

THE HISTORY OF ST. STEPHEN PARISH 1978-2003

Just as the Roman Catholic Church has evolved over the past 2 years, St. Stephen parish has had to adapt to changing times. Like the church as a whole, St. Stephen has had to adjust to the dramatic decrease in religious vocations and a corresponding need for an increase in lay participation.

St. Stephen parishioners have been asked on several occasion to sacrifice and make donation to help preserve their church and school structures.

In both cases, parishioners have responded in a generous fashion, sharing their time, talents and fortunes to enable St. Stephen to continue as a vibrant faith force in our community.

PARISHIONER BECOME MORE INVOLVED

Challenged to be active witnesses to their faith, increasing number of men and women have accepted roles in the church, which previously were reserved for priests and religious.

Parishioners have become Readers of the Word, Ministers of the Eucharist, Catechists and Sacristans. They serve as helpers to their pastor in bringing converts to the Sacrament of Baptism, since the Rite of Initiation of Adults or R.I.C.A. was introduced in 1984. In preparation for the sacrament of Marriage, married couples volunteer to serve as sponsor couples for those preparing for the sacrament. Young girls are now permitted to be altar servers along with boys.

During the pastorate of Father John Cunningham from 1983 to 1989, a Parish Council was formed to “enhance and ensure the quality of parish life and ministry.” Parishioners make up the membership of the council. A vibrant Outreach Mission developed out of parish council’s Christian Witness Committee. Outreach members comfort the homebound, the hospitalized, and the sick with visits, prayers, cards and distribution of Holy Eucharist.

In June 1989, the Sisters of Humility of Mary departed St. Stephen’s Parish after more than 100 years. The order of nuns had served St. Stephen since 1881. Their roles of parish ministry and teachers at St. Stephen School are now filled by the laity.

Sister Mary Slick, Margaret Burgess, and Kathryn Conry were the last remaining nuns at St. Stephen, and were honored with a farewell Mass and reception in June 1989. The large brick convent on the school grounds, which had been home to the sisters for many years, was razed in 1998.

A PERIOD OF RENOVATION

Father Robert Hannon, the church’s associate pastor, was named pastor of St. Stephen in 1989 upon the death of Father John Cunningham. Father Sylvester Kaminski was named to the Father Hannon’s Associate.

Music is another area where lay involvement continued to grow in the past 25 years. Since 1991, Joseph and Patricia Maciejewski have served as organist for the church. Mr. Maciejewski accompanies the congregation at all Masses of Obligation and directs the church’s adult choir. He has instructed several cantors and soloists during his tenure, and in 2003 also introduced a Resurrection Choir, which sings at funeral Masses. Mrs. Maciejewski provides music for weddings and funerals.

Father Hannon began a fund-raising drive in 1991 to help meet the most pressing needs of the church. Monies raised were used for the repair of church parking lots and sidewalks, the renovation of church restrooms, repair of the air conditioning unit, and the purchase of a computer and software for the church.

However, major structural problems remained, most notable the deteriorating roof. In August 1988 church bulletin noted, "The interior of the church is in need of repair. Cracking plaster and peeling paint can be seen in several sections of the walls."

By the time Father John Gubser was named pastor in July 1992, church renovation had become a priority and necessity. Working with Parish Council's Finance Committee and the architectural firm of Hunter, Howard and Saxon, Father Gubser announced a three-phase Capital Improvement Drive in August 1993. The congregation responded generously.

By 1998, a new roof, gutters and spouting had been installed, putting an end to leaks that had caused the deterioration of the interior plaster. That same year, the vacant convent was torn down and the area cleaned for additional parking lot and playground space.

In the spring of 1999, renovation of the church's interior began. The work represented the most extensive renovation to date. All interior plaster was repaired, the church was painted and decorative wall coverings were installed along with new carpet and flooring.

In 2000, the Christopher Grusha Memorial Bell Choir was formed in honor of a St Stephen School student who passed away in 1999. Christopher's mother, Nancy Grusha directs the choir.

