Renton parish ‘dedicated to both prayer and service’

With ministries to the homeless, the grieving and pregnant women in crisis, there’s always something happening at St. Stephen the Martyr

RENTON
BY KEVIN BIRNBAUM

“Welcoming, accommodating, engaged, helpful, generous, just very alive, very vibrant.”

Those are a few of the words that describe St. Stephen the Martyr Parish, according to Cynde Bosshart, a 35-year parishioner who serves as pastoral assistant for adult faith formation at the parish.

The parish has never been “afraid to try something new,” she said, “so we tend to be innovative, and yet at the same time people are very spiritually grounded” through traditional devotions.

‘A house of prayer’

One of Pastor Father Ed White’s priorities during his five years at the parish has been fostering a sense of the church as “a house of prayer,” said Marjorie Heutmaker, a founding member of the parish and the pastoral assistant for liturgy and music, “and so there have been many ways in which we can pray that he has brought forward for us.”

One way Father White has done that is through biweekly catechism classes for the parish at large to help parishioners grow in their faith.

In addition to the “beautiful liturgies that continue to grow in their reverence,” Father White noted that the parish has regular eucharistic adoration (over 30 hours a week), centering prayer and recitation of the rosary and the Liturgy of the Hours.

This Lent, between 400 and 500 people attended a four-day mission led by Dr. Tom Curran. “Every night the place was just crowded” with both adults and teens, said Bosshart.

The parish also recently started a group called Spiritual Companions, said Heutmaker.

“We were trained in the Ignatian spirituality and are available for people to look deeper into their prayer life,” she said.

A group of Stephen Ministers is available to “walk with those that are going through a grief process,” whether due to death, illness or loss of a job, she added.

Terrific Tuesdays

The parish community is a mix of older, established members — including several who helped found the parish 45 years ago — and younger families. The parish has been growing by more than 100 families per year over the past five years, Father White said. The parish is home to significant Filipino and Vietnamese communities.

St. Stephen’s is “a vibrant community dedicated to both prayer and service,” said Father White, noting that the parish has over 100 ministries, including Knights of Columbus, direct aid to those in need and a food bank.

For more than 20 years, the St. Stephen’s Housing Association has provided transitional housing for homeless families with children.

Started and supported by parishioners, it’s a separately incorporated non-profit that now houses 20 families at any given time. Families can stay for up to two years and receive case management to help them get into permanent housing.

“We’ve helped hundreds of people and children” over the years, said Deacon Marshall Denby, the housing association’s vice president.

The parish recently celebrated the first anniversary of its Terrific Tuesdays ministry, a collaborative effort with two Protestant congregations that provides a meal for about 150 homeless people and others in need each week.

On a mission

The parish is also “very engaged in the right to life” movement, said Bosshart. Father White is the archdiocesan leader of the Gabriel Project, a parish-based ministry to women facing crisis pregnancies, and St. Stephen’s recently launched its own chapter.

“We’ve got at least three women in our system, three moms who have asked for help” so far, said Father White.

The parish also has an active youth program. Each summer youth from the parish go on a two-week mission trip to Yakima.

For the past five years, the parish also has sent a mission team to Honduras. Last year, 23 parishioners participated, with 12 renovating orphanages, 10 teaching Pope John Paul II’s theology of the body to teens and one taking part in a medical mission with a team from St. Charles Parish in Tacoma.

Mass under a basketball hoop

St. Stephen the Martyr Parish was established by Archbishop Thomas Connolly on Nov. 11, 1966, less than a year after the close of the Second Vatican Council. The founding pastor was Father John Lynch, a Boston native with an accent that was “a mixture of New England twang and soft Irish brogue,” according to a parish history.

For about three years, Mass was celebrated at Meridian Junior High School in Kent.

“We had Mass under the basketball hoop,” Heutmaker recalled.

The parish broke ground on a 19-acre plot on Dec. 8, 1968. For several months before the church building was completed, daily Masses were celebrated in a two-car garage adjoining the rectory. More than 300 children were baptized in the garage.

The first Mass celebrated in the church building was the Midnight Mass at Christmas in 1969.

The 30,000-square-foot church building was dedicated on April 19, 1970, at a Mass celebrated by Archbishop Connolly and concelebrated by Father Lynch and six other priests.

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