

St. Wenceslaus is ‘beacon of hope’ in Baltimore

One by one, the banners were carried to the altar of St. Wenceslaus on May 18.

Each represented Baltimore city parishes long gone, but at this 10 a.m. mass, the flocks of St. James and John, St. Katharine of Siena and St. Bernard were on the minds of all those celebrating Family and Friends Day.

St. Wenceslaus stands as a lone survivor on the east side of Baltimore, a refuge of spirit and faith for the Catholic African-American population in that part of the city. The Mass honored those parishes no longer in existence, and the people who now populate St. Wenceslaus.

When St. James and John and St. Katharine each closed in 1986, St. Wenceslaus embraced those looking for another parish. When St. Bernard’s shut down 11 years later, St. Wenceslaus was there again.

“We are celebrating St. James and John, St. Katharine and [St. Bernard],” Dorothy Stokes-Wallace, a St. Wenceslaus parishioner of 55 years, said after the mass. “What a blessing that God gave them to us to come worship with us and help our parish here. It’s a loving parish here.”

It is also a vibrant one, and the gospel-music infused Mass on the spring morning reflected a unified family that showed no sign of separation. During the sign of peace, parishioners did not simply turn to neighbors in their pews, but rather moved about to embrace nearly everyone in sight.

“When you meet your family, you hug and you kiss. That’s what we do,” Edith Pumphrey said.

When St. Katharine closed, Ms. Pumphrey’s search for a new parish was not easy.

“It’s always tough when a church closes,” St. Wenceslaus pastor Father Peter Lyons, T.O.R., said. “I think there was some fall out at the time, but they’ve been able to

assimilate.”

Ms. Pumphrey said there was “a period of adjustment because it was different,” citing the Bohemian history of St. Wenceslaus.

“We wanted them to share with us,” Ms. Stokes-Wallace said. “Just because a building shut down, there is Jesus Christ, still living and apparent. They were just wonderful. We just loved them.”

In his May 18 homily, Father Lyons told his congregation that St. Wenceslaus was a “blessing” to those without a parish, but added that they brought a renewed spirit.

St. Wenceslaus’ surrounding community is in need of repair, with buildings featuring boarded-up windows.

“It really is a beacon of hope for the people of this area,” Sister Pat Kane, O.S.F., who attends Mass at the church and is formerly of St. Katharine, said. “This is a very depressed area, but look at the people and what they bring to the neighborhood.”

The church’s convent now serves as a hospice for chronically ill men and is run by the Missionaries of Charity. They are also regulars on the local streets.

“The sisters, they go around every Sunday and bring kids to Sunday school and to church,” Ms. Pumphrey said. “So, we’re here to welcome them in, make sure they’re safe and everything is alright, because some children don’t have that opportunity.”

Parishioners routinely work to improve many of the buildings in the community that are in disrepair.

Ms. Stokes-Wallace says the “unity, fellowship, the congregation and just the warm, loving, peaceful spiritual feeling,” is what makes the 94-year-old St. Wenceslaus her beloved place of worship. The former members of the long-shuttered parishes have also come to love the church that stands guard for Catholics on Ashland Avenue.

“It’s like family here,” Ms. Pumphrey said.