

Our Lady of the Annunciation

The dedication of Our Lady of the Annunciation Church took place in 1934 with nine Catholic families composing the congregation. However, the first Catholic residents in the area arrived back in 1887, when the Ewing family relocated to Albemarle from Richmond, Va.

Visiting priests sporadically celebrated Mass in the area, or families traveled by train to Salisbury for Sunday services. That changed in 1934, when Father James Cowan, originally from New York, worked to establish a church in the South. Father Cowan celebrated Mass in the living room of the rectory until a gift from Our Lady of the Annunciation Church in New York made construction of a church building in Albemarle possible.

The new structure was dedicated on Sept. 4, 1934.

By the mid-1940s, 35 families made up the parish community, and the textile industry began to yield an even larger Catholic population in the area. A rectory was built in 1941, and Our Lady of the Annunciation Church began to experience its first significant growth. By the time of the parish's 25th anniversary in 1959, some 75 families called the Albemarle church their spiritual home.

Sustained needs for additional space marked the following years. The congregation saw a parish hall constructed in 1966 to provide room for their religious education classes and social events. Father (now Msgr.) Anthony Kovacic, a native of Bijelsko, Yugoslavia, presided as parish administrator at the time -- Father Cowan had passed away that year -- and became pastor in January 1969.

After the 1967 dedication of the hall, Father Kovacic turned attentions to building a new church, as the parish community grew to more than 100 families by decade's end. A sizable donation from the estate of Father Cowan and his mother led to the construction of a new facility, and on July 31, 1971, Bishop Vincent Waters of Raleigh said the first Mass at the new, 380-seat Our Lady of the Annunciation Church. Msgr. Michael J. Begley, soon to become the Diocese of Charlotte's founding bishop, preached the homily at the celebratory Mass.

Several diocesan priests have served the parish since Father Kovacic was appointed pastor to a Charlotte parish in 1973. During this time, the parish enhanced its participation in a number of community and ecclesial projects, such as Meals on Wheels, campus ministry, charismatic prayer and youth ministry.

On March 25, 1984, the parish of Our Lady of the Annunciation Church gathered to celebrate its Golden Jubilee Liturgy. Fathers Kovacic, Joseph Kelleher and Carl T. DelGuidice -- all pastors of the Albemarle church at various times -- joined Bishop Begley in celebrating the Mass for more than 200 families who were then registered at the parish.

In May 1990, Bishop Begley dedicated a newly built Family Life Center to mark the continued physical expansion in the parish. Spiritual growth has also continued as many parishioners remain active in a host of ministries and community efforts, such as a program for the elderly called OASIS, Knights of Columbus, pregnancy crisis outreach and a morning prayer group.

The church also expanded beyond parish boundaries with the establishment of a mission, Our Lady of the Americas in Biscoe in 1989. In 1999, Father Lawrence Heiney became pastor of Our Lady of the Annunciation Church.

To celebrate Lent last year, the parish held a unique Parish Stations of the Cross on March 21. Fifteen parish groups each wrote and read a reflection based on a particular Station of the Cross. Groups included the parish choir; Bible study; MOMS (Ministry of Mothers Sharing), which includes several non-Catholic members; and sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders involved in faith formation.

The parish population of Our Lady of the Annunciation Church now consists of approximately 330 families. The parish is one of the largest in the Albemarle Vicariate, and by its active stance in church and civic life, it makes a strong statement of devotion in the Stanly County town.