Visitation is adapting to its new home in Southeast Tacoma ‘cluster’ of parishes

BY KEVIN BIRNBAUM

It’s fitting that Visitation Parish is named after the event recorded in the Gospel of Luke in which Mary is welcomed into the home of her cousin Elizabeth for an extended stay. According to Arlene Ayala, who was invited to the parish eight years ago at a time when she was not affiliated with any church, Visitation is “the most warm, loving, welcoming atmosphere that I’ve ever wandered into. … You feel at home the minute you get here.”

The people make the difference, explained Ayala, who now chairs the pastoral council. “These are the most generous people,” she said. “It’s not by any means at all a wealthy community, but everybody is willing to share. It’s a sharing community. If something is needed, everybody digs a little deeper.”

When the roof on the parish hall needed to be replaced a few years ago, “everybody went into fundraiser phase,” she said, and the project was finished ahead of schedule.

That generosity also shines through in ministries like the parish’s active St. Vincent de Paul Society conference, which opens its food bank every Tuesday and Thursday morning and distributes sack lunches to the homeless every Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

“Our parishioners are quite generous with their donations towards our needs to help the people,” said president Margie Rivers. Parishioners bring items for the food bank to Mass each Sunday.

Last year, the conference distributed 55,000 pounds of food through the food bank and 2,257 sack lunches, said treasurer Margaret Mitchell, who’s been a parishioner since 1952.

The parish also regularly opens its doors to shelter homeless and at-risk families through the Phoenix Housing Network, which works to get families into permanent housing.

“For reaching out to the poor, Visitation is number one,” said pastor Father Tuan Nguyen.

Supporting the parish school

Another key ministry of the parish, said Father Nguyen, is Visitation School, which opened in 1925.

“Visitation School is very much a part of Visitation Parish,” said Principal Sheila Harrison. “The parish has always been very, very, very supportive of our school.”

Though the school has been struggling financially, a fund set up by Tacoma man Darrell Jesse that gave the school $100,000 this year and promises the same amount for the next two years has been a real blessing, Harrison said. It’s allowed the school to accept “more students who would not otherwise be able to afford a Catholic education,” she said. “He’s given us that kind of latitude, which is great.”

Like the parish, the school is ethnically diverse: 36 percent white, 26 percent Asian, 19 percent Hispanic, 15 percent black and 4 percent Pacific Islander.

Visitation’s priests all support the school in their own ways. Father Nguyen celebrates Mass for the students each Friday, and Father Cal Christiansen teaches seventh- and eighth-grade religion each day, and Father David Gese teaches fifth-grade religion. Father Deirdre Arledge serves as chaplain for Cub Scout Pack 10 and Boy Scout Troop 10, which the parish and school support.

Last year, Pack 10 received the Gold Medallion from the National Catholic Committee on Scouting.

A long and developing history

Visitation Parish traces its roots to Aug. 21, 1892, when Benedictine Father Wolfgang Steinckogler celebrated Mass with seven people present in an empty storefront. Until enough money was raised to move to a permanent location in 1899, Masses were celebrated in the Edison Hotel or the Oddfellows Hall.

In 1903, Benedictine Father Mark Wiechman became the parish’s first resident pastor, and on June 15, 1913, Visitation’s present church was dedicated. The building cost $31,212.64.

On June 30, 1984, the Benedictines priests, who had guided Visitation since 1892, departed after 92 years, and Father Ross Fewing became pastor.

When Father Nguyen became pastor in 2006, Visitation became part of a “cluster” of parishes in Tacoma including Sacred Heart, St. Ann and St. John of the Woods, all of which Father Nguyen also pastors. The transition has been a challenge for the community, he said, but the parishioners have gradually adapted and the four parishes have begun to cohere and support each other well.

“At first it was difficult … The people got a little confused,” said Father Nguyen. “But now, after three years, we enjoy it very much.”

Visitation Parish, Tacoma

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