



After more than 10 years in the works, Camano Chapel's new Saratoga Hall, a Christian education building for both children and adults, is finally nearing completion.
(Dan Bates / The Herald)

Camano Chapel nears completion of decadelong building project

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CAMANO ISLAND — There are Bible verses written in black ink under the drywall and on the concrete of the unfinished floor.

The Camano Chapel's effort to build Saratoga Hall, a new Christian education building for children and adults, stretches back more than a decade. Planners say faith is what kept the project going. Now the building is nearing completion and that faith has been written into the frame.

Camano Chapel, on Southwest Camano Drive, was founded nearly 70 years ago by a man who lived in Seattle but had a cabin on the island. He wanted to "build a church in the wildwood," church administrator Jon Rice said.

Famous evangelist Billy Graham was in the area and agreed to dedicate the chapel in 1951. Black and white photographs show hundreds of cars and thousands of people there.

The church has added to its campus and congregation over the years. Saratoga Hall is the latest addition. About 13 years ago, the church started working on permits for the two-story, 24,600-square-foot building. It took five years and the permits were finished at the start of the recession, Rice said.

Church leaders had committed to building the hall without taking on debt, relying instead on donations. They broke ground in November 2008. A drop in lumber prices allowed the church to put up the walls and roof right away and make the building weather-tight.

A team has been working to finish the project as donations come in. Several workers died of cancer shortly after construction began, and the recession meant everyone was tightening their belts, Rice said. Progress continued slowly. The final steps of finishing bathrooms, floors and doors remain.

Classes and programs currently share space in other church buildings. There are gatherings for young mothers, multiple Bible studies, evening activities, a food and clothing bank, and preschool classes, among other events. Most programs don't have a dedicated space because there aren't enough rooms.

The new building would give groups their own areas and keep related activities closer together, said Teresa VanSant, children's ministry director. The bottom floor is for infants through fifth grade, and the upper floor is for adults.

The chapel has seen an increase in attendance and in the number of young families. There are usually about 800 people at Sunday services. VanSant said she has seen the number of children in some programs double over the last two years.

Seemingly little features in the new building should make a big difference, she said. There are restrooms attached to the classrooms for young children so teachers won't have to walk them down the hallway. There are sinks in each room to clean up after crafts, snacks or spills.

The church has preschool and pre-kindergarten classes during the week and Sunday school programs during and after church services. Evening programs include "Kaboom," with music, games and crafts for young children, and "Centershot," an archery program for third- through fifth-graders.

Having dedicated classrooms means they can be set up for age groups, VanSant said.

"It'll be the kids' area and they can really see that and feel that," she said.

Moving classes and activities into the new building also should free up room for the food and clothing bank so volunteers don't have to set up and tear down each week.

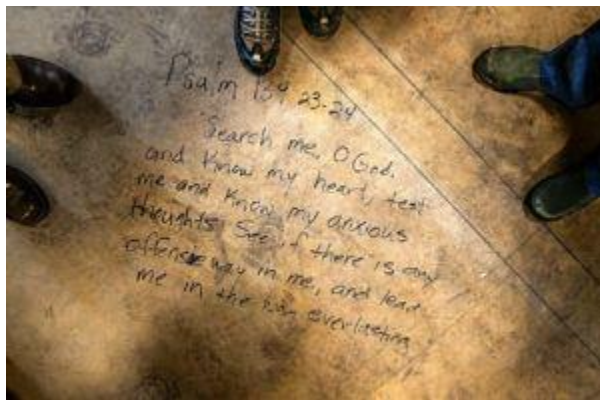
The church has raised about \$4.3 million for Saratoga Hall, Rice said. He estimates \$200,000 more is needed. The building could open as soon as September.

Yvonne Laun has been going to Camano Chapel for more than 30 years. Her children grew up there and now her grandchildren attend. She's excited for the new building.

"It's going to be great," she said during a busy Tuesday morning at the church, when a mothers group and preschool classes had adults and children bustling about. "It's especially great for programs like these."

People may contact Jon Rice at 360-387-7202 or info@camano-chapel.org for more information about the project, the church or donations.

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Bible verses have been written under drywall and in many places on the yet to be finished concrete floor in Camano Chapel's new Christian education building, Saratoga Hall. (Dan Bates / The Herald)



Volunteers like Andrew Nitchman, who has a 3-year-old and 6-year-old of his own, help out in the nursery. Children in the infant nursery are here until they walk. (Dan Bates / The Herald)



Ray Harrison (left), Mark Peterson and Jon Rice pause to take in the view from the Fellowship Room upstairs in Camano Chapel's new Saratoga Hall. Harrison is a member of the administrative board and his role is overseeing facilities. Peterson is the facilities director as well as project manager. Jon Rice is the church administrator. The Fellowship Room is fire-approved for 450 people. (Dan Bates / The Herald)