

Pastor Jim

(continued from page 1)

He said he will dearly miss this congregation, which he thinks of as his "extended family."

"I've been through births, baptisms, weddings, anniversaries, and funerals. You celebrate with the families and enjoy with them, and you mourn with them. I feel honored to have held this position. I don't think there's any other profession where the individual is welcomed into other's homes so readily. It's a wonderful privilege."

Under Wert's beacon, the parish has benefited from some rather unique developments in the last 14 years. "Our church membership has grown very effectively under the leadership of Pastor Jim," notes Paczewski, a 30-year member of the parish.

According to Wert, the congregation has sprouted from 800 parishioners in 1982 to over 1,300 currently. Along the way, the parish added another full-time pastor, Harriet Santos, about 12 years ago. "We work as co-pastors. It's rare for a parish in our conference to have more than one pastor," said Wert. With the increase of members and the increasing pace of today's busy lifestyles, the need for additional services became apparent.

"Pastor Harriet would drive by St. Therese's Church Saturday evenings on her way here and would see their parking lot full. She said, 'Why don't we try that?' At first, I was reluctant," he admitted with a smile. "But our 5:30 p.m. Saturday service has been well attended ever since we've initiated it, about four years ago."

He continued, "It's unusual in Methodist churches to have a Saturday evening service. But since we've started, Tunkhannock United Methodist Church has come down to observe how ours works, and they've started a Saturday service as well."

"Now we'd never give it up. We generally have 75 to 115 people attend. It's drawn people from a wide geographical area. If they can't make their own Sunday service, they'll come here."

They've also added a 9:00 a.m. service on Sunday mornings in addition to the traditional 11:00 a.m. service. Paczewski gives credit to the ministers who now have to do three weekend services in addition to their other responsibilities. "Through their flexibility and hard work, the congregation has grown as well," he said.

With the flourishing congregation, Wert has also been instrumental in cultivating more lay leadership in the church. "We have four lay leaders, which are official, elected positions," he said proudly. "Most Methodist churches have one or two at the most. We also have a core of 10 lay speakers, who could give leadership to the worship or a homily if the two pastors are away. This is the largest number of lay speakers in our conference."

"Pastor Jim seemed to have a knack for bringing out people's talents and getting them involved in the church. He's a great facilitator of people's gifts," said Ken Getz, lay leader. "I always wanted to get involved in lay speaking and he encouraged me. I've been a lay speaker for about seven years and a lay leader for two years."

Wert is also a force behind a growing ecumenical movement in the community, according to Getz. In conjunction with neighboring St. Therese's parish, he helped develop the "Soup and Scriptures" program, which runs every Monday during the Lenten season. "The congregations are invited to share a simple meal of homemade soup, biscuits, butter, and water and then break up into groups to discuss scripture and take part in fate sharing. This is the fourth year we've run it and it's exceptional. We've had 125 people at one time," said Getz.

Getz also credits Wert with being involved in expanding the summer bible school program, combining resources with various local churches, creating a more ecumenical effect.

In yet another example of his community efforts, Pastor Jim has implemented a unique "dial-a-prayer" service, used by the congregation and the general community for those who would like to call in and share the worship prayer. According to Paczewski, "The shut-ins get comfort from this service and like to start their day with a prayer, which Pastor Jim records on a daily basis. It's been a mission of his to reach those who can't always get to us."

In addition to working outside with the community, Wert has also been busy with work inside the church building itself. The altar in the sanctuary has been totally remodeled, a historical room has been added, the social room renovated, and most recently, the entrance doors are tak-

ing on a new look, having been replaced with stained glass - a memorial gift symbolic of Pastor Jim's leadership, said Paczewski.

Wert's life of dedication and ministry to the church happened almost by accident. A native of the Scranton area, he graduated from the University of Scranton with a B.S. in pre-med, expecting to go on to medical school to become a doctor.

Due to a last minute change of plans, he decided to attend Syracuse University where he obtained a masters' degree in microbiology. Thriving on his love of science, he accepted a lucrative position as a research scientist for Merck laboratories in New Jersey. It was while continuing his education part-time, working toward a doctorate, when he realized his calling to the ministry.

"My wife Gene and I were volunteering with a youth ministry program in a small church in Westfield, N.J. and I had such a good time with the kids," he said. Wert recalled the experience where he first felt his calling: "I was working with a boy who was in trouble. His life totally changed because of the caring and counseling he received. He had gone from a real troublemaker to a fine young caring, responsible man. His parents were so pleased with his remarkable change of attitude. I remember thinking, if this can happen with one kid, then it can happen with others."

"Some people thought I was crazy to give up my job and study theology. But I've never regretted my life since."

You celebrate with the families and enjoy with them, and you mourn with them.

Pastor James A. Wert
Shavertown United Methodist

From his first appointment at a small parish in Wayne County, he's been assigned as pastor in churches in Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, and Endicott, N.Y. During his career, he's also served as Executive Secretary of the Board of Christian Education and as Scranton District Superintendent, where he assisted the bishop to oversee 92 churches in the Scranton area.

"In July of 1982, I was appointed to the Shavertown United Methodist Church. The bishop needed me here. The parish was in grief, mourning the loss of Pastor Robert Yost, who had served here for 29 years. Although there was an interim pastor for two years before I came, the people were still grieving. They were really down, and the bishop asked me to go and help out."

"When I came, they were ready to accept me and work together. They've been a wonderful congregation. They're willing to try new things and take risks. That's why we've been able to become a unique parish."

Wert notes another important feature of the parish: "We're a cosmopolitan congregation. What I mean is that people have come here from all across the country and state. It makes it very interesting because of all the different backgrounds and cultures."

The Shavertown parish will now also have a new team of pastors this July when husband and wife Douglas and Janet Clark arrive from an Apalakian, N.Y. church, and current associate pastor Harriet Santos moves on to the Centenary United Methodist Church, Ashley.

What does Wert plan to do upon retirement? "My wife Gene, who is retired as a home hospice care worker, and I hope to stay in the Wyoming Valley area. We don't want to interfere with or distract from our successors, but would like to do some part-time ministry work in the general area."

He also plans to spend some time simply enjoying life. "I'd love to devote more time to my hobby of trains and trolleys, do some writing for publications, and visit my family." His family includes daughter Kathleen in Tampa, Fla., sons David in Montrose, and Stephen in Pottstown, and eight grandchildren.

The Shavertown congregation plans to recognize Pastor Jim's retirement at a special gathering on Sunday, May 19 at 6 p.m. in the church sanctuary. Plans also are underway to honor Pastor Harriet for her service with a celebration taking place in the church at a special 9:30 a.m. worship service on June 30.

The congregation, friends, and community are invited to attend each of these celebrations.

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