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Westport monastery is on 'cutting edge' of green technology

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WESTPORT — “Thoroughly modern monastics” is how the new Holy Wisdom Monastery has been described — a structure that could rival the Aldo Leopold Legacy Center in Baraboo for the title of greenest building in the country.

Geothermal heating and cooling; solar panels; windows that open and natural lighting in all occupied spaces; rain gardens; roof gardens; tankless water heaters; and a slew of reused furniture including a renovated organ went into the \$8 million monastery run by the Benedictine Women of Madison.

“Our community has always tried to be on the cutting edge,” said Prioress Mary David Walgenbach, adding the new building is a way to grow Holy Wisdom’s monastic community and continue to provide a place for environmental education.

Moving to the Madison area more than 50 years ago, Benedictine Women of Madison is a monastic community of single Christian women that offers retreat services and participates in environmental work at its two buildings and 95-acres of native prairie just north of Middleton.

The monastery is open to personal and group retreats in addition to those seeking spiritual guidance. People come here to meditate, walk the land, write poetry or “just plain sleep,” Walgenbach said.

Holy Wisdom currently is led by three Sisters. The community’s oblate, or lay associates, is open to men and women and about 110 people attend a Sunday assembly service — a number Walgenbach expects to grow.

The newly constructed 30,000-square-foot monastery, which holds its first Eucharist on Sunday morning, has been in the works for three years and replaced a larger, outdated building that served as a girls high school in the 1950s and 60s.

The building has a simple design, but incorporates subtle details, such as the curved walls to represent the monastery’s female leadership.

It will be paid for in part though a \$2 million fundraising campaign, of which \$500,000 has been raised.

Betsy Liotus, the monastery’s director of community relations, said

she expects the building's opening to rejuvenate those efforts.

The rest of the funding is through a mortgage.

Holy Wisdom was constructed to achieve LEED — Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design — platinum certification, and has the "high probability" of receiving 63 out of 69 possible LEED points, said Neal Smith, executive director of Benedictine Women of Madison.

"It shows the sisters are pioneers, risk takers," he said. "This building, when it's open, (will use) 59 percent less energy than a new LEED-based building."

The monastery will know in about a year if it has earned that status.

Currently the Aldo Leopold Legacy Center in Baraboo has the highest LEED rating of any building in the United States with 61 of 69 points.

Other examples of the building's green construction include a completely computerized heating and cooling system that sends out e-mails to staff when outside temperatures are appropriate to open office windows.

Motion-sensored lights turn on when people enter rooms, but also use thermal imaging so as not to leave anyone who might be meditating in the dark, Smith said.

And while the monastery's green features certainly stand out, the Sisters stress the new building is meant to connect, not distract, visitors or worshipers from the monastery's values — community, hospitality, prayer and care of the earth.

"At this point we wanted a space for people to slow down and become renewed," Walgenbach said. "That is why we built it."

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