Tiny St. Joseph Mission is strong in faith

Close-knit Kalama faith community continues to build on long, proud history

KALAMA
BY KEVIN BIRNBAUM

In 1902, when the parishioners of St. Joseph Church decided to replace their 33-year-old building with a larger one, they built their new church with donated lumber and volunteer labor and finished debt-free.

That spirit of dedication and cooperation continues to animate the St. Joseph's community today, said Father Gerald Woodman, who became pastor of the 71-household mission in 2002.

“I'm having a delightful time being the pastor,” he said. “They're very willing to step forward. Whenever we're confronted with something, we just really address it and move along with it.”

He points to the time he hesitantly mentioned the idea of face-to-face confessions to the parishioners, unsure whether they'd like the change. Before he knew it, they had cut a hole in the wall of one of their confessionalsf to facilitate the practice, to his delight.

“In some ways I have to be careful about what I say out loud,” Father Woodman chuckled, “because it's liable to happen immediately.”

Sometimes he doesn't even have to suggest anything for his parishioners to take action. A few years ago, some parishioners who owned a local business decided to covertly renovate the church building. They did all the work for free, and they desired to remain anonymous.

“In the slack time of the year … instead of laying off their workers … they came in and took all the pews to their store and they refurbished all the pews, they painted the church inside … they put down new carpet, they put all of the stations of the cross on the same line with one of those laser levelers — they did a wonderful job, and to this day I don't know who they are,” said Father Woodman.

A close-knit community

St. Joseph’s, a mission of St. Philip Neri Parish in Woodland, is a community of mostly retired folks, said lifelong parishioner Walter Neiman, 78, whose great-grandparents were all founding members of the church and whose great-nieces and nephews are now sixth-generation members of St. Joseph’s.

“If you look down from the choir loft you see a lot of white-haired people or bald-headed people,” Neiman said. “We don't have too many young people. “Everybody knows everybody else,” he continued. “Most people always have the same pew. If you go into the church and you don't get your pew, some people say they don't know how to pray.

There are some children and young people who are very active in the parish, said Father Woodland. About seven or eight grade school students attend religious education classes in a given year, and a few St. Joseph's teenagers and parents have gone with Father Woodland on his annual 12-day mission trips to Guadalajara, Mexico.

St. Joseph Mission is a small, close-knit faith community within a small, close-knit city, said Jacquie Wicker, president of the parish council.

“Our annual fundraiser is a turkey bingo, where we play bingo to win turkey keys,” she said. “It's going on for over 20 years now. The Baptist church, the Methodist church, the Nazarene church — all those people come to our turkey bingo, and everybody knows everybody.”

A 134-year history

St. Joseph Mission traces its history to 1874, when Masses were celebrated in the homes of church members, mainly that of the John Schauble family. The first Catholic church in Kalama was built by Catholic families and Franciscan missionaries from the Cowlitz Mission. It was completed in 1876.

Because of the church's position at the top of a steep hill, it was one of the only buildings to survive a series of devastating fires that destroyed most of Kalama in the late 19th century.

In 1909, the St. Joseph's community rebuilt their church on the same site. It was dedicated Oct. 10, 1909 by Bishop Edward O'Dea and Father Capistran Damek.

The church's main altar and two side altars were built in Italy and shipped around the tip of South America. The church bell — named Agnes, after Agnes Schauble — was cast in Baltimore and shipped by rail. Walter Neiman's grandfather Gunther, a blacksmith, used his team of horses to help get the bell into the bell tower, where it still hangs.

“I would like to see how they got it up into that steeple,” said Neiman.

From its founding until 1940, St. Joseph's was served mostly by Franciscan missionaries and some diocesan priests. In 1950, it became a mission of St. Philip Neri Church in Woodland. In 1979, parishioner Rita Aichlmayr wrote a history of St. Joseph Mission and had the church listed as a state historical site.

St. Joseph Mission, Kalama

Pastors:
(records unavailable before 1950)
Father Thomas Pitsch 1950
Father John Doogan 1952
Father Patrick O'Brien 1953
Father Patrick Godley 1962
Father Donald Piro 1969
Father John McMullin 1971
Father Richard Hayatsu 1974
Father James Westenhaver 1977
Father Ronald Knudsen 1979
Father Steven Roman 1985
Father Joseph O'Shea 1991
Father Gerald Woodman 2002