

PARISH PROFILE

Average-looking parish a hotbed of activity

Large and growing school a driver of St. Francis of Assisi's outreach to community

BURIEN
BY KEVIN BIRNBAUM

An outsider peeking in at a Sunday Mass at St. Francis of Assisi Parish might think the faith community was pretty mundane — just “a pretty middle-class, white parish,” as Pastor Father Richard Hayatsu describes it.



Father Richard Hayatsu

But look beyond the demographics and you'll find a warm and welcoming parish community bustling with energy and activity.

“It's just a very inviting parish,” said Pat Cervenka, a parishioner since 1954 who

sent her nine children through the parish school. “I've had a lot of people tell me that they've come from other parishes and they love the way they feel part of it so soon.”

If you're ever going through a tough time, she said, “You always have someone that is anxious to help.”

She gave the example of a friend whose husband has been in the hospital since November.

“So a group have gotten together and had their yard taken care of,” she said. “It's that kind of a parish.”

“It's a real family,” concluded Ken Lindh, who moved into the parish as a boy in 1946 and has never left.

'Loving and supportive'

Cervenka attributes the sense of community partly to the “unusually large number” of daily Massgoers at the parish — maybe 50 to 100 during Lent.

“I think the Eucharist is very important to our parish community and, of course, I really believe that that's why our community is so loving and supportive,” she said.

That support extends to the wider community through active Knights of Columbus and St. Vincent de Paul Society groups, and a scouting program that continually cranks out Eagle Scouts, said Father Hayatsu. The parish also supports Hospitality House, a local shelter for homeless women.

Twice a month, a group of mostly seniors gathers to make sandwiches for the homeless, said Lil Isernio, a parishioner since 1957. On first Fridays, 100 sandwiches go to the Lazarus Day Center in Seattle for homeless and marginally housed men and women age 50 and older. On last Tuesdays, they send 300 sandwiches to the St. Martin de Porres Shelter for homeless men 50 and older.



Above: The parish's current church, dedicated in 1966. Right: The first church, built between 1929 and 1930.

For the past 15 years, St. Francis of Assisi has had a “sister parish” relationship with a church in El Salvador. Each year the two churches alternate sending groups of parishioners to visit the other.

“It really makes you look at the world from a different perspective,” said Elizabeth Hanks, a longtime parishioner and pastoral assistant for liturgy, RCIA and infant baptism.

Building an Engaged Church

Hanks heads a vibrant RCIA program at the parish. Last Easter, St. Francis of Assisi welcomed 25 adults into full communion with the Catholic Church.

The parish also is one of 14 in the Archdiocese of Seattle participating in “Building an Engaged Church,” a research-based initiative developed by the Gallup Organization to help churches diagnose their parishioners' levels of involvement and individual strengths, then help them discern how they might be able to share them.

“We have hopes for that helping us to become a more engaged church,” said Father Hayatsu.

In the past year, St. Francis of Assisi started a youth ministry program, with Life Teen ministry for high schoolers and Edge for middle schoolers. The Edge meetings have been especially



popular, regularly drawing about 60 young people.

School the 'main driver'

Most of those young people come from the parish's exceptionally successful school, which Father Hayatsu calls “the main driver of things around here,” with a budget twice that of the parish itself.

“We have a large school, a very popular school that is almost full because of the great education they get there,” he said.

In the 18 years since Principal Sheila Keaton took over, the school has nearly doubled in enrollment, from 250 to 475 students, with two classes per grade. In the past few years, the school has added two classrooms and a high-school-size gym, and construction will start this June on a new library and media



This 1952 photo shows the interior of the old St. Francis of Assisi Church.

St. Francis of Assisi Parish, Burien

Founded: 1929
Households: 1,310
Street Address: 15226 21st Ave. S.W.
Phone: 206-242-4575
Website: www.stfoa.org

PASTORS:

- Father John Gibboney, 1929
- Father William Quick, 1956
- Father Ibar Lynch, 1968
- Father Edward Norris, 1978
- Father Philip Wallace, 1983
- Father Jerry McCloskey, 1997 (administrator)
- Father Richard Hayatsu, 1999

center funded by a \$500,000 donation from a former parish family.

Keaton says the spirit of collaboration among her staff is one reason for the school's vitality.

“The teachers that I have are committed to Catholic education, and are here not just as a profession but as a mission, and I think that makes a difference,” she said.

She added that the school is “big on social justice,” and this year students are working to support the building of a well in Ndavaya, Kenya. They have raised \$7,000 since October.

The Hungry Mind

St. Francis of Assisi Parish was established by Bishop Edward O'Dea on Aug. 1, 1929. He appointed Father John Gibboney as the first pastor. The parish's first church was built between October 1929 and April 1930, but Father Gibboney celebrated the first Mass in the unfinished church building on Christmas Eve 1929.

In 1953, construction began on a 10-room school building, which was blessed by Archbishop Thomas Connelly on Jan. 31, 1954.

Father William Quick took over as pastor of the growing parish in 1956 and would often take photos of the packed 400-seat church to show the archbishop that the parish needed a new, bigger church building.

On Sept. 18, 1966, Archbishop Connelly dedicated St. Francis of Assisi's current 900-seat church.

During the 1960s, the parish opened the Hungry Mind Coffee Shop in the former downstairs chapel of the old church. Parishioner Jeanne Sack arranged a lineup of programs on often controversial topics, according to a parish history: “Black Panthers, abortion, politicians, anti-Vietnam War speakers, women in the church.”

“The Hungry Mind was certainly never dull,” adds the history.