Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are realizing a dream come true in their own backyard. Latter-day Saints are building the first temple in the Louisiana-Mississippi area, providing thousands of members with a place to hold sacred ceremonies and receive the formal blessings of the faith. Work began in June on the 11,000-square-foot facility at Highland and Bluebonnet roads in June. The expected completion date is March.

Members will continue to worship in their "meetinghouse" on Highland Road. The temple will give them a place to hold sacred ceremonies. For the past two years, national church leaders have encouraged the construction of smaller facilities, said Brent Rawson, stake (regional) president. The famous temple in Salt Lake City, Utah, is about 100,000 square feet, and many of the older regional temples are between 40,000 and 60,000 square feet. Smaller units mean that more temples would be accessible to greater numbers of members, and especially helpful to those who must travel long distances to go to a temple, Rawson said.

"Dallas, the closet temple, was nine and a half hours for some of our people. To have a facility here is something people have only dreamed about," Rawson said. Baton Rouge, which has a Latter-day Saints missionary headquarters, was selected for a number of reasons, said Rawson.

"We asked them to consider one here, given the length of time and distance to the nearest temple, which is in Dallas and where our members have been going. Then, there's the membership in this area," he said. Louisiana membership has grown significantly over the past several decades. In 1948, there were 300 Latter-day Saints members in New Orleans. By 1980, there were 16,000 members in the state. Now, there are an estimated 24,000, according to the denomination.

In the area encompassing Baton Rouge, there are roughly 3,000 members and another 2,000 in the Denham Springs and Shreveport regions, Rawson said. The temple will give them and members in neighboring regions a place for sacred ceremonies such as the sealing (similar to marriage) of family members, said Rawson. It will be open to members of all religions.

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Roy Maughan, who serves on the High Council as an adviser to the stake presidency, says the building of 56 new temples, including the one in Baton Rouge, will boost the number worldwide to more than 100.

"We feel very fortunate in the Deep South to have been awarded one," said Maughan, a Baton Rouge lawyer. "The church recognizes the faith is fast-growing." Randy Bleth, second counselor in the stake presidency, said the temple will be open temporarily for public visit. Once a dedication service is conducted the building will be closed to the general public.

A typical temple service lasts two hours, Bleth explained. There will be eight to 10 services per day, with about 40 people attending each session, he said.

"We do expect the church to grow in this area in numbers, but as we say, also grow in faith," Bleth said. "We believe having a temple here can help us do that and make our commitment more substantial. There will be some 27,000 people periodically coming and staying in our community, enjoying the fellowship," said Maughan.