

# Highlights

from the history of St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Student Center/Drake Newman Community

## **Parish in a box**

Our parish of today has roots in the 1940s when a “Newman Club” was established to serve the growing number of Catholic students at Drake University. “We lived out of a box,” a student officer recalled at the time, “which contained a coffee pot and the minutes of previous meetings.” In the early 60s, realizing the need for a physical location, the Club rented space at the Oddfellows Hall near the Varsity Theatre opposite Drake’s Old Main. From this makeshift “storefront center” members organized classes, discussion groups, days of recollection, lectures and more. It was served part-time by priests who taught at Dowling High School. Eventually, headquarters was an old house on 30<sup>th</sup> Street leased from Drake.

In 1968, Fr. Nick Tormey was appointed the first full-time pastor by Bishop Maurice Dingman with the mandate to make this “unofficial” parish a real Catholic presence on campus and “live out Vatican II.” In 1969, the non-territorial parish became “official” with the name Drake Newman Community, supported by its resident parishioners. Several Newman staff – priests and sisters – have taught at Drake.

A parish history compiled in 1985 relates: “What made the Newman Community unique was the interaction of the student and the non-student communities. People of different interests came together seeking to experience what the Gospel could mean in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America ... within the modern secular university, the site of creative thinking, shaping the future.” Another unique feature – over many years – was an “adopt-a-student” program that paired Drake students far from home with parish families. Drake alumna Kristi Ryan ‘04 was paired each year with the Pokorny/Gelhaus family. “They were great listeners, [which] I don’t think I fully appreciated at the time. We had many nights around the kitchen table talking and being engaged in each other’s lives. It filled my soul.”

The 1985 document continues, “[We] came into being during a time of significant social conflict: the Vietnam era with its demonstrations [not to mention the civil rights and women’s movements]. The founders hoped to bring the witness of religious faith to bear on these matters.” Ecumenism was in the air. Clergy from area Protestant, Catholic and Jewish communities would show up together at student protests to help ensure they remained non-violent, recalls Kevin Pokorny, then a student.

## **Mass on the Grass**

The 1970s were also a time of re-thinking and renewing faith and spirituality. Vatican II had concluded in 1965, opening the windows to the modern world, and its teachings were beginning to be put into practice across America. Bishop Dingman encouraged Drake Newman to be innovative. Liturgies always included outstanding music, a feature that persists to this day. And it was one of the first parishes to have guitar Masses, shake hands during the kiss of peace, take communion in the hand, and have female lectors, practices now widely accepted and no longer “way out.”

Longtime parishioners cherish those memories, with Sunday Mass held at many places on the Drake campus, including Old Main and Bulldog Theatre. Nellie Robinson, who with her late husband David, joined the parish in 1968, remembers, “When no building was available, we had ‘Mass on the Grass.’ We fondly called ourselves a ‘Pilgrim Church’ to follow Christ’s example of poverty.” Parishioners also heeded the Gospel mandate to care for the stranger, sponsoring and providing critical services for four different groups of refugees, from Southeast Asia and from Poland, over a 10-year period.

### **“To live is to change. To be perfect is to have changed often.” – St. John Henry Newman**

Vatican II changes prompted some priests and religious to reexamine their vocations and pursue lives of service in other professions. Pastor John Ludwig (1991-2001) recalls that eventually the pilgrim model was unsustainable, with pastor and staff scrambling every week to organize Mass at different locations. Further, Catholic Campus Ministry at Iowa’s public universities “had facilities that made ours look shabby.” All this led Fr. Ludwig to push hard for an “identifiable building,” a move not met with universal approval at the time but which has since proven its wisdom. In 1993, fund-raising began for construction of today’s Catholic Student Center at 28<sup>th</sup> St and Brattleboro on property leased long-term from Drake. Strikingly, a substantial portion of the financial resources was secured by Maddie Glazer, a Jewish woman who was a great fund- and friend-raiser for the University. The new structure was completed in 1997 and christened “St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Student Center,” with the important coda “Drake Newman Community.”

The building’s simple unadorned design reflects the primary insight of Vatican II: The people – not a building – are the church. Or, as Fr. Ludwig wittily observes, “‘assembly’ is required.” Inside, the sanctuary can flow into the gathering space and vice-versa. “Our buildings build us,” says Fr. Tim Fitzgerald – a priest of the diocese deeply versed in how Vatican II should impact sacred space and a consultant on the interior design. “Holiness is not consolidated in a sanctuary behind a communion rail. It’s broken loose! All members are called to holiness.” Flexibility reigns. The focus is not on stained glass windows or statues but on the ambo and the altar. “It’s all about sharing the Word and breaking the Bread,” Fr. Fitzgerald says.

### **Immersion and Outreach**

Many meaningful programs have been hatched within the walls of our church building. To mention only a few: From 2005 to 2014, delegations of Drake students made annual trips to the community of El Conacaste in El Salvador. This long-term relationship, championed by pastor Jim Laurenzo (2002-2009), saw Drake students and accompanying resident parishioners working, praying – and playing – alongside the people. They often took badly needed school supplies and basic medical necessities. But despite great need for clean water and electricity, “what [the people] really wanted was a place to worship,” recalls Margaret Cavanagh, who helped organize the trips. St. Catherine’s launched a campaign for a new church to replace the one destroyed by an earthquake. The church was completed in 2009 at a cost of some \$40,000, and a group from St. Catherine’s attended the dedication and magnificent celebration afterwards. Those kinds of immersion experiences leave lasting marks. After a trip in 2011 one student said, “I still struggle to describe what I saw. Words don’t do it justice.” And another, “I really learned from them!”

Most recently, St. Catherine’s has been blessed by the ministry of two pastors from Africa – Fr. Mark Owusu (2012-2019) from Ghana and Fr. Protas “Opondo” Okwalo, SJ (2019-present) from Kenya. During Fr. Mark’s time, funds were raised to drill three wells that allowed a hospital and two schools in Ghana direct access to clean water; build a dormitory at a boys’ high school so the students no longer had to put up and take down beds in their classrooms every day; and help erect – and continue to support – an addiction treatment center in Ghana established by Fr. Mark. The parish is now providing scholarships for eight students in Kenya, ranging in age from kindergarten to high school, to attend school. The cost, per student, is \$500 a year, which includes books and uniforms. The parish is committed to supporting all eight students through high school. Several of the children have written to us about how the ability to get a good education has been life-changing for them.

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*Sources: parish histories written c.1967, 1985, 1993 and 2005, plus conversations with former parishioner Kevin Pokorny; current parishioners Margaret Cavanagh, Nellie Robinson and Kristi Ryan; former pastor Fr. John Ludwig; and consultant Fr. Tim Fitzgerald.*