

Father Rob Henley Retiring from St. Joseph's



FATHER ROBERT P. HENLEY, rector of St. Joseph the Carpenter Episcopal Church, is retiring after a long career in the priesthood.

He has served the Sevierville parish for 10 years. His service began in an unorthodox manner that his parishioners have come to regard as typical of him: he was interviewed for the job in his canoe.

In 2001, two members of St. Joseph's Vestry went to Michigan to observe Father Rob in Grayling, Mich., to interview him. When one vestry member, Steve Petty, admired Michigan's lakes and rivers, Henley suggested the interview should take place on a river in his canoe. It did, and he got the job.

During his nearly 10 years in Sevierville, St. Joseph's has done "a lot of things to be proud of," Father Rob said. The church campus has improved in many ways, including parking lot paving, renovation of the education rooms, the addition of a columbarium and the installation of an antique tracker organ, the fourth oldest in Tennessee.



St. Joseph also hosted the annual convention for the Diocese of East Tennessee a few years ago, a major feat for a small parish, he said. Through its annual Pig Roasts, the church has supported local non-profits such as Mountain Hope Good Shepherd Clinic and Smoky Mountain Area Rescue Ministries. And, he said, "We gave birth to St Paul in Seymour,

probably one of the fastest growing parishes in the diocese.”

Another highlight of Father Henley’s service was a visit by Bishop Mano Rumlshah of Peshawar, Pakistan whom Henley met while doing continuing education at General Seminary in New York.

The church also hosted two Native American powwows, and members were involved in the early stages of the Martin Luther King Day event in Sevierville and of the 911 vigil.

Petty said Father Rob’s part in the church goes much deeper. “One of the things that characterize Rob so much is social and political issues,” he said. “He has a heart for how the Gospel translates into the real world.”

Petty said he’s seen how Father Rob has helped many people, and has done it so quietly that many others are unaware of his actions. Petty cited Father Henley’s “commitment to human need and to the Gospel in the trenches.”

Rob Henley grew up in Sewanee, Tenn., and became a scholarship student at St. Andrew’s School, which was run by monks of the Order of the Holy Cross.

Father Henley’s wife Ann, known as Russ, has also played an active part in parish life. She and Rob became sweethearts in 1964 at Mars Hill College, N.C. He was a physical education major. He was drafted into the U.S. Army, and trained to fly helicopters as a warrant officer candidate at Fort Rucker in Alabama. He was discharged for medical reasons.

After his army service, Rob and Russ Henley were married and held various jobs. He became more and more curious about his Christian faith. “I was investigating the call,” he said. “I didn’t fit the mold” for seminary, but after getting encouragement from his bishop he enrolled in the University of the South at Sewanee, not with the idea of becoming a priest but as a “spiritual quest.” By the time he graduated in 1978 with a Master of Divinity degree, “I answered the call to ordination,” he said.

That answer took the Henleys to St. Paul Episcopal Church in Gladwin, Mich. By the time they left, he had three parishes in his charge. In 1982, the Henleys – now with two children, their daughters Mariah and Merrie Hope – moved to Dubois, Wyo. and served two parishes 70 miles apart. One was in cowboy country, the other at the edge of the Wind River reservation of Shoshone and Arapaho tribes – “wonderful, wonderful people,” Henley said.

“Following my ministry in Wyoming, we moved to Charlotte, NC where I was a chaplain intern at Carolinas Regional Hospital,” he said. The two-year CPE (clinical pastoral education) course was a blend of behavioral sciences and theology. He was chaplain to the psych unit and the physical therapy unit. Once certified as an Employee Assistance Professional, he worked as a short-term counselor for Presbyterian Hospital and for businesses with which the hospital contracted.

“I was also scratching my racecar itch, which I’d had since child-



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hood,” he said. He drove Sports Car Club of America formula cars and mini-stocks at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

“After 12 years in Charlotte, I returned to parish ministry” at St. Francis in Grayling and St. Bartholomew in Mio, Mich., he said. There, he was able to indulge in his love of sports: canoeing, ice skating, fishing, skiing, deer hunting, snowmobile racing, etc.

The Henleys, however, were “lonely for green hills and warm sunshine on spring days,” he said. They began looking southward. The St. Joseph’s job interview was set for Sept. 11, 2001 – so they ended up grounded at the airport and instead made the long drive to Sevierville. They immediately felt at home. “Finding St. Joseph’s was a reward for going into the ministry,” he said.

What the couple loves most is “the wonderful people,” Father Henley said, “a sense of really being family.” He said he wants people to know “how much I have enjoyed being a part of this place. It’s been a fine way to end a career... This parish welcomes anyone who wants to be here.” He said the sense of “community” is “rare and wonderful.”

He said it’s been a pleasure working with the diocese of East Tennessee, and that Bishop Charles vonRosenberg is “the best bishop I’ve ever had.”

People are the reason the couple will remain in the area. The Henleys plan to travel and spend more time with their two grandchildren. Recent successful knee surgery will enable Father Rob to be more active than before; he hopes to continue competing in the Senior Olympics as a cyclist and, for the first time, to walk the trails of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. He plans to do some writing, too.

“We just want to be open to new opportunities, new adventures,” Russ Henley said. ☒