

The Cebu City Philippines temple was dedicated on Sunday, and two days later the builder will go through to take out his own endowment. Building the temple convinced him the gospel was true.

Two days before the Cebu City Philippines Temple dedication, everyone on the temple grounds is already dressed in their best, in suits or dresses, because the prophet and apostles are arriving today. Everyone that is, except for one man, who carries an air of authority about him in a plaid shirt with an unbuttoned collar.

Indeed, all the workers, who are touching up and fixing up after the temple open house, respond to him with respect and immediacy, watch him for cues.

He is Knute Klavenes, the 40-year-old builder of the temple — and every other building on the temple lot, including a stake center, patron housing, one home each for the temple president and the mission president, a retention pond, and an invisible and underground sewage treatment plant.

These are so many buildings, in fact, that someone has aptly named this temple lot “a city on a hill,” and it certainly took that much complexity to build it.

Knute, with a Tongan mother and Norwegian father, hails from New Zealand and carries the accent that marks the place. Yet the accent of authority that has garnered him so much respect comes from experience. This is the third temple he’s built since he managed the temple building in Tonga and helped in the refurbishing of Tahiti .

Being a temple builder means there is a standard of perfection and excellence that is required in the finished project that is unmatched in any other edifice. This is the House of the Lord and, therefore, nothing, not one thing, can be amiss. The paint on the back side of a column near the ceiling that no one will ever see still has to be flawless.

One area in the Cebu City temple was repainted 18 times to get it to the level of superiority required to be acceptable in a temple. Temples have to be earthquake-proof and sound, beautiful and soaring, built to last 500 years or longer. A thousand details that will never be visible to the eye have to work together to lift this building to take its place as being worthy.

This Cebu City temple will always stand out for him personally, however, because it is in this temple that he built that he will take out his own endowment two days after it is dedicated (the temple was dedicated June 13, 2010).

It is building the temples that began to urge him to conversion. “I started out by wanting to know what I was building and what the meaning of it was,” said Knute, “and it just grew from there.” Someone gave him a copy of The Book of Mormon, and he began reading.

He was also impressed with his counterparts in the temple department. “I started becoming impressed with their morals and beliefs. They were so focused and intent on what they were doing. I thought, I’ve got to get some of that.”

Yet it was more, a flow of events and circumstances in building the temple that was just unexplainable. Things working together when for all intents and purposes, they shouldn’t have. He said, “You can do all the plans in the world with contingencies a, b, and c, and still everything happens wrong as you are working along. Your best efforts aren’t enough. Then the day it has to work, everything clicks into place again. It turns out well. “So many things happen like that when you are working on a temple. You think something is wrong. It couldn’t have happened the way it did and then be finished in a positive way. It’s amazing.”

The flow of things was managed from a higher source, and Knute said, “I just came to see I was an instrument in his hands.”

As in all of our lives, most of this is hard to describe or point to specific incidents, but some are clear. The fact that Knute even came to build temples was surprising. He had left the construction business for three years because of a downturn in the New Zealand economy, but he felt what he describes as a “real strong calling” to go back into construction though it made no sense.

The first month he had no business, but almost immediately after that, the owner of the business said he had a project coming up and asked if Knute would take it.

“With most complex construction drawings,” Knute said, “you have to look at the site and study them to figure them out. For some reason, I can look at temple drawings and understand them without having to spend too much time on it. I look at a temple drawing and I just know what’s going to happen. With other projects I am sometimes scratching my head and saying what are we going to do about this or that part of it.

“The one thing I’ve always believed is that if this is the house of the Lord, he’s going to do what he wants with it,” he said, and somehow the complexity of the drawings is immediately clear to him.

Then there are all the things that seem little, but are simply dumbfounding. He had so many spiritual moments working on the temple that he started to talk to the Lord in the car on the way to work in the morning, “Let’s have another good day, and please let all my workers show up.”

On the Tonga temple project, Knute said, “We were doing the regilding of the angel Moroni and we had to build a very high scaffold. Dale Jolley flew out from Salt Lake to do that work, and for two weeks before there was gusty wind and rain. It was unsafe as we were building the scaffolding, but when we built the enclosure for him to work, it became like a sail in the wind and so dangerous.

