

St. Joseph Church

In the first half of the 20th century, the Catholic population in North Carolina was largely a missionary group. Northern Cabarrus County Catholics, like many others in the state, had to travel for Mass, and it was partly from that need for more churches that Bishop Vincent S. Waters of Raleigh decided to establish a parish in Kannapolis.

In 1944, Bishop Waters invited the Redemptorist Fathers to begin priestly work in Kannapolis. Before that ministerial presence, locals traveled to Concord or Salisbury for liturgies. Redemptorist Father Francis Funk was named the first pastor of St. Joseph Church and was handed the task of locating a site for a church. Masses were celebrated in a private home in the meantime.

Father Funk was successful in his quest, and a building on the six-acre site was furnished as a chapel. The first Mass in the chapel was celebrated on Christmas Day, 1954. Sixteen parishioners made up the charter congregation.

With a new parish taking root in Kannapolis, Bishop Waters established a mission in Mooresville and placed it in the care of St. Joseph Church's clergy. The Kannapolis priests also ministered to Catholics at the Mecklenburg County Tuberculosis Sanitarium in Huntersville.

Tragedy struck St. Joseph Church on Holy Thursday in 1949 when a fire destroyed the chapel. While parishioners made plans to replace their church, they gathered for Masses in a funeral home chapel and school auditorium.

A military chapel on the North Carolina coast was purchased by St. Joseph Church in September 1949. The structure was transported to Kannapolis and was assembled in time for Christmas Eve midnight Mass that year. About 120 Catholics lived in Kannapolis at the time.

Diocesan clergy assumed the pastorate of St. Joseph Church and its mission, St. Therese Church in Mooresville in August 1954, interrupting for a time the Redemptorist presence. St. Therese Church gained parish status in 1956.

As Kannapolis grew, so did St. Joseph Church. Industry and businesses have added to the congregation, and a number of converts have complemented its growth as well, prompting the need for additional facilities.

A parish hall was built during the 1950s. Modular classroom space for religious education was added in the 1980s and a parish activity center was constructed in the early '90s.

In August 1969, the community of St. Joseph Church became a mission of St. James Church in Concord.

Father Alvaro Riquelme, pastor of St. Joseph Church, is a native of Chile who was raised in the United States. The predominately Hispanic parish has a ratio of three Hispanics to one Anglo.

Father Riquelme has seen tremendous growth in the Spanish-speaking population of his parish.

"When I worked as a seminarian in this area in 1995, there was just one Spanish Mass per month with 75 people attending," he said.

By 2001, more than 500 Hispanic families were worshipping regularly at St. Joseph Church, while about 160 Anglo families were registered. St. Joseph Church now has two Spanish Masses each week with 800 to 1,000 worshippers.

One of St. Joseph Church's most active groups is the charismatic prayer group, which draws up to 100 parishioners to its weekly services.

A bilingual staff, including Father Riquelme; Josh Gilliam, youth minister; and Sylvia McGill, parish nurse, help bridge the gap between the Hispanic and Anglo parishioners.

McGill, one of only a few parish nurses in the Piedmont area, serves the growing parish by providing essential medical services and information.

With such growth, additional space for worship was required and, on Oct. 6, 2001, then-Bishop William G. Curlin dedicated a new 1,000-seat St. Joseph Church, built on the site of the small, white church that had served the parish since 1949.

Staff Writer Karen A. Evans contributed to this story.