Northwest Corner known for hospitality, generosity, evangelism

Diverse populations in tri-church community take pride in their history and outreach to youth

FERNDALE
BY ARMANDO MACHADO

St. Joseph Parish in Ferndale is one of three Whatcom County Catholic churches that make up what is called the Northwest Corner Catholic Community. The other two are its mission churches — St. Anne in Blaine and St. Joachim in the Lummi Indian Nation.

The three-church community assumed the Northwest Corner name in 1996. In the image of the Holy Trinity, the three churches form one community of faith, members note. They share one parish history and outreach to youth and national charitable efforts.

The three-church community has a strong ecumenical presence, and volunteerism...More than 50 volunteers participate in ministries and organizations (beyond attending Mass),” Father Sauer said. He also noted that the tri-church community has a strong ecumenical spirit, and there is a great sense of outreach to the poor — that members respond with generosity to local, regional and national charitable efforts.

“While there is an evangelical spirit, we invite and encourage people to come to church and we train people to share their faith with others,” said Father Sauer, who has been pastor since 1996.

St. Joseph in Ferndale was a mission church for three years before Bishop Edward O’Dea established it as a parish in 1896. St. Anne in Blaine has been a mission church since the year the Ferndale church became a parish. St. Joachim at Lummi has been a mission church since 1861.

Father Sauer said one of the special things about the area and communities and churches is the pride they have in their young people.

“From the day I arrived as pastor people made it clear that the spiritual growth of the children and youth was a top priority,” he said. “We’re small communities with limited resources, but we have a full-time faith formation director, a full-time youth minister and a youth center because it’s a priority.”

“I believe the Catholic faith is strong in this area; we receive Jesus at the Eucharist,” said Lane, whose wife Nancy, also 76, is also a lifelong Catholic.

He said the church helped him over the years in coping with historical difficulties between Native Americans and descendants of white settlers.

Up in Blaine at St. Anne Church, Martin Vezzetti, 72, has been a lifelong church member. He has served as a volunteer in many ways, including Eucharistic minister, council member and yard worker.

“His is an important part of my life,” Vezzetti said of the community and the Catholic faith in general. “We have a very good community, people help a lot.”

He said that he too appreciates the efforts by Father Sauer and others to provide activities and events that include coordinators and participants from St. Joseph, St. Joachim and St. Anne. Vezzetti’s wife, Hilda, also has been an active church member, including council membership.

Virginia Roberts, 80, is a lifelong member of St. Joseph’s Parish who raised seven children, including a son who died 18 years ago. At the church she has been an active volunteer for many years, including serving as the chairperson of the Centennial Committee when the parish turned 100 in 1993. She has also been active with RCIA and youth ministry.

“My grandparents on my father’s side were among the first seven families when the church became a parish. They asked for it to be a parish,” Roberts noted.

She said all three churches often participate in celebrations collectively, with most large gatherings occurring at St. Joseph because it has more space.

“Every Lent, on Holy Thursday, all three churches participate in a liturgy,” Roberts said. “I think we are all very supportive of each other.”

Vernon Lane, 76, is a member of the Lummi Indian Nation, a lifelong Catholic, and a member of St. Joachim Church.

He served on the Lummi Council for several years, including several years as chairman.

“I believe the Catholic faith is strong in this area; we receive Jesus at the Eucharist,” said Lane, whose wife Nancy, also 76, is also a lifelong Catholic.

He said the church helped him over the years in coping with historical difficulties between Native Americans and descendants of white settlers.

As the number of the faithful on and off the reservation increased the log church became inadequate and was replaced by a larger wooden church in 1869, the present St. Joachim Church. It is the fifth oldest standing church in Washington State, community members note.

In 1893, St. Joseph mission church was created, and the first structure was built the following year. In 1896, the church was established as a parish, with Father Jean Baptiste Boulet as pastor.

The town of Ferndale began to expand from the Nooksack River, and so in 1900 St. Joseph Church was moved to Third Street. Starting in 1896, when St. Anne in Blaine was created, Father Boulet took trips to Blaine by train to celebrate Mass in the Loomis Hall on Martin Street. Later, between 1905 and 1907, the present St. Anne Church was built. St. Anne was expanded in 1938, and the parish hall was added in the 1960s. A parish hall also was added to St. Joachim in 1960.

In 1965, St. Joseph’s present site on Hendrickson Avenue was purchased and the ground was broken for the church the next year. The new St. Joseph Church was completed in September 1967 and dedicated the following month, on Oct. 29.

In 1997, St. Anne was named an official historical site in Blaine, and in 1998 Archbishop Alex J. Brunett dedicated a new tower on the grounds of St. Joachim.