



PARISH PROFILE

Le Mars St. Joseph has deep roots, looks to future

By KARA KOCZUR
Globe staff reporter

LE MARS – While many parishes in the diocese have an aging demographic, St. Joseph's in Le Mars is different, said Father Kevin Richter, pastor.

Out of the parish's approximately 750 families, many of them are young. The mix of young and old is due to the Wells Blue Bunny ice cream plant and its corporate headquarters, as well as the subsidiaries that support it, he said.

When it comes to parish activities and ministries, the people are willing to be involved.

"Part of that is because we support a K-12 school (Gehlen), we have lots of volunteers involved in all aspects of parish life," Father Richter said.

The priest said it can sometimes be difficult to separate school from parish. Through Gehlen Catholic, St. Joseph's is part of Mission Honduras and Support Our Troops, where every month they gather supplies to send to troops overseas. The parish also supports the Christian Needs Center in town.

History

The first Mass celebrated in Le Mars took place April 24, 1870, at the home of Peter Gehlen. Two months later, in June, a new church was completed at the cost of \$1,000. In 1876, the church was expanded for an additional \$4,000. The addition provided room for the priest's home, as well as a school room. Three years later, the Community of the Sisters of Christian Charity from Wilkes-Barre, Penn., took charge of the school.

The cornerstone of the present church was laid in May of 1884, with completion of the superstructure in 1885.

The pastors of St. Joseph have left a lasting mark on the parish. One long-told story involves Msgr. F.X. Feuerstein, who served the parish prior to 1925. Apparently a man of "formidable stature," he once gave a would-be thief trying to rob the priest of renovation funds a backhand swat that toppled him to the ground. Another priest, Msgr. Joseph Fisch, took over the parish during the Depression in 1932. Not only did he get St. Joseph's out of debt, but Gehlen Catholic School was erected.

After numerous renovations throughout the years, as well as a \$3 million addition to Gehlen in 1996, the parish is still working on building projects. This time, the parish



St. Joseph Church, Le Mars

will be constructing a new church, parish hall and parish offices.

"The primary issue is that the brick on the old church is such a soft brick," the priest said, adding that the brick also causes moisture problems.

In fact, the brick has actually been covered with a cement plaster, was painted and then the brick lines were hand-painted on. It's been done four times in the history of the church.

Construction is expected to start Spring 2011 and be completed 18 months later.

St. Joseph is part of a cluster that includes Le Mars St. James, Struble St. Joseph, Neptune St. Joseph, Merrill Assumption and Ellendale St. Joseph. Many of the parish's activities are done in conjunction with the other churches. Catholic Daughters, Knights of Columbus and the Confraternity of Christian Mothers are all done as a cluster. A ladies card club also meets at the parish, and not only includes women from the parish, but from all over town.

Another cluster program is religious education. All of the parishes, except Ellendale St. Joseph, participate in the joint program. Sister Jeanette Homann, OSF, the director of religious education, estimates that the program has over 500 students in grades 1-10.

"We don't have enough classrooms to have anymore because we use all of the Gehlen classrooms that are available to us," she said.

Juniors are confirmed in the fall and so they attend classes in the church basement during September and the first part of October, Sister Jeanette said.

About a month before both first reconciliation and first Communion, the program hosts a day of learning centers that parents and students do together. The entire cluster participates, as well as students from Gehlen.

"The kids just love it because they get their parents all to themselves for an hour and a half," Sister Jeanette said, adding that they leave the activities with smiles on their faces.

Sister Jeanette is also in charge of RCIA. Currently there are five in the program: two catechumens, two candidates and one Catholic preparing for confirmation.

Besides having religious education for the youth, Father Richter said that the parish tries to do adult education as well. The priest said he tries to offer classes during Advent and Lent.

"We do a Saturday morning group and lately we've had about 40 people coming," he said. "Sometimes we've done additional things in the fall. Usually we have a different book on Catholic spirituality and Catholic teaching that we choose and work our way through."

There are also a number of social activities for parents, such as the fall dinner. A few years ago the pastoral council also started the St. Joseph Summer Celebration.

"[The St. Joseph Summer Celebration] is the opportunity to gather people together and it's not a fundraiser," Father Richter said.

