

## St. Joan of Arc Church

In its 76th year, St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church is breaking the mold.

On Aug. 1, 2004, Bishop Peter J. Jugis came to a gently rolling farm field just west of town -- the site for a planned new St. Joan of Arc Church -- to both celebrate Mass and lend his support to what the parish calls "Our Journey of Faith."

The first Catholic churches in the eastern United States and their attendant parochial schools were built in the urban centers by first- and second-generation European immigrants.

As these mainly blue-collar families worked their way into the middle class and moved to the suburbs, they rebuilt their churches where they lived. The continuing migration of Catholics has meant overcrowded parishes had to expand or relocate -- a process that continues today.

The difference with St. Joan of Arc Church is that it is moving in advance of the demographic wave. The reasons lie rooted in the history of the parish.

In 1927, to serve the growing Catholic population in west Asheville, a group of St. Lawrence Church parishioners, under the leadership of Father Louis J. Bour, purchased the 12-room Gardner House on the corner of Blue Ridge Avenue and Haywood Road.

One room was remodeled as a chapel; the rest was put into service as the first parochial school in western North Carolina. Bishop William J. Hafey of Raleigh named it for St. Joan of Arc, the 15th-century French virgin warrior who had been canonized seven years before. There were about 70 youngsters in the first student body.

A year later, Father Frank Gallagher was appointed as St. Joan of Arc Church's first pastor.

In 1936, St. Joan of Arc Church built a 40-by-80 foot auditorium that was pressed into service as a temporary chapel, the plan being to build a permanent church "within a year or two." But the remodeled and expanded "auditorium" remains the worship area today.

In 1950, the first part of the present brick building -- four classrooms and an auditorium -- was built.

In 1955, St. Lawrence Church opened its own parochial school on Culvern Street in north Asheville. But the bishop decided to split the St. Lawrence parish, establishing St. Eugene Church next door to the school and changing the school's affiliation to St. Eugene.

Shortly thereafter, Bessie Prime, an elderly St. Joan of Arc parishioner who lived in a stately home at the intersection of Blue Ridge Avenue and Craggy Avenue and rode around town in a Packard limousine driven by a chauffeur in livery, bequeathed her residence to the church in 1960.

The house, a block from the church and school, became a convent for the sisters teaching at St. Joan of Arc School.

During the 1962-63 school year, St. Joan of Arc School built a 95-by-119-foot brick addition that housed four additional classrooms, a kitchen and gymnasium/cafeteria to serve the 210 students in kindergarten through eighth grades. The Gardner House was demolished, making way for a parking lot.

In 1968, the Franciscans concluded they could no longer shoulder the financial strain of operating St. Anthony School in south Asheville for African-American children. St. Joan of Arc School accepted all the children who wanted to continue with their parochial education.

With a decline in the numbers of religious who were available to teach, running a parochial school became an increasing financial drain. In 1980, St. Joan of Arc School closed and the students transferred to the renamed Asheville Catholic School at St. Eugene Church, which was newer and larger.

The convent became offices for Catholic Social Services after the school closed and later became the church's rectory when CSS moved their offices to Orange Street in 1997.

Although St. Joan of Arc Church was the smallest of Asheville's three parishes, it continued its tradition of reaching out -- to Hispanics and other ethnic minority Catholics, to senior citizens, to gay and lesbian Catholics and to AIDS and HIV-positive individuals -- through its Caring Hearts ministry.

Father John Pagel, who was assigned as St. Joan of Arc Church's 23rd pastor in 1998, balanced the parish budget but discovered that the former school buildings, which were built expensively and not well maintained, constituted a large and continuing financial on the parish.

A parish planning committee organized a series of "listening" sessions to discern the hopes of the parishioners and launched an exhaustive evaluation of the options facing the parish.

Doing nothing meant the eventual demise of the parish, the committee concluded, but there simply was not the money available to renovate the obsolete buildings or rebuild in place.

Although there is a great deal of affection for the "little brown church" and sadness at the prospect of leaving west Asheville, the parish agreed that relocating was the only viable option. It will become affordable with help from the diocese and the sale of the commercially valuable property on Haywood Road.

By moving 10 minutes to the west, St. Joan of Arc Church will be centrally located to serve what the diocese expects to be an explosive growth in Catholic families, making it one of those rare parishes that is ahead of the demographic wave rather than swamped by it.

The parish's "Journey of Faith" capital campaign kicks off this fall.