St. Patrick’s is community willing to stick its neck out for a worthy cause.

SEATTLE
BY TERRY MCGUIRE

When Vicki Grayland moved to Seattle four years ago, she asked a friend in the know to recommend a parish with a strong social justice orientation.

St. Patrick’s was one of two that came to mind. Grayland has been a parishioner ever since, and now co-chairs the parish’s Social Justice Committee.

Like others before her, Grayland is finding in St. Patrick’s a Christ-centered community with a history of progressive ministry.

“I was a parish that was quick to embrace the spirit of the Second Vatican Council after the council’s conclusion in 1965; a parish that’s always been willing to stick its neck out for a worthy cause,” she said, “and the community keeps moving along.”

St. Patrick’s is both a “resilient and cohesive” community, says 41-year parishioner Marilyn Kavanaugh. And she admires the way in which they’re always willing to try new things.

In the 30 years I’ve been here there’s always been some kind of major change or where it feels like, ‘Are we going to be able to keep going?’,” she said, “and the community keeps moving along.

Like any community with a long history, the Diocese of Seattle has had many different bishops over the decades. Interstate 5 looms. The freeway cuts through the core of the city, a 30-by-60-foot corridor. The parishioners are used to living with the noise and the vibration.

“Peace and justice is really the heart of the parish,” said Father Patrick Clark, former archdiocesan schools superintendent, who is in his sixth year as St. Patrick’s pastor.

“The words are prominent in the parish mission statement, which states in part: ‘Our Sunday Liturgy, enhanced by the creative arts, strengthens us for the work of peace and justice in the world and challenges us to live in communion with one another and all of creation.’

That work is carried out daily by a range of parish groups and ministries, from a homelessness task force to an El Salvador sister parish relationship to efforts to make people with physical or developmental disabilities feel an integral part of the parish.

Deaf and blind Catholics from all over the Seattle area attend the 10 a.m. Sunday Mass, where interpreters lead them in the liturgy. Probably half the parish looks American Sign Language terms, Father Clark said. The parish commits approximately $12,000 annually to providing the interpreters for liturgies, faith formation classes and other gatherings, and for deaf or blind Catholics serving on parish groups or wanting to attend the meetings.

The parish is also home to residents from the local L’Arche homes for people with developmental disabilities. This year’s sole baptism at the Easter Vigil will be of L’Arche community member Patty McNair.

Active community of just 250 households

St. Patrick’s is a relatively tiny community of just 250 households. And probably less than 50 of them live within the parish boundaries, Father Clark said. The rest — who come from as far away as Everett, Federal Way and Issaquah — are drawn by the parish’s progressive reputation and its extensive outreach, he said.

“We’re small,” notes Parish Council President Peggy O’Brien-Murphy, a parishioner since 1970, “but there’s so much that is done, so much that people care about.”

Longtime parishioners trace some of St. Patrick’s magnetism to the parish leadership of the 1960s and 1970s, including the ecumenical and interfaith-minded Father William Treacy, social activist Father Joe Kramis and the charismatic Father Martin Connelle.

Good Shepherd Sister Vera Gallagher, who became an expert and well-known author on survivors of childhood sexual abuse, was St. Patrick’s parish life coordinator in the 1970s and 1980s. Victoria Ries, the parish’s parochial minister/pastoral life director from 1989 to 1999, was the first lay woman in the archdiocese to hold that position.

St. Patrick’s was a parish where folk Masses, Marriage Encounter, Charismatic and Cursillo movements, and ecumenical and interfaith efforts were either born or flourished early on.

Freeway runs through neighborhood

Like any community with a long history, the parish has faced its share of challenges over the decades. Interstate 5 and Highway 520 cut swaths through the neighborhood. The I-5 construction starting in 1959 erased at least 200 parish homes. The church and school building also were razed, bringing an end to the school.

Decades later, the parish went years without a full-time pastor.

And although Father Clark is the type who prefers to defuse praise (he didn’t want his photo to run with this article), Kavanaugh and others credit him in part with the parish’s continuing vibrancy. He inspires and challenges them to strive to be a Vatican II parish, O’Brien-Murphy said.

“It’s a parish that was quick to embrace the spirit of the Second Vatican Council after the council’s conclusion in 1965, even if controversial, from serving as a sanctuary church for refugees, as it did in the 1980s, to holding letter-writing campaigns or vigils on issues ranging from capital punishment to the war in Iraq to cuts in state social programs, as it does today.

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“To me, and to most of us — especially the parish council — he seems to be the kind of pastor who isn’t working from the hierarchy down but (instead) gives the people the responsibility of being church, which is what the Vatican II emphasis is … and he’s right there in a tremendously supportive way.”

Ministries flourish

Father Clark, however, prefers to shine the spotlight on his small parish’s many ministries.

In addition to its peace and justice efforts, the parish boasts strong and innovative liturgies. Choir director Laura Ash, and her husband, David — both members of the parish — are musicians and composers with a national reputation. O’Brien-Murphy says her husband likens the quality music at St. Patrick’s to “going to a concert you’d pay money for.”

In addition, Betsy Beckman integrates liturgical dance into special liturgies.