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Davidians break ground for new building

WACO, Texas (AP) — As grasshoppers flitted in 90-degree heat, workers as young as four and as old as 71 broke ground Sunday for a new Branch Davidian church at Mount Carmel.

Shovels and pickaxes tore into the soil outside Waco — the same scenery that six years ago formed the backdrop for the fiery debacle that killed David Koresh and some 80 followers.

The project was organized and led by Austin radio talk show host Alex Jones, who has called the Davidians victims of "a government cover-up of its violation of the First Amendment."

Some 60 people dug holes on the old compound site Sunday to hold support beams for a 38-by-40-foot white frame church.

The scene was reminiscent of a barn-raising — hamburgers sizzled and a portable stereo pumped out Christian country music.

"This is a statement," the 25-year-old Jones said. "This is about

saying the witch hunt of 1993 is over."

Jones called the church project a "healing process" for the Branch Davidians and the country.

"We know that now is the perfect time, that's why we're doing it."

— Alex Jones
Austin radio talk-show host

Six years ago, on April 19, 1993, flames destroyed the sect's compound.

The fire ended a 51-day standoff between the Branch Davidians and the federal government.

Sunday's caravan of volunteers from Austin to Waco included Koresh's mother and stepfather and consisted of about 60 vehicles in-

cluding pickup trucks, motor homes and a luxury sedan. It arrived at Mount Carmel at 9:30 a.m.

"It means a lot," said Koresh's stepfather Roy Haldeman, 71, a retired carpenter who lives in Tyler, Texas. "I feel good about it."

Haldeman lived at the compound for about 18 months in 1992 and 1993.

Sunday, he cast a stoic glance over the workers and said the project was "too deep" to explain what it meant to him.

Jones began the drive to rebuild the church during a broadcast on his KJFK-FM show on Sept. 13.

He said he and others have been talking for three years about building a new structure on the site.

Recent questions about whether the FBI fired incendiary tear-gas rounds and the escalating controversy over the government's conduct spurred him to act, he said.

"All of it — it's all about public opinion. We know that now is the perfect time, that's why we're do-

ing it," said Jones, who was with the message: "You build it."

"This is a monument to the First Amendment," he said. "I think about speech and the press, but it is also religion and the press thereof."

To jump-start the project includes a memorial church to those who died in the 1993 massacre. Jones gave \$1,000. It will be two to three months, he said.

Exactly who owns the compound site in Central Texas is not clear.

It has been claimed by three parties: Clive Doyle and his followers of David Koresh, who lived at Mount Carmel, which is about 10 miles east of Waco; Douglas R. Jones, who claims to be the direct descendant of the Branch Davidian Seventh-Day Adventist leader; and Amo Bishop Rodden, who has said that she was married to Koresh.

She has said that she was married to Koresh, who was an ex-leader George Rodden.

Worshippers return to Fort Worth church

FORT WORTH (AP) — Some walked hesitantly up the sun-washed sidewalk. A few used sunglasses or veils to shield teary eyes. Still others marched into the church with poker faces, heads high, eyes straight ahead.

But come they did, clad in their Sunday best, to reclaim Wedgwood Baptist Church just days after a shooting rampage left eight dead and seven wounded in the white-walled sanctuary.

Over the front door hung a banner reading, "Let the Healing Begin."

Blood soaked the aisle and foyer carpet Wednesday night — so church officials had the rugs torn up and hauled away.

In their place, scarred cement flooring lined the aisles yesterday.

And because splattered blood destroyed some of the pew cushions, entire sections of seating were uprooted. Rickety folding chairs replaced sections of wooden pews yesterday.

The scars were evident — but shouted prayers, spirited singing and clapping hands rang off the high sanctuary ceiling.

The service opened with a prayer "that

many may be saved by the lives and deaths of these martyrs."

"Praise the Lord," the Rev. Al Meredith said, taking the pulpit to waves of applause. Behind him, the choir stood in flowing crimson robes. "If I didn't know better, I'd say we were having church today."

Packets of Kleenex were scattered throughout the sanctuary for the church's first service since gunman Larry Gene Ashbrook burst into an evening youth rally and opened fire. The killing spree ended only when Ashbrook turned the gun to his own head.

Since then, the church grounds have been awash with uniformed officials, television crews and well-wishers.

Yesterday, the lawn was still, the ribbons of police tape and stacks of plastic cones nowhere to be seen. Wedgwood officials asked even Baptists from other churches to stay away yesterday morning.

During the children's sermon, Meredith gathered the youngest, knee-high worshippers to the stage.

"Was it hard for you to come to church today?" he asked them. Twenty heads nodded.

"I don't know if it'll ever be the same," Meredith told the children.

Meredith told the congregation the shooting might produce some blessings. The church received 5,000 e-mails and had 30,000 hits on its Website. Wedgwood church members hoping to use the sudden rush of public attention to expand their fold.

"I've lived long enough to see that thought was bad work for good," Meredith said. "This tragedy that the devil wanted to stop the people of the Lord has been strengthening us."

Some congregants buried their heads in their hands during the service. Children hid their faces in their parents' laps, while other worshippers stared dully ahead.

But self-described "Wedgies" said they wanted to let Ashbrook drive them from the sanctuary.

"We're a strong church of people," Page said, walking to his car. "We'll all survive."

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