

PARISH PROFILE

'Blue-collar' parish to welcome Vietnamese community

South Tacoma's St. Ann Parish will nearly double in size when the Vietnamese community begins celebrating its Sunday Mass there in July

BY GREG MAGNONI

St. Ann Parish Tacoma is in the midst of yet another transition. And as Pastoral Assistant for Administration Kathy McSperitt said, "change is scary."

work," Father Nguyen said, "but I pray the Holy Spirit helps and everyone [will] work together to make the transition go smoothly."



Mary will be a common denominator for the newly merged parish of St. Ann Tacoma and members of the Vietnamese community in Pierce County. Pictured above are images of St. Ann, the parish patroness, and Our Lady of Lavang who first appeared to the Vietnamese people during a persecution beginning in 1798.

From its establishment in 1924, St. Ann was built and supported by hard-working, blue-collar Irish, Czech and German immigrants who found a home in the Pierce County parish that lies in the shadow of Mount Rainier and above the shores of Commencement Bay.

Archbishop Alex J. Brunett announced earlier this month that St. Joseph and Holy Rosary parishes will be added to the four-parish cluster that includes St. Ann, Sacred Heart, St. John of the Woods and Visitation. As a result, St. Ann is making preparation for big changes.

The primary challenge for St. Ann is preparing to welcome the large Vietnamese community that will begin celebrating its regular Sunday Mass there at 4 p.m. on the first Sunday of July. There will be no shortage of Vietnamese Catholics. More than 1,000 people participated in a liturgy and procession at St. Ann hosted by the Vietnamese community on the feast of St. Joseph the Worker earlier this year.

"It was an absolutely incredible celebration," said pastoral council chair Cathy Bunker of the procession including life-size statues of St. Joseph and Our Lady of Lavang that closed off four square blocks around the church. "The planning they put into that, the beauty and the colors were just incredible," she said.

St. Ann Pastor Father Tuan Nguyen said both the existing parish community, made up primarily of Anglo, Samoan and Filipino members, and the Vietnamese Catholic community are working on the transition and "working on being accountable to one another."

"It's a lot of preparation, a lot of

'Another little parish'

The 300 Vietnamese Catholic households joining the St. Ann faith community will nearly double the current number. "It's like another little parish," said McSperitt, who added that efforts thus far to work collectively as one body with representation by all communities have been very positive.

This is not the first time St. Ann has been through a similar transition. St. Ann became part of the first Pierce County parish unit

in 1992 with Sacred Heart Parish, and on July 1, 1995 St. Ann, Sacred Heart and St. John of the Woods parishes were joined into a parish cluster that later included Visitation Parish. Due to changing demographics, the parish cluster included many Hispanic and Korean families.

The Pierce County Korean Catholic Community joined St. Ann's before receiving permission to build their own church and forming the St. Paul Chong Hasang Korean Catholic Community in Fife in 2005. The difficulties associated with blending the two communities are still fresh in the memories of many parish leaders who hope to avoid some of mistakes of that first effort.

Bunger, a lifetime member of St. Ann whose grandparents were among the parish founders, said that in the last 15 to 20 years the neighborhood has experienced growth in the Hispanic, Vietnamese and Samoan communities.

"St. Ann parishioners have always been hardworking, dedicated people who helped make the parish what it is today," she said. "They were people who were able to build a school and convent and able to pay off the debt in five years; staunch people who built the foundation of St. Ann's."

"We're realizing the necessity of working together and collaborating with each other to form a viable faith community," said Bunker, who described the earlier attempt to merge with the Korean community as "very painful." She expressed hope, however, that the current transition will be smoother.

"I feel that there are little bumps in the road, but I'm looking forward to working with the Vietnamese community,"



The original St. Ann Church (above) was completed in 1924 and was replaced by the existing structure in 1968. St. Ann Parish will nearly double in size when members of the Vietnamese community in Pierce County begin celebrating their regular Sunday Mass there July 5.

she said. "And today we have some very positive conversations and planning. To Father Tuan's credit, his expectations are to making it a smoother transition."

Blending communities

In welcoming the Samoan community, St. Ann has already experienced success in blending diverse ethnic cultures to enrich the parish, Bunker said.

"They are the most loving people culturally. I think they are fantastic. And their coming together with our community is an example of how these communities can blend."

My Ling, chair of the Vietnamese pastoral council who has attended Mass at Sacred Heart Parish for the past six years, said her community "knows it's a challenge, but we're excited to move to St. Ann because it has a facility that meets our needs."

The need for parish facilities presents one of the primary challenges for the merger. The Vietnamese Catholic Community has numerous activities. Approximately 130 students attend language classes every Sunday for several hours followed by youth religious education. The community also has a choir, a liturgy group and an elder group.

"We would like to have more activities for youth," Ling said. "I believe the youth are the ones who will bring their families into St. Ann's." But that will put pressure on St. Ann's current facilities, and Ling said the Vietnamese community hopes to work with the larger parish community to make renovations that will accommodate more programs for Vietnamese youth and their elders.

"We would like to have more activities for elders to come to the parish for socializing because they are the key people who will support the Vietnamese youth," said Ling.

Parish history

Before it became a parish, St. Ann was originally part of the territory assigned to Holy Rosary and was served by the Benedictine Fathers. The parish was established in 1924 just as Tacoma was becoming a modern city.

Bishop Edward J. O'Dea appointed Father Michael Murphy as its first pastor, and Father Murphy immediately began the search for property on which to build a church. Prior to construction of the church, Mass was held in the home of Patrick Gallagher at South 67th and Yakima Avenue.

Once the site for the church was chosen at South 72nd and Park Avenue, work began on a tile and reinforced concrete structure finished in stucco. Both church and hall had a seating capacity

St. Ann Parish, Tacoma

Founded: **1924**

Households: **384**

Street address: 7015 S. Park Ave.
Tacoma, WA 98408

Phone: **253-472-1360**

E-mail: infor-stann@catholic-tacoma.org

Web Site:
www.catholic-tacoma.org/St_ann_home.htm

PASTORS:

Father Michael Murphy, **1924**

Father Robert Dillon, **1932**

Father Edmond Hayes, priest
administrator, **1935**

Father Maruice Galvin, **1936**

Father J.F. Milner, **1943**

Father Thomas Phelan, **1973**

Father Sean Heneghan, **1983**

Father John Koehler, priest
administrator, **1994**

Father Vincent Pastro, **1995**

Father Tuan Nguyen, **2006**

of 300. The cost of the entire project including the rectory, which was completed in early 1925, was \$30,000.

During the war years, the church served as spiritual home to many of the soldiers and sailors from the East Coast and Midwest who were stationed at Fort Lewis and the local naval base. In its early years, Franciscan sisters from St. Ann's Home provided religious training for the children of the parish.

Declaring that "No parish is complete without a school, and no sacrifice is too great when there is a question of providing for the proper education of God's little ones," Pastor J.F. Milner, the longest-serving pastor in St. Ann's 85-year history, launched a school building fund in 1953.

The school, which was staffed mostly by Benedictine sisters, opened in the fall of 1955 with an enrollment of 321 students in eight grades. Due to changing demographics in the community that resulted in a significant decline in enrollment, the school closed in 1989.

In the 1960s the parish began acquiring property for the construction of a new, bigger church. In 1966 the design of the current church and rectory were approved and construction was completed in 1968.