The priest, who's in his sixth year at St. Joseph's, said he has enjoyed his time very much with the strong community of the parish.

"I think their German roots run deep," he said. "A part of that is a good work ethic, but they're also deeply faithful people."

Brick problems force parishioners to build new church

By KARA KOCZUR
Globe staff reporter

LE MARS – To the casual onlooker, it's brick. But upon closer inspection of the exterior of St. Joseph Church, a person is able to recognize the deception.

The outside is not brick, but brick that's been covered with cement plaster and then painted red. The paint was then covered with hand-drawn brick lines to give it the appearance of real brick.

Although the church was built in 1885, this process was already done for the first time in the early 1900s, said Father Kevin Richter, pastor. In fact, due to the soft original brick, it's been done four times in the church's history.

"There were so many moisture problems with the brick," he said. "So they covered the whole exterior of the church with cement plaster and then hand painted the brick line."

After realizing that the brick was unfixable, St. Joseph's began the process of building a new church about three to four years ago.

"No one wants to lose the current church building we have, it's just the brick is such a problem that at some stage you

have to say we have to move forward," Father Richter said.

Currently the architect is in the process of finishing the construction documents. Besides a new church, there will be a parish hall, parish offices and a chapel for daily Mass.

After hearing parishioners say over and over again that they were sad to lose their church, the architect purposely designed the building to give them the feel of their old church, doing so in a Neo-Gothic style, Father Richter said.

"We have the old high altar going into the new church, what were the old side altars will become shrines at the end of each transept and the ambo and the altar of sacrifice that is actually used for Mass will all be part of the new church," he said. "Some elements of the stained-glass windows will [also] be transferred and used."

The new church will have the look and feel of the old one. Some of the statues will be the same and the old bells will be moved to the new bell tower.

"You look at the bell tower and it's almost identical," he said. "That's deliberate."

While the new church has a traditional feel to it, it's going



An artist's rendering of the interior of the new St. Joseph Church in Le Mars.

to take advantage of many modern amenities and technologies. The current building has no air conditioning, doesn't retain heat in the winter and has poor access to the parish hall in the basement. However the new church will have better accessibility, air conditioning and won't be heated with gas.

Instead, it will use geothermal heat, which will be more expensive to put in, Father Richter said, but after three to five years it should pay for itself with the difference in heating costs.

The entire cost of the project, including the new church, the demolition of the old St. Joseph school, putting in a new student parking lot on the site of the old church, buying a townhouse for the rectory and 10 percent contingency is \$8.8 million. So far the parish has \$5.2 million pledged, with close to \$4.25 million in hand, the priest said.

The theme for their capital campaign is "Honoring Our

Past, Building Our Future." Parishioners have also stepped forward to help with fundraising.

A group of women made a quilt to be raffled, while another group of women put together a cookbook that raised about \$10,000, Father Richter said. A gentleman also made an outdoor fountain that was raffled. Throws depicting the old church were also sold and the parish is in the process of having T-shirts and sweatshirts designed with the image of the new church.

"Lots of little things help generate excitement as we move forward," he said.

Excitement for the project has definitely been growing. In fact, when the initial exterior design was unveiled and the people saw the bell tower, there was a gasp in the room, Father Richter said.

"I had one person from the parish when we had a town hall

meeting to reveal these first designs and stuff, she said, 'I came, I was angry, I was ready to be very disappointed and upset,'" Father Richter recalled. "And she said, 'By the time I left I understood why we were doing this, why we had to move forward and I'm leaving excited and fully onboard.' To me that's what's happened. People have understood the nature of the problems we're dealing with. We've had increasing excitement."

Construction is expected to begin in Spring 2011, with estimated completion to be 18 months later. The site of the new facilities will be where the former St. Joseph School, parish rectory and garage sat.

"The nice thing is that the old church will stay in place during construction and once construction is completed," he said, "then the old church will be taken down and then finished for parking."

PARISH INFORMATION

Pastor: Father Kevin Richter

DRE: Sister Jeanette Homann, OSF

Mass Times: Saturday - 5 p.m.; Sunday: 9 a.m. and 11 a.m.

Confessions: Saturday, 4 to 4:30 p.m. and by appointment

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