St. Paul, Seattle:

a diverse parish of prayer

South Seattle parish has been place of pilgrimage during Year of St. Paul

BY KEVIN BIRNBAUM

The members of St. Paul Parish are very diverse, but there's one thing that unites them.

"We are all people of God and we are striving for heaven," said Margaret Menges, who's been a member of the parish since the early 1970s.

"St. Paul is really composed of a multifaceted community — differences of age, culture, race, language ... it's really a very diverse community," said Pastor Father Felino Paulino.

Those differences sometimes present challenges, he said, "But I can see the love of the parishioners for their church. They volunteer — they go out of their way to help out even in cleaning and the groundskeeping. ... The people are generous with their time, their talent and their treasure."

Diversity and service

The diversity of St. Paul's is on display each Sunday, as several of the founding members of the 56-year-old parish sit side-by-side in the pews with young families, and considerable African, Filipino and Vietnamese populations contribute to "the mosaic vitality and color of the community," said 34-year parishioner Bruce Abe. There are 17 languages spoken in the parish, added Menges.

"I would say that St. Paul is very representative of the South Seattle area," said Abe. "The diversity in age groups, ethnicity, cultures — those are big pluses."

The parish's cultural diversity adds interest to parish dinners, which often feature different ethnic cuisines and entertainment by one of the parish's cultural communities, he added.

And though there are distinct ethnic groups, "Everybody works together," said Menges, especially in service to others.

Once a month, a team of volunteers gathers at the parish to make about 260 sandwiches for the homeless men at the St. Martin de Porres Shelter in Seattle. "They usually make a lot of meatloaf and peanut butter, because that seems to be the preference that the people like," said Menges.

"We take them down to St. Martin's and serve them," as well, said Nora Sullivan, a St. Paul's parishioner since the 1960s.

The parish also has an active St. Vincent de Paul Society conference.

"Last year, we were able to pass out, with the assistance of our parish and the assistance of the needy conference fund, over $30,000 in assistance," said treasurer Joe Marley.

The members of the conference make more than 1,200 home visits per year. Since the economic downturn, they've noticed an increased need for assistance, said Howard Swenson, the president of the council.

"Right now we're experiencing a completely new cross-section of people that we've never seen before," he said.

"Most of them are people that have lost their jobs, have mortgage payments to make and so on, can't pay their utility bills. It's a whole different picture than what we've seen in the past."

Prayer and the Year of St. Paul

During the past year, the parish has celebrated the Year of St. Paul announced by Pope Benedict XVI last June. Archbishop Alex J. Brunett appointed the parish a place of pilgrimage where people could obtain a plenary indulgence.

"Every first Saturday we have the pilgrimage," said Father Paulino, "so parishioners come and we have confession and prayer, and even some from other parishes come."

He said about eight groups of pilgrims had come from other parishes during the year, from places as far as Buckley and Everett.

During the year, the parish also started neighborhood-based prayer groups of about 10 people each that met every other week during the year to study the writings of St. Paul.

"That was just spiritually so rewarding," said Abe, "not only meeting other parishioners, but we have a common goal and common spirit, so to speak." Archbishop Brunett will be at St. Paul's on Sunday, June 28 at 10:30 a.m. to celebrate Mass as the Year of St. Paul comes to a close.

The parish also has two ongoing prayer groups: a charismatic group that meets Monday evenings and another that meets Tuesday mornings.

'We've seen a lot of answered prayer there," said Menges, "so that's been a good thing to have."

56 years of history

Archbishop Thomas Connolly established St. Paul Parish on June 29, 1953. Founding Pastor Father Joseph Vogel celebrated the parish's first Masses in the auditorium of Emerson School at 60th Avenue South and South Pilgrim Street.

Construction on the new church and school buildings began on a 15-acre plot in Seattle's Rainier Beach district in April 1954. The school was completed in time to open that September, the auditorium and convent were finished in November, and the church was done in time to celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception on Dec. 8, 1954.


In 2002, during the pastorate of now-Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Tyson, the parish campus underwent major renovation following a 2001 capital campaign.