

Rochester parish marks 150 years

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

ROCHESTER — More than 200 people attended a Mass and dinner on Jan. 25 to mark the 150th anniversary of St. Bridget's Parish.

Founded by Irish Catholics in 1854, St. Bridget's is currently located on Mark Street in the former St. Theresa's Church, which once served a primarily Polish community. St. Bridget's moved from its former location on St. Bridget's Drive in 1997, and is the spiritual home of 300 people, 70 percent of whom are African-American.

Father Anthony Mugavero, pastor, said he was delighted to serve the parish. He noted that many St. Bridget's parishioners hail from the low-income neighborhood that surrounds the church, yet are nonetheless rich in faith. Vocal prayer is a common occurrence at any parish meeting, he added.

"It's a direct kind of contact with God that you feel," he said of the parish's prayer life. "There is no hesitation about spontaneous prayer and making contact with Jesus right away."

Terry Hin, who works in several parish ministries, counts among her favorite activities a small contemplative prayer group that meets in the parish's eucharistic chapel monthly.

"I find it's easier to pray when you come together with other people," she said. "It's just a very peaceful moment in my life that I really need."

Hand-in-hand with prayer at St. Bridget's is neighborhood outreach. The parish has hosted everything from revivals to community meetings, and serves as a focus point for the neighborhood, according to Murie E. Hardin, a veteran community organizer.

"It's a church for the people, with the people, about the people," she said.

It's also a parish for which it's easy to volunteer, according to Andria Pullaro, who has attended St. Bridget's for 56 years. Pullaro is a lector who also works on St. Bridget's hospitality and social committees.

"I never think about it," she said of her volunteering. "I just jump in. It's kind of like a family."

Rita Hammer, who has worked as the parish's secretary for three years, said she was drawn to serve St. Bridget's by its openness and warmth.

"You can just feel the love of the

church family, and you see the compassion that Father Tony (Mugavero) shows to anyone and everyone who comes to his door," Hammer said.

Father Mugavero said that St. Bridget's is a place to which neighbors turn when they need counsel in dealing with such inner-city issues as violence, poverty and drugs.

"You go into some of these homes on (Mark Street), you open the door, and there's almost nothing from the perspective of material goods, but the church is such a source of hope for them," he said.

In an effort to evangelize, the parish has held outdoor social events and meals for the neighbors, according to Mary Dwelley, volunteer religious-education coordinator.

"We know that there are folks here who hunger for God," she said of the neighbors. "They may not be ready to set foot in the church, but they're drawn to things outside."

For those who do go inside, St. Bridget's offers a place to encounter God and neighbor, according to Edna Triplett, who converted to Catholicism two years ago. Dwelley was her sponsor in the parish's Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program.

"If you don't know something, they take the time to teach you," she said of the parish's staff and volunteers.

Millie Cintron attends church with her daughter, Antoinette, 15, and son, Ivan, 11. Like other St. Bridget's parishioners, she said she likes the parish's friendly atmosphere.

"There's not, like, church gossip," she said. "You just feel good to talk to everybody here because they just make you feel that way."

Ivan has less complicated reasons for liking St. Bridget's.

"I like the choir because I like how they sing," he said.

Young people such as Ivan are an important focus of St. Bridget's, according to several parishioners, including Dawn Smith, a former catechist who also worked in youth liturgical dance ministry.

"Anything that the adults are willing to do, the kids are 100 percent into doing it," she said. "They need guidance, and they need to see that there's another way than being in the streets."

Sam McGuire, who has trained St. Bridget's altar servers, shared Smith's conviction about the importance of working with young people.

"These kids are dedicated," he



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As diocesan Vicar General Father Joseph Hart (left) looks on, Andria Pullaro (center) and other parishioners of Rochester's St. Bridget's Church carry banners during a Mass Jan. 25 celebrating the parish's 150th anniversary.

said of the nine boys and girls who serve Masses. "They're thoughtful, or they wouldn't be doing what they're doing."

One such thoughtful altar server is Danielle King, 13, a seventh-grader at Bishop Hogan Academy in Irondequoit. She proudly noted that among her experiences as an altar server, she once carried the processional cross during a liturgy celebrated by Bishop Matthew

H. Clark at Sacred Heart Cathedral.

"It keeps you out of trouble," she said of altar serving. "You get to do all of the things that other people can't. You get to be up in the action on the altar."

Another altar server is Rafael Walker, 13, an eighth-grader at McQuaid Jesuit High School in Brighton.

"I just like to help," he said of his service. "It's mainly the right thing



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Alexis Armstrong (from left), Stan Rose and Marilyn Bellamy sing with St. Bridget's gospel choir during the anniversary Mass.

to do."

His mother, Tanishia Johnson, attends the church with her husband, Cory Johnson, and their four children, including Rafael. She and her husband had high praise for St. Bridget's parishioners.

"The people that are part of this parish are helping us raise our children," she said. "When we pray in our family, we include St. Bridget's."