

# St. Francis de Sales grows with Harford County

When visitors walk up to St. Francis de Sales in Abingdon for Mass, they are struck by a characteristic of the brick building: there is only one entrance to the church.

As they open the doors, the true personality of St. Francis de Sales unfolds.

“When they get into the church, we have greeters there,” said Father Charles M. Wible, the church’s pastor. “They hand out worship aids, and they’re very welcoming. That really sets the tone.”

Welcoming others is a way of life there, he said.

The pastor or a parishioner will send a personal note to visitors who sign the church’s guest books to thank them for coming. When the church gets new parishioners to join the list of 2,400 registered families, Father Wible and ministry directors will meet them at the parish office to say, “How can we be of service?”

The evangelistic outreach of St. Francis de Sales is necessary in growing Harford County, a once-rural community that has taken on a more suburban feel in the last 15 years.

“We started out as a small, country church,” said Mary Jo Piccolo, the parish’s director of liturgy and music. “We’ve always kept that ability to welcome strangers.”

The church became a parish in 1966 after 100 years as a mission of St. Ignatius, Hickory. In a move to keep up with the rise in the number of homes and shopping centers in the area, the parish has evolved. It opened Kilduff Hall in 1972 as a multipurpose room, the new church in 1992 and the Schleupner Education Center. The center is named after former pastor Monsignor G. Michael Schleupner, who is now at nearby St. Margaret in Bel Air.

Father Wible said there is a strong focus on young people since the average age is 32, and there is a large number of growing families.

The parish features a regular Spanish Mass, attended by some 200 people each week. Kenyan families have become a strong presence as well.

“Christ invites us all,” Father Wible said. “We have a wonderful community, and we continue to look for opportunities to bring us all together.”

Ms. Piccolo said the church has to keep up with demands. She has 70 people in her music ministry, including a children’s choir, a bell choir, a contemporary ensemble and cantors.

She has no problem prompting the congregation to join in song, either.

“We are a singing community,” she said. “There’s a real priority for good music in our parish.”

Father Wible said the parish extends its collective hands to those in need as well, using a program called “Let’s Do Lunch” to make sandwiches for the homeless. St. Francis de Sales is active with the St. Vincent de Paul Society as well, with a collection bin for clothing in its parking lot.

“I’ve always been impressed the way this parish rallies around the needs of the region,” Father Wible said.