

PARISH SPOTLIGHT

ST. JOSEPH, SYKESVILLE

Marianist charism drives Sykesville parish

Sue Thompson

sthompson@catholicreview.org

Once a quaint country mission serving the 100 or so Catholic families in Sykesville, St. Joseph Catholic Community has evolved into a vibrant parish of more than 3,000 families.

From the early 1850s, Jesuits from Woodstock College and Sulpicians from St. Charles Preparatory College would celebrate Mass and administer the sacraments, often in the home of Dr. and Mrs. Orrelana Owens, who in 1865 donated the ground on which the original church was built.

The cornerstone of the first Sykesville church, at the corner of Main and Sandosky streets, was laid in August 1867. Having been a spiritual home to Catholics in Howard and Carroll counties for more than 130 years, the original Sykesville church is now used for special occasions and frequently visited for private prayer and devotions.

By the early 1960s, it became evident that the expanding population in the Sykesville area would need a larger worship space. In 1965, a new St. Joseph Catholic Church was dedicated, followed by the construction of classroom space, offices and a gymnasium.

The newest addition to the parish community was dedicated in 1998. The new worship space, including the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, is connected to the old church by a gathering area.

Today, under the leadership of Marianist priests, St. Joseph serves more than 10,000 congregants through liturgy, education, service and outreach and faith development.

The Marianist charism is the foundation on which the parish's ministries have been built.

"Our charism focuses on a strong sense of community, recognizing peoples' gifts and helping to develop them," said Father Patrick Tonry, S.M., pastor of St. Joseph. "We are a community of equals." This charism is reflected in the staff of 16 who work as a collaborative team. "The Marianist charism is unique in that it is grounded, not hierarchical," said Andrea Springer, a pastoral associate who grew up in the parish. "Instead, there is an openness to involvement and ownership of lay people." Catholic education is among the top priorities at St. Joseph. There are more than 1,300 children in the religious education program and nearly 300 involved in youth ministry. While the parish does not operate a school, it does provide financial support to families who wish to send their children to one of the four neighboring Catholic schools.

Education for adults is a priority as well. Small Christian communities provide opportunities for reflection and discussion of weekly Scripture readings. Yet, according to Father Tonry, there is a great need to provide convenient opportunities for young adults, especially married people, who in the midst of careers and families may have difficulty finding time for learning and discussion.

Perhaps the challenging size of the parish is also a great gift.

"The place is truly alive," said Father Tonry. "There are so many families that truly participate in the Mass and the many ministries of the parish."