

Family spirit thrives in West Baltimore

By Elizabeth Lowe

elowe@CatholicReview.org

Ernestine Watkins has been a lifelong parishioner of St. Peter Claver because of the parish's sense of family.

"For me, it's the feeling of being home," said Watkins, 54, the church's volunteer director of religious education for youth. "I've been to other churches and other Masses and while they're doing what we're doing, it's something about being with people you know and some people you don't know. It's a sense of belonging."

St. Peter Claver and St. Pius V, which retain their own names and identities, have operated under one roof since St. Pius V's church in Harlem Park was closed in 2005. The west Baltimore parishes, which are predominately African American, share the tagline "one in the spirit."

Deborah Holly, another lifelong parishioner who has worked in the parish office since she was a teenager, called the community family-centric.

"It's family," Holly said. "It's how African Americans worship. They worship as a community."

Holly called St. Peter Claver, which will celebrate its 125th anniversary next year, "a mission-driven parish because there's so many needs."

Josephite Father Ray P. Bomberger said there is a "sense of family and community" at the church.

"People put their heart into everything and that just comes across," Father Bomberger said.

Nearly one year ago, a parish youth started liturgical dance at the church, which Father Bomberger described as “movement to music” that “liven up the liturgy.”

Two parish youths led liturgical dance at Mass May 13, which Holly called an expression of praise to God. The church also has four choirs.

Another church ministry was inspired by Josephite Father Henry Harper, a longtime associate pastor of St. Peter Claver who died in March 2011. Father Harper was known for ministering to the homeless for about 22 years.

In an effort to continue Father Harper’s ministry, parish youths started Harper’s Helpers, which works to clothe and feed the homeless, Father Bomberger said. Parishioners donate supplies and prepare and serve meals to the needy at the church.

“I think it comes from the whole neighborhood being a family,” Father Bomberger said.

Watkins, the director of religious education for youth, said parish youths come to youth meetings on Friday evenings.

“I don’t have to pull teeth,” Watkins said. The youths are in grades eight through 12.

“They come out on Friday night and, to me, that says something about our kids wanting to learn about their faith,” Watkins said. “It’s not a matter of forcing them – it’s where they want to be.”

The youth ministry group organized a Toys for Tots fashion show as a way to collect unwrapped toys for needy children at Christmas. It also collects and distributes blankets to Baltimore’s homeless, Watkins said.

The youths even bring their friends on occasion, which Watkins called “evangelizing in their own way.”

“It’s preparing the kids to be active (church) participants,” Watkins said.

St. Peter Claver, Baltimore and St. Pius V

At A Glance

Location: 1546 North Fremont Ave., Baltimore

St. Peter Claver established: 1888

St. Pius V established: 1878

Registered families: 441 at St. Peter Claver, 112 at St. Pius V

Pastor: Josephite Father Ray P. Bomberger

Music: Catherine Thomas, Maurice Murphy and Theodore Dickey

Religious education: Dorothy Kutcherman

Religious education youth: Ernestine Watkins

Liturgy: Mary Purnell

Phone: 410-669-0512

Web: josephite.com/parish/md/spc

Masses: Saturday, 4 p.m.; Sunday, 8 and 10:30 a.m.; Monday, noon; Tuesday, Thursday and Friday 8 a.m.; Wednesday 10 a.m.

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