By February 2000, the repairs were completed and new furnishings were purchased and placed in the sanctuary. New Stations of the

Cross and statues of the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph were mounted in place in 2001.

A bell striker- a power unity with a programmable control panel- was installed. This improvement enabled the church bells to ring for Saturday and Sunday Masses, the daily Angelus, and for funerals. In addition, a new sound system was installed with funds donated by former parishioner Larry Sullivan, in memory of his late parents, Frank and Mayme Sullivan.

In conjunction with the church's 150th anniversary, the parish began a fund-raising drive to renovate the church organ. In 1914, parishioners made sacrifices to buy and install the 15-rank pipe organ, built by Philip Wirsching, one of the country's premier organ builders. The organ has been recognized as a historical treasure, as few Wirsching organs still exist in Ohio.

In the early 1970's some renovation work was performed on the organ. Time and use, however, took their toll on the instrument, and by 2003, it was in need of major restoration. An organ Renovation Committee was formed and surveyed several companies for recommendations on the repair work, before a \$58,000 fund drive was begun in July 2003 to pay for the renovation.

The restoration would include the cleaning and tuning of all 886 pipes and repair of all wind chests, among other things, to bring the organ up to standards of the American Organ Guild. Work was to begin in early 2004.

Today, St. Stephen Church is a beautiful house of worship, lovingly preserved by a generous and devoted family of believers. The church, school, rectory and their grounds make up an entire city block- a block of beauty. The St. Stephen campus is a point of

pride for the entire community, and a valued asset in its downtown neighborhood.

An imposing figure of the Sacred Heart stands at the front of St. Stephen property with a sign to identify the church and school to all passersby. Its arms uplifted in praise the statue embraces all in love.

SHEPERDING THE ST. STEPHEN FLOCK

Father John Gubser was named pastor of St. Stephen Parish on July 24, 1992, and continued in that leadership role as the church marked its 150th anniversary year. During his 11 years at St. Stephen, Father Gubser has offered parishioners many opportunities for spiritual growth. These have included the sharing of the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, special Lenten and Advent penance services, Lenten missions preached by visiting priests, and, for the children, the introduction of the Liturgy of the Word for Children in November 1997.

Ecumenically, the church maintains a visible presence in the community. Father Gubser has served as president of the Niles Clergy Association and as a member of the Board of Directors of Niles Community Services. St. Stephen participates in the Clergy Pulpit exchange, the Niles Interfaith Dinner, and the Interfaith Thanksgiving Prayer Service. St. Stephen also hosts community suppers for the needy.

A special Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated on Sunday, December 29, 2002, to mark the 40th anniversary of Father Gubser's ordination. Parishioners honored him at a brunch that followed in the school hall.

2003- A YEAR OF CELEBRATION

St. Stephen's 150th Anniversary year has been marked by numerous events that have united parishioners in celebration.

On Sunday, May 18, a community band concert and ice cream social were held in the school hall. The event included performance by the church's Christopher Grusha Memorial Bell and the Canfield Community Band. It served as the kickoff for a year of events marking the 150th anniversary.

The annual parish picnic took place on Sunday, July 13, a church history book was printed, and a new parish pictorial directory was photographed and compiled. In addition, anniversary committee members sold commemorative plates and banners.

The events culminated with an anniversary Mass and Dinner on Sunday, September 14. Bishop Thomas Tobin concelebrated the 3:00 p.m. Mass, which was followed by dinner at Ciminero's Banquet Center in downtown Niles. Former priests and nuns who had served at St. Stephen were invited to attend the Mass and banquet. Mayor Ralph Infante presented the parish with a proclamation from the city of Niles honoring the church for its 150 years of faith and ministry in the community.

A Mass and brunch to celebrate the feast of St. Stephen (December 26) was scheduled for Sunday, December 28, and would culminate the year's anniversary celebrations.