PARISH PROFILE

United, caring community uses gifts to reach out

Sacred Heart Parish, former home to many Slavic Fairhaven fishing families, has experienced a century of growth spurred by immigration.

BELLINGHAM

BY ARMANDO MACHADO

According to parish historical records, the creation of Sacred Heart Parish, Bellingham, initially was met with resistance from the archdiocese because of the existence of Assumption Parish, which had been established in 1889 in the northern part of Bellingham.

But the fledgling parish eventually was formed because of the determination and strong wishes expressed by Catholics living in the southern fishing community of Fairhaven. In 1905, about a third of Assumption parishioners left to become the first members of Sacred Heart Church.

Although its beginnings were marked by the predictable growing pains of an expanding population, Sacred Heart Parish celebrated its centennial and 100 years of faith and service in 2005.

According to the parish mission statement, parishioners at Sacred Heart Parish, Bellingham seek to witness the presence of God in their community as a family “bound together by the Word and Eucharist.”

Parishioners also look to work together “through worship, education, service, social activities, and stewardship,” using their gifts and talents to reach out to others.

United, caring people

Mary Spencer founded the Sacred Heart Health Team in 2001 and serves as the team’s coordinator. The Health Team is a resource to health programs in the area providing spiritual counseling and strong wishes expressed by parishioners to become the first members of Sacred Heart Parish.

Father Qui-Thac Nguyen, who was born and raised in Vietnam, also noted the good self-sacrificing efforts of the pastor (Father Daniel A. Hanley, who was pastor until 1910 and was succeeded by Father Stephen Carmody, who was pastor until 1912). Father Stephen Carmody succeed him as pastor and remained in that position for 32 years until 1944, making him the parish’s longest-serving pastor.

“The rapid growth of south Bellingham has been reflected in the increase on membership of the Sacred Heart Parish and the parish, under the splendid leadership of Father Carmody, has steadily increased, parish historical material states. “The debt has been reduced and improvements have been made….” This has all been accomplished by the self-sacrificing efforts of the pastor (Father Carmody).”

In 1921, the present rectory was built. Prior to that, the priests lived at the original St. Joseph Hospital. Land acquired before the Great Depression for a Catholic school is now the parish parking lot.

Children from the parish attend Assumption School, located north at the Assumption Church site. The Sacred Heart parish hall was built in 1962 under the direction of Father Thomas R. Hanley (no relation to Father Daniel Hanley).

Immigration spurs growth

In the early decades, few Sacred Heart members attended Mass at Assumption and vice versa, largely due to neighborhood loyalty.

Parish borders in those days normally were based on high school boundaries, and each end of the city had a high school until Fairhaven High School burned down in 1936.

The high school consolidation after the fire apparently took away some of the differences between Sacred Heart Parish and Assumption Parish.

According to local Catholic Church history, the Sacred Heart community, like the Assumption area, had many early members from Ireland, Germany and French-speaking Canada. Starting around 1915, many families from the Adriatic coast of Yugoslavia joined the Sacred Heart community. Many were fishermen in their native land, and soon began a Slavic fishing community in the Fairhaven area.

They eventually became the main ethnic group of Sacred Heart, resulting in many of the church liturgies having Slavic influence. Today, an ethnic mix remains including people of Croatian, Polish and Vietnamese descent, although today the parish has somewhat more white-collar than blue-collar workers.