Parish set to mark centennial of Jesuit presence

Inspired by Ignatian spirituality and structured around eight commissions, St. Leo’s is community where many are actively involved

BY TERRY MCGUIRE

You could say that Jesuit Father Stephen Lantry started at the top when he was appointed pastor of St. Leo the Great Parish in 2003. With 22 years in the priesthood at the time, it was his first work in any parish. And here he was coming into a community widely known for its social outreach ministries — a “magnet” parish whose 850 households today hail from approximately 70 ZIP codes, with about 80 percent of the parishioners residing outside the parish boundaries.

Parishioners and staff list St. Leo’s Jesuit leadership, its preaching, Ignatian spirituality and location in a needy part of town among the reasons that so many are drawn to the parish.

Parish council member Judy Jones, a parishioner for 16 years, remembers searching for the right parish after moving here from California. Fellow students in Seattle University’s School of Theology, among others, recommended St. Leo’s.

“When I walked in the door [that first Sunday morning], people moved over to make room for me in the pew,” she recalled, “and they smiled and they were very welcoming, and wished me a good week as I was leaving. [I thought] ‘This doesn’t happen.’

“The thing that I find amazing is that so many people are so involved in doing lots of things,” she said. “It’s a concrete example of fellow parishioners living out the Gospel. And I looked around and said, ‘I want to be like these people.’”

Food bank feeds multitudes

The parish’s inclusive spirit is seen at the Sunday Mass, where residents from the local L’Arche community for people with developmental disabilities participate comfortably in the liturgy.

St. Leo’s offers a myriad of pastoral ministries and faith formation opportunities. The most visible social service ministry is the St. Leo Food Connection, which last year fed 115,000 people through its food bank, one of the largest in the state. The ministry also includes a mobile food bank and projects that feed children during the school year and summer.

“There are countless parishioners who support us financially as well as” volunteering, said food bank director Kevin Glackin-Coley, a parishioner for 27 years. “It’s a community that’s dedicated to reaching out to those in need, both locally and internationally.”

Like other parishioners, he first came to St. Leo’s as a 16-year-old to serve as a member of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps.

Spiritual exercises popular

Service to others is part of the Jesuit tradition, Glackin-Coley said, noting that many parishioners have gone through the Spiritual Exercises in Everyday Life. The program, based on the teachings of the Jesuits’ founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola, helps participants grasp the Ignatian vision of finding God in all things and in discerning God’s action in their individual and collective lives.

That Ignatian spirituality influences the decision-making process, Jones said. “We take time to consider and listen and discern in anything that we’re looking at doing as a parish.” For example, she said many parish meetings and other gatherings have been held as the parish prepares to implement the new translation of the Roman Missal this Advent.

St. Leo’s is structured around eight commissions: Ecumenical and Interfaith; Facilities; Liturgy; Pastoral Care; Social Justice; Stewardship; Faith Formation; and the Food Connection. Each commission has from eight to 10 members, plus a chairperson and a parish staffer.

“It involves tons of parishioners, and it’s an extremely difficult model, because it’s a lot of work,” said former pastoral associate Colleen Mulligan, a parishioner for 34 years, who helped set up the model.

But she said the results are worth it because it empowers parishioners to be involved and have their voices heard.

“The Jesuit presence has been huge because it really empowers the laity to do the work,” she said. “It’s a collaborative parish rather than being structured from the ‘top down,’ she said.

On Oct. 29 and 30 the parish will celebrate 100 years of Jesuit leadership and almost a century of educational ministry under the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia, who staffed the former school. According to a parish history, the St. Leo’s community was started in 1873 by missionary priest Father Jean Baptiste. In 1879 Father Peter Hylebos became its first pastor. The Jesuit tradition which continues today began under the pastorate of Jesuit Father George Weibel. During the Depression, the parish ran a free soup kitchen.

Neighborhood on rebound

Three decades ago the surrounding Hilltop Neighborhood was mired in poverty, with the jobless rate reaching 42 percent, according to a parish history. St. Leo’s responded with emergency services. A low point came during the 1990s when drug dealers and gunfire permeated the area, but the neighborhood has rebounded somewhat since then and is now a mixture of poor, working poor and the lower middle class, Father Lantry said.

Mulligan, the former pastoral associate, said St. Leo’s response to the needs of the area is “one of our biggest strengths.”

She said she also has seen the parish transition from a “senior” parish to one that attracts young families today.

“When I started working there in 1998 we had about 50 families registered for religious education,” she said. “When I left [in 2008] I think there were about 120.”

In response, the parish several years ago introduced the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, a Montessori-based faith formation approach that helps children understand their relationship with God.