Dale was only going to be there three days, so we had a prayer to make sure everything was OK. The morning he started we had perfect weather conditions, which lasted three days until he left. As soon as he got on the plane, the rain and the wind started up again in a fury.”

Then there was the time that there was a heated discussion about something in the drawings right before the sign that said “Holiness to the Lord.” There was no wind, but suddenly a gust of wind blew the drawings out of the hands of the one party, and blew them entirely around the entire square building and right back into his hands.

“Physics wouldn’t allow this,” said Knute. “It was against the law of physics, but it happened before our eyes.” The resolution of the fiery discussion became clear.

“My biggest moment,” said Knute, “was here in the sealing room. I came back from Manila, where I had been inspecting furniture, on a Friday evening. It was quite late, but I thought I’ll just go by the temple to make sure everything is OK.

“I went inside the sealing room, and as soon as I went in, I could tell the Spirit was there. It was very, very strong. As soon as I walked in, I just wanted to cry. It was the nicest feeling. I was there for about 10 or 15 minutes, crying like a little baby.

“It was like someone was holding a book in front of me showing me the construction, page by page, and all the ways we had been blessed and helped, and I was being told to remember these things.

“Then a year ago, Bishop Keith McMullin of the Presiding Bishopric came on a visit, and that’s when I made

my final decision. He said that since you have to be baptized twelve months before you can go to the temple, you better hurry and be baptized, so you can take out your endowment when the Cebu City Temple is dedicated. “That’s when I made my decision.”

Knute’s wife, Melenau (pronounced like Mary), has been active in the Church her whole life, but only learned when she went back to Tonga and talked to her grandparents that she had never been baptized — only blessed as a baby! It was a complete surprise to her. This she didn’t learn until recently, so in an astonishing turn of events, last February, Knute baptized his active wife.

When he received his endowment, she will not be there. Now she is the one who will have to wait a year before she can take out her endowment. They will be sealed next March in the Cebu City temple, when he comes back from New Zealand to inspect it.

Building a temple, Knute says, is like how you live your life. The smallest detail inside has to be correct so your life can reflect that. You are the vessel and what you are trying to do is live your life the best you can, which means that all those little connections have to be right.

In a temple, if you don’t get the timbers perfect, they won’t connect to the stone correctly, and so forth. You have to treat the smallest details of your life with that kind of care

Knute learned more than that from building this temple. In his 90 to 110 hours per week of labor, he was directing some times up to 1200 construction workers, 90% of whom had never worked on a project anywhere near this kind of craftsmanship and care. That means they had to be retrained.

“I had to get them to understand that they were not just building another building; they were building something special,” he said.

“I got some sponges, and I had to fill them up with water. I had to give them a new mindset and also a whole new set of skills. Even the patron house and the church are on a level of work that is different than anything you find here.”

All the workers were each given a new set of tools as part of the bonus of working on the project, but they were also given a new set of skills. This could have been immensely frustrating in the hands of most managers, but Knute decided the best way to keep the employees working at the level required was to appreciate them, treat them as human beings, which sometimes doesn’t happen on construction jobs where workers ebb and flow.

“I was always massaging them, hugging them, asking them ‘how’s your family?’ trying to keep them happy on their job.” Frequently, he had dinner on the temple lot for all the workers, as another way of showing them that he appreciated the job they were doing.

“If a worker feels appreciated, he’ll still keep doing good work,” he said. “It’s constantly making them feel good about their job.”

Building a temple also means there are unbelievable surprises, but never more so than on this one. They were excavating just in front of the main entrance, when Knute got a call, that they’d found a big hole — and then that hole just kept going. The entire temple lot was riddled with tunnels created by Japanese soldiers in World War II.

It was a warren of tunnels fifteen to twenty feet down that interconnected and split off heading in different directions and well beyond the temple lot. They had to check them for safety, including gases and leftover bombs. They had to explore them with ultrasound to understand the extent of them. Then finally, they had to fill them all with concrete — at least 28 truckloads full. Then they had to re-stabilize the soil.

“We lost a lot of time because of this,” Knute said, in what is certainly a great understatement.

But temples have to be solid and stable, and superior in every detail. Everything about this one changed Knute’s life — especially the Tuesday after dedication, when he began building his life on a new foundation.