

Bald Knob mission looking forward to new parish hall

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |




BALD KNOB — Parishioners think of St. Richard Church in Bald Knob as one big family, which comes together once a week to celebrate. They know one another well because they are long-time members of the parish.

On Saturday, Feb. 6, there were almost 40 people at Mass. Before Mass, they prayed the rosary. After the rosary, they discussed whether to continue praying the rosary during Lent or the Stations of the Cross and decided on the Stations before each Mass.

The previous Saturday Mass was canceled because of the snowstorm, which hit the area, and pastor Father John Agbakwuo was not able to come in from Searcy. They decided to create an e-mail list for any notices in the future.

St. Richard was built of native rock and dedicated in 1939, after the original church, Our Lady of Victory, burned down. Both were built with the help of the Catholic Extension Society.

 [St. Richard Church](#)
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The church is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, said Don Freppon, who has been a member of the parish for 70 years. The church has a 4-foot stained glass window in the peak gable in the front.

“They say Bishop (John B.) Morris brought it up from Little Rock about this time of the year, on the car’s running board,” Freppon said. “They set the window on the running board, rolled the window down and held on to it through the window all the way. I think (Highway) 36 was only a gravel road. It was before any hard surface road from Little Rock to here.”

Freppon describes St. Richard as “a small parish with a small building. I imagine 50 to 60 people fill the seating in the church.”

The church has never had any social activities because it never had a parish hall.

“If the bishop comes up, we go across the street to the Latter Day Saints church, they have loaned us their hall to meet with the bishop,” he said. “When Father John came, we had his reception in the small sacristy. Everyone sat in the pews or stood. There is no place to hold a

social function.”

They are in the process of having a parish hall built behind the church now, where they hope to be able to hold other church activities. The building will include restrooms, a large area for seating and a kitchen.

“We are very excited about that,” Freppon said. “We will have an opportunity for social activities. We could not have anything, showers, weddings or receptions. In the future at least activities in Bald Knob can be associated with the church rather than having to take the activities elsewhere.”

Freppon said they are very appreciative of St. James Church in Searcy, where Father Agbakwuo is pastor, for allowing them to hold activities there. All the children from St. Richard attend religious education classes at St. James.

The parish does not have very many young families.

“That is primarily because religious education for the kids is done at Searcy at St. James,” he said. “We understand that is the way it has to be. Many of the younger families gravitate that way. They have to take their kids that way. We are a little bit older parish than the average. “We have a custom here, after a funeral, family members and friends gather and have lunch,” he said. “We can’t do that. We have to rely on St. James. They have been very good, but still, you just hate to be dependent on someone else for anything. Religion has to be the primary focus but the social aspect is important.”

Freppon said the parish includes people from all occupations, including farmers, nurses and teachers.

The makeup of the parish has changed little over the years, he said. At one time, the parish was closed, he said. Then they started having Mass once a month and then weekly. Mass is now usually at 4 p.m. on Saturdays.

“That has helped,” he said. “Once they started having Mass on a regular basis, it helped with attendance.”

He grew up with many of the members of St. Richard, Freppon said. There have been some new people who have joined the parish.

“But in a lot of ways, these are extended families that have married and their spouses have joined the church,” he said.

He estimated 80 percent of the Catholics there are from the original families and their extended families.

“The unique thing about this parish is that this is a parish that is self-sufficient except for the priest,” he said. “We take care of all maintenance, lawn, all of the reparation of the church. Everyone pitches in and does whatever is needed.

“We certainly depend on Father John and preceding priests to have Mass,” he said. “When he walks in, everything is ready for him. During the week we don’t expect him to have to come in and say ‘you need to do this or that.’”

Another lifelong parishioner is Ann Smith, who has attended St. Richard since she was born 66 years ago.

“It is a small church, and we are all like family, everybody helps each other,” she said.

Getting together on Saturday for Mass is a family celebration.

She too is looking forward to having a hall for other activities and sees the potential for many things.

“All the time I was growing up we had to have our catechism and everything in the church,” she said. “We did not have any other place to go. We are excited.”

She added that perhaps in the future, they could hold religious education classes in the hall as well for parish children, but this time in the new building, instead of in the sacristy as they did at one time.

St. Richard Church

Location: 101 W. Cleveland St., Bald Knob

Established: 1919

Overseen by: St. James, Searcy

Mass: 4 p.m. Saturdays

Sacramental life: In 2009 there was one First Communion celebrated. No baptisms, confirmations, weddings or funerals occurred last year.

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