Island church opens new chapter

‘Chapel’ designation marks start of restoration effort

Island church opens new chapter

‘Chapel’ designation marks start of restoration effort

DOCKTON
BY TERRY MCGUIRE

Except for the scattered pieces of fallen ceiling plaster on the carpet, St. Patrick Church looked at first glance ready for Mass last week, with the hymnals arranged neatly in the pew racks and the Book of the Gospels sitting central on the altar.

Stand in the wrong place, however, and you just might step through the floor, Father Richard Roach, SJ, warned a visitor as he showed one such weakened spot where he used to distribute Holy Communion.

Five years ago last month, a massive pest infestation forced closure of the 1923-built church. Sight unseen, the termite-like bugs had been eating away at the rear of the building, apparently for years. Exterminators were summoned when the destruction became known, but it was too late, and the church has been closed ever since.

But now that the longtime mission has been designated an “oratory” ("chapel" in common parlance) by Archbishop Alex J. Brunett, the church can fulfill its Sunday and Holy Day obligation, said Father Richard Roach, SJ, pastor of St. John Vianney Parish on Vashon Island, which includes St. Patrick’s.

The Dockton church will be known as St. Patrick’s Chapel, Father Roach said. He said it will likely be used weekly only during the summer months and for weddings and other special occasions throughout the year. But it could become even busier should the land around it become home to a Catholic youth center — an idea being explored by several parishioners.

According to a parish history, the church was built under pioneer priest Father Herbert Mertens, who traveled from Tacoma to serve the boatbuilding workers and fishing families around Quartermaster Harbor. Funded by major donations from the Catholic Church Extension Society and Dockton summer resident Patrick Heney, St. Patrick’s was constructed for $2,400 and named in honor of Heney’s patron saint.

The church was remodeled in 1950. The original wood siding was covered with brick, two transepts were added and the steeple was replaced by a bell tower. Later additions were made to the rear of the building.

Letters seeking funds for the maintenance and restoration of St. Patrick’s were to go out this month to the 270 households that make up St. John Vianney Parish serving Vashon Island and the adjoining Maury Island, where St. Patrick’s is located.

While no recent estimates have been made, Father Roach, the pastor, said the project could run close to $350,000.

If the interest is there in restoring the church, Father Roach said he’d like to see the structure returned to its pre-remodeled state if it doesn’t cost more. But finding the money will be a challenge.

Parishioner Denny Mielock, who attended services at St. Patrick’s for about seven years, is not sure the parish can financially support two facilities. “I don’t know that we could at our present time really justify supporting two churches,” he said last week. “I think we’re barely making it with one big church (St. John Vianney).”

Mielock is one of four parishioners whose names will appear on the fundraising letter.

What is an oratory?

As noted in Archbishop Alex J. Brunett’s official, published in this issue of The Catholic Northwest Progress, the former St. Patrick Mission at Dockton has been established as an oratory.

Commonly known as chapels, oratories — unlike missions and parishes — are not required to provide services where the faithful can fulfill their Sunday and Holy Day obligation, said Father Richard Roach, SJ, pastor of St. John Vianney Parish on Vashon, which includes St. Patrick’s.

Father Tony Bawyn, archdiocesan judicial vicar, said oratories are usually found in religious houses such as monasteries and convents, and at shrines and institutions, such as hospitals, schools and seminaries.

Oratories are “for the benefit of some community or group of persons as determined by the bishop who establishes them,” Father Bawyn said. “Permission to use them is thereafter directed by the person in charge, usually the superior of the place.

“The Eucharist may be reserved and people can become emotionally attached to a building where they were baptized, married and received the other sacraments.”

He said he enjoyed the homey, country-church feel of St. Patrick’s, and was sad to see it close. But he noted the oft-used Catholic observation that it’s the people and not the structure that makes a community.

Even so, Mielock said he recognizes that people can become emotionally attached to a building where they were baptized, married and received the other sacraments. Perhaps enough of them will “dig deep,” he said, “to keep that place going.”

He said he enjoyed the homey, country-church feel of St. Patrick’s, and was sad to see it close. But he noted the oft-used Catholic observation that it’s the people and not the structure that makes a community.

Even so, Mielock said he recognizes that people can become emotionally attached to a building where they were baptized, married and received the other sacraments. Perhaps enough of them will “dig deep,” he said, “to keep that place going.”