

Immigrants are revitalizing St. Leo's in North Fairmount

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5:00 AM, Oct 6, 2015

CINCINNATI -- Father Jim Schutte likes to say of St. Leo the Great Roman Catholic Church, where he is the pastor, that it was founded in 1886 by German immigrants, and today the church being renewed and rebuilt by immigrants.



This time, the people revitalizing the congregation are from Latin American and Africa. Most of the parishioners are immigrants from Guatemala or refugees from the East African nation of Burundi, who fled ethnic conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes. There is a small minority of white, longtime parish members, Schutte said, some of whom live in the neighborhood.

The diversity makes Mass at St. Leo's a multicultural event, filled with brown, black and white faces. The hymn books are printed in English and Spanish, and one of the scripture readings is in Kurundi, the language of Burundi. A white choir sings hymns in English, but later, a choir of six Burundian women sings hymns in Kurundi, accompanied by bongos and a tambourine.

"It's like Pentecost every Sunday," Parish Associate Angela Anno said.

New beginnings

The church is a bright spot in a neighborhood, North Fairmount, that has been in decline for many years and which, as Schutte said, usually only makes the news when there's a shooting. In its heyday, the church had a school and even a convent for nuns who taught there, but those both closed years ago.

Parishioners such as Myles Kunkel, 88, remember those days. Kunkel attended St. Leo as a child, and then returned in 1985. He appreciates seeing all the baptisms and marriages the influx of immigrants has brought.

When Schutte became pastor in July 2007, no infants had been baptized at St. Leo's in many years. But thanks to new parishioners, he said, this year he will baptize his 200th infant at St. Leo's.

Weekly offerings also have grown from about \$600 a week to about \$1,250, Schutte said.

New faces show up every week, he said. Some of them learn about the church from its website, www.saint-leo.org, the creation of which was one of Casey Betz's first goals when she was hired as the church's first development director five years ago.

One of the newer faces is Elizabeth "Betsy" Mueller, a pediatric dentist who lives in Mason. She said she became involved first because she gave a used car to St. Leo and saw how much good the parish was doing.

She likes the fact that it's a small parish where everyone knows her, which makes it feel more like family. She also likes it that most of the other parishioners have more interesting stories than she does. "Everybody there has certainly struggled just to get personal freedom," she said. "That's not something I've had to struggle with," she said, and it makes her troubles seem small in comparison.

Because it's a poor parish, St. Leo offers more opportunities for good works than other parishes, Mueller said.

Relying on others

Although attendance and collections have improved, it hasn't been enough for the parish to sustain itself. During the fiscal year that ended June 30, the church ran a deficit of about \$30,000, Betz said.

During that same year, the collection plate brought in \$76,000, or about 37 percent of the church's total income of \$203,000. The National Catholic Reporter reported in 2012 that the average U.S. parish had total annual revenue of nearly \$700,000, about two-thirds of which came from the collection plate.

About 90 percent of the approximately 150 registered members of St. Leo are immigrants, refugees or elderly who "don't have two cents to rub together," Betz said.

Since the church can't support itself, it looks to other parishes for help. Fourteen other parishes, including ones as far away as St. John the Baptist in Dry Ridge, Ky., have become parish partners with St. Leo, agreeing to provide financial or volunteer support. Last fiscal year, those partners contributed \$20,000, or about 10 percent of St. Leo's total income.



Our Lady of the Visitation in Mack, a much larger parish with 2,300 families, went a step further when it became a "covenant partner" in January 2012. The agreement commits the parishes to helping one another and learning from one another, said Our Lady of the Visitation Pastoral Associate for Outreach Bill Tonnis.

“We have more wealth in the way of money, but they have a lot of wealth in the way of faith that they can share with us,” Tonnis said.

As part of the partnership, the parishes put on events together such as a Latino fest at St. Leo’s and a Culture Fest at Our Lady of the Visitation. Our Lady of the Visitation members also volunteer at a Tuesday night tutoring class for school children held at St. Leo’s, and at St. Leo’s food pantry, which feeds about 1,400 residents monthly.

Parish partners also contribute volunteers to the other services that St. Leo’s offers the parish, including English as a second language classes and free dental care once a month. A staff nurse, whose salary is paid by local hospital/physician provider TriHealth, maintains an office at St. Leo’s and does at-home health checks for neighborhood residents identified by the St. Leo staff.

It’s likely that her visits are the only medical care many of them get, Schutte said. Meeting these kinds of needs are the kind of hands-on ministry that’s typical at St. Leo’s, he said.

“There are not enough adjectives to describe it,” he said. “It’s really wonderful. I call it basic Gospel.”