating to the 1960's, was deemed too inefficient, too large, and cost too much to operate.

The executive director here wants the new building to be certified as meeting the highest of high green building standards, called platinum LEED.

"This building, by the research that we've done, will have the lowest cost per square foot of any platinum building in the country," Smith said gleefully.

The finishing touches are now being put in place. The first service in this new spiritual and environmental home is just days away.

"I don't have a dichotomy between the environment and religion," said Walgenbach in conclusion. "It's all one piece."

As for the greenest building in the country right now as of those national standards? That's the Aldo Leopold Legacy Center in Baraboo. Smith said Holy Wisdom will be able to outscore it by a couple of points. He'll start applying for that certification next month.

The new monastery cost about eight million dollars. The sisters have a capital campaign underway to help pay two million of that. They're still about \$1.5 million away from their goal.

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