

BUSINESS

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Church pew restorations fit for a pope

M'town's The Keck Group is finishing up order for St. Patrick's Cathedral

By James Walsh
Times Herald-Record

MIDDLETOWN – Preparations for Pope Francis' visit to New York City in September have kept workers busy at a North Street business for more than three years.

The Keck Group's church pew restoration plant expects to soon make its last delivery of pews and furnishings to St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan. The batch includes presider side chairs to seat the pope and Cardinal Timothy Dolan at the main altar.

Company founder Bob Koeck said 325 pews, or about 4,000 linear feet of oak, were sanded, mended and stained. The project began, fittingly, on St. Patrick's Day 2012.

"The pews were installed in 1937, and they never left the cathedral," Koeck said, "and you know how many people go there in a day. ... We did a lot of work on them."

More than a dozen workers, including Koeck's son, Bob, a partner in the business,

are divided into two shifts to handle that project and others coming from around the region and beyond. Fifteen specially equipped trailers are dispatched to remove the furnishings and deliver them to the company's plant.

The cathedral project required 22 pickups and deliveries.

"We're doing four cathedrals at the same time," Koeck, 72, said in an upstairs office as sanders buzzed below. "St. Patrick's, St. Patrick's Old Cathedral in Chinatown, St. John the Baptist in Paterson, N.J., and St. Thomas Moore in Arlington, Va."

The pine pews from St. Patrick's Old Cathedral date to the 1800s and earlier.

"They must have had 20 coats of paint on them," Koeck said, pointing to several pews in various stages of restoration.

Q: How did you get into this business?

Koeck: I was selling franchises for a furniture restoration company, and I realized the guys I was putting into business were making more money than me. So



Bob Koeck, founder of The Keck Group, stands next to a pulpit that is being restored for St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Va. The Keck Group's church pew restoration shop is on North Street in Middletown.

ERIK GLIEDMAN/TIMES HERALD-RECORD

in 1972, I sold myself a franchise in Warwick.

Q: How did church furnishings enter the picture?

Koeck: In 1973, the Warwick Methodist Church had a fire, and they asked me to refinish the pews for a new church they

were building. That was the first church we did, and I sent a bulletin out to every church within 15 miles.

Q: How much has the business grown?

Koeck: We started out in 3,500 square feet with five part-time workers and did that for a year until we started getting way too many churches. We built another plant in Warwick and came to Middletown in 1998. We now have 13 full-time

SEE PEWS, 34



The refinished presider side chairs for St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan will seat Pope Francis and Cardinal Timothy Dolan during the papal visit in September. ERIK GLIEDMAN/TIMES HERALD-RECORD



Company founder Bob Koeck said 325 pews from St. Patrick's Cathedral have been sanded, mended and stained. The project began, fittingly, on St. Patrick's Day 2012. ERIK GLIEDMAN/TIMES HERALD-RECORD

On the Web

Take a video tour of The Keck Group's pew-refinishing plant with owner Bob Koeck, as he explains the process of refinishing pews and shows off some of his work for St. Patrick's Cathedral at recordonline.com/video.

To view more photos, go to recordonline.com/photos.



A church pew is refinished inside The Keck Group building in Middletown. ERIK GLIEDMAN/TIMES HERALD-RECORD

PEWS

From Page 33

employees.

Q: How many churches do you do in a year?

Koeck: We average 40 to 50. Small churches, too. We've done St. Joseph's in Middletown and Vails Gate United Methodist Church in New Windsor. We've also done Temple Beth Tikvah on Long Island and Temple Orach Chaim in Manhattan.

Q: What does it cost to refurbish a pew?

Koeck: A 10-foot pew will cost about \$700.

Q: What's the biggest pressure in the business?

Koeck: We've never been late in 40 years, and I don't want to be late now. A lot of these churches have dedications. They have the cardinal coming and all. You can't be late.

Q: How do you know

they'll like what you do to their furnishings?

Koeck: They choose the stain, and we always do a sample first. We don't want unhappy people.

Q: What tips can you offer to people thinking of starting a business?

Koeck: Take as much advice from successful entrepreneurs as you can get. And run a tight ship. We don't even have a secretary here. And take care of your employees. Our newest guys have been here eight, 10 years. Others are here 30.

Q: What do you mean by taking care of the employees?

Koeck: Share the wealth. That's important. We offer benefits. We have bonuses. We go on fishing trips. We're all equals, including me. They've all been to my house many times.

—jwalsh@th-record.com

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Attention Orange County Chamber Members



August, 2015

Dear Chamber Member:

I am pleased to announce that the Times Herald-Record once again will be publishing the official guide and supplement for EXPO 2015. This year's EXPO is scheduled for Thursday, September 17 at Anthony's Pier 9 in New Windsor.

A representative from the Times Herald-Record will be contacting Chamber members soon to explain the benefits of advertising in this special publication. The supplement will be an attractive, colorful piece that will be included as an insert in the Tuesday, September 15 edition of the Record and will also be distributed to all who attend EXPO 2015. See more information on the reverse side of this letter.

The Chamber is looking forward to working with the Record on the EXPO guide and supplement. And we also look forward to seeing you at EXPO 2015!

Sincerely yours,

Lynn Allen Cione
President



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