

Change for St. John, Columbia, as it celebrates 40 years

Change is coming to St. John the Evangelist in Columbia as the parish, unique in its interfaith, ecumenical environment and challenge, celebrates its 40th anniversary and the 30 years Monsignor Richard H. Tillman has been its pastor.

Since its founding in 1967 by Cardinal Lawrence Shehan to bring a Roman Catholic presence to the new, fast-growing community of Columbia as part of a vision of interfaith religious life, St. John has shared worship space with Protestant and Jewish congregations in two centers at Wilde Lake and Oakland Mills, which are about seven minutes driving distance apart.

Now, “St. John United” – which represents Methodist and Presbyterian congregations that have long shared the Wilde Lake worship space, will soon have its own building, leaving St. John with the center as its own.

St. John will continue to share the nearby Oakland Mills Interfaith Center building with two Jewish congregations, but with the exception of making its space available for Jewish High Holy days, the Wilde Lake center will be exclusively a Catholic church.

As Monsignor Tillman and key staff members see it, the change will provide both an opportunity and a challenge.

Wilde Lake “will in a more demonstrative way be more Catholic,” the pastor said, “but we will lose some of the more intimate connections we have had with our Protestant friends, so we must be sure to continue to stay focused on our interfaith spirit and action, which has been such a hallmark of this community.”

As it now stands, St. John United Protestant ministers, support staff and congregants cooperatively share the Wilde Lake space but will move to their new church (probably next year), to be built on about two acres of the 10-acre Wilde Lake tract, leaving the remaining eight acres for St. John the Evangelist, to be owned then by the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

“I think the downside will be in losing our daily experience of sharing with and relying on each other (at the Wilde Lake Center),” said Eileen Kiefer, St. John the Evangelist’s liturgical administrator who has been with the parish as long as Monsignor Tillman. “But,” she added, “the positive part is that we will have more

room for events and activities, and that will help a lot.”

Barbara Hope, who directs the parish’s social/pastoral counseling ministry from the Oakland Mills Center and who has been on the staff since 1983, agreed that more room will benefit St. John’s many and active programs. “There’s so much going on here,” she said, “and everyone is doing something.”

But, she also stressed that maintaining the strong, long-nurtured interfaith relationships will continue to be a priority. Interfaith cooperation was the vision of Columbia founder, James Rouse, who made it possible for Catholic, Protestant and Jewish congregations to share very affordable space.

Other than its unique history of interfaith cooperation and closeness, St. John the Evangelist may be one of, if not the most, diverse parishes in the archdiocese.

Its membership includes African-Americans, Hispanics, Haitians, Vietnamese, Koreans, Asians and Filipinos, among others, and thus reflects to a large extent the diversity of Howard County and the Columbia community itself. And, as Columbia and the county have grown over the years so has St. John the Evangelist. When Monsignor Tillman became pastor in 1977 there were about 1,300 households. Today there are some 3,000, and there are Masses in Spanish, celebrated every Saturday and Sunday at Wilde Lake and Oakland Mills by one of the two associate pastors, Father Antonio Velez, T.C., who leads a very active Hispanic ministry. The other associate pastor is Father Matthew T. Buening.

St. John the Evangelist’s diversity and its interfaith dimension have had ‘very positive’ effects on the parish, said Monsignor Tillman.

“I think our people, no matter what their background or culture, feel pretty much at home here,” he said. And, he said, most parishioners are “thankful” for the interfaith ingredient.

“They’re aware of the presence of one another; they get together on a cordial basis and I think (the St. John the Evangelist parishioners) see what it is to be church while gaining knowledge of other faith traditions.”

While the interfaith arrangement might have run the risk of diminishing the sense of Catholic identity among St. John’s parishioners, that identity has remained firm although the pastor acknowledged “it may grow a bit stronger” when the Protestant congregations move to their new building, leaving Wilde Lake to the Catholics.

Despite the uniqueness and initial uncertainty of the interfaith experiment, St. John the Evangelist has been a stable parish, a stability that Mrs. Kiefer attributes in

large part to the presence of Monsignor Tillman, its pastor for fully 30 years, “Father Tillman being here so long and being so well-loved and respected has been our biggest asset and helped maintain our stability,” Mrs. Kiefer said. “He is so empowering and enabling of others to do things that he helps make the parish what it is.”

As for Monsignor Tillman, he described the parish as “a place where I have truly been nourished and where I have learned so much, especially about interfaith relations. It’s been and continues to be a great joy.”

Although there will be some change in the interfaith environment for the people of St. John the Evangelist, they will, said Monsignor Tillman, continue to face with warmth of spirit the interfaith challenge so well described in the parish’s mission statement:

“Our differences are a blessing which challenge us and we commit ourselves to address those conditions which hinder us from becoming one,” he said.