

Lay Missionary Center 'home' for Latino Catholics

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |



The Vincentian Lay Missionary Center in North Little Rock on its surface is just an old school.

To the missionaries, it is “home,” said Guillermo Bruzatori, executive director of the Vincentian Lay Missioners, director of Hispanic Ministry and assistant director of religious education for St. Anne Church in North Little Rock.

“The difference is the Anglos living here, they have a home. They don’t have an empty feeling. It’s very difficult for us,” Bruzatori said for immigrants who make up most of the missionaries. “Our families are in our countries. But this is our family (now). We don’t feel alone anymore.”

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This year marks the 10th year of the lay Vincentian movement at St. Anne Church in North Little Rock. There are about 700 missionaries at the parish, but the movement is also present in several faith communities throughout Arkansas including in Batesville, Searcy and Hot Springs.

Following the charism of St. Vincent de Paul, the missionaries are a nonprofit global Catholic community that focuses on care for the poor. However, Bruzatori said that often means ministering within their own faith community.

“We are not really evangelized,” Bruzatori said, adding that despite 18 years of Catholic school

and college in his native Argentina, "I learned what I know now with the Vincentian Lay Missioners."

The center, formerly the Redwood Early Childhood Center at 401 North Redwood Street in North Little Rock, was purchased from the North Little Rock School District in September 2015 for \$175,000. On July 2, Bishop Anthony B. Taylor celebrated Mass and blessed the center, which is six miles from St. Anne Church.

Missioners raised money for six years to buy a building to hold retreats and use for faith formation and religious education programs for St. Anne Church. Trying to rent other parish or diocesan spaces was not always an option because other groups had already booked the spaces, Bruzatori said.

Tucked in one of the storage rooms sits an old red popcorn tin, with a sign still taped on asking for donations for the center.

"I was very skeptical," about raising enough money for a building, but Bruzatori said he "found \$100 bills, \$50 bills," in the tin despite the majority of missioners being low-income. "This was bought and is maintained by lay people. We're not receiving any money from anybody so it's really a miracle ... we don't owe money to anyone, we don't have debt."

There are three buildings on the seven acres of land — one used for religious education that has about 20 classrooms, rooms big enough to be split in two; the second building is used as a space for sleeping during retreats; and the third building is the chapel and storage.

Belinda Ortner, St. Anne director for religious education, said for years, the roughly 200 religious education students were split between five rooms at St. Anne and rooms at nearby St. Joseph Center.

"This was an answer to our prayers in terms of space needs," Ortner said.

Missioners are required to attend a Vincentian retreat, go to Mass, meet with a missioner faith community and pay the \$5 monthly fee.

Split over two weekends for men and women, the last Spanish-speaking retreats had a total of about 100 new missioner attendees and more than 150 missioners coordinating the retreat.

The next Anglo missioner retreat March 3-5 has just one man and seven women signed up.

Father Toshio Sato, CM, pastor at St. Anne and a Vincentian priest, said the center is a place for all to feel welcome but holds a special significance for Latino Catholics.

"This is their home. Not only a spiritual home, but they can lower their shoulders ... They can be relaxed," he said.

Those wishing to learn more about the retreat, rent the center or donate can call Bruzatori at (501) 351-0856. Donations for Vincentian Lay Missioners can be mailed to St. Anne Church.