

# A Revival

## at Sacred Heart Mission Church and Hopkins Park

STORY BY CARLOS BRICEÑO

In late September, as part of its 80th anniversary celebration, Sacred Heart Mission Church in Hopkins Park celebrated an event church leaders there billed as a “revival,” a word that connotes an event full of spiritual awakening and joy. That word, revival, also means a renewed interest or a process in which something begins to grow.

Both meanings apply not only to Sacred Heart Mission Church, but also the area in which the church is located — Hopkins Park in Pembroke Township — which is a poor area, one of the poorest in the state. In 2017, the area had a population of 487 people, mostly African Americans with a growing Hispanic presence, and the median household income there was \$16,625. Roads are not paved. Some homes don't have plumbing or sewage. Access to Wi-Fi is practically non-existent.

But Catholic leaders there hope a revival is just beginning. Father Peter Jankowski, the church's administrator, has a vision for revival at the church and the area, which includes focusing on the short-term — inviting mission teams into the area, asking for monetary and food donations — and focusing on the long term by helping residents get opportunities to find jobs.

A recent example illustrated all that in action as the first outdoor Mass in over 15 years was celebrated in late October at St. Patrick's Grotto, in Momence. Father Ray Lescher, a senior priest who lives

on a farm near Sacred Heart Mission Church and is in residence at the parish, and Sister Mary Beth Clements, SSCM, in charge of adult formation and the director of religious education at the church, participated in the Mass, along with around

175 people. The day also included a pet blessing and luncheon, and \$500 was raised for mission work at the Hopkins Park area.

Also present — as part of a job fair — were Van Drunen Farms, a local company that supplies premium fruits, vegetables, and herb ingredients to the food industry, and Momence Packing, another local company that manufactures sausages, cured meats, smoked meats, canned meats, and other meat specialties.

“It's my old attitude that, if you start to plant seeds in the garden, they may not grow today, but in the future, you may have a garden,” Father Jankowski said. “What we don't want to happen is have the people who are living in Hopkins right now leave Hopkins



because they don't have the resources, or nobody's helping them. We want them to stay. We want them to say, '[Someone] cares.' Otherwise, what are we doing as a church? Why do we even read the 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel: 'When I'm hungry, you give me food. When I'm thirsty, you gave me drink.' And... 'When you do it to the least of my brothers, you do it for me.' If we're going to say all that, then we have to live it."

Helping Father Jankowski out is fellow priest, Father Lescher, who used to assist at the parish during the late 1960s. Back then, the population was around 20,000 people, Father Lescher said. There were jobs galore, he added, with two steel mills and several factories in the surrounding area.

Now, he said, there are usually 30 people who attend Masses during Sunday.

"Sacred Heart Mission Church for 80 years has been a diamond in the rough as far as this diocese is concerned," he said. "Out of sight, out of mind. I don't think 99 percent of the people in this diocese know it even exists. It's a hidden desert."

Another senior priest, Father Tony Taschetta, the church's pastor from 1976-1982, is also assisting when he can at the parish. He called his time there as a young priest "probably the most transforming experience I had in my life.

He added: "The people transformed my life by their utter, absolute awareness of the presence of God in every moment and every day because they need that presence of God. They're aware of that presence of God."

It's Father Jankowski's dream that, by helping people in Hopkins Park get jobs and some needed resources, those who are struggling will be helped. He said he sees residents who have great faith and great love, but no hope among them.

"They struggle because the resources that they should have been given to them have not," he said. "We need to be established in there to say we really do care. That's the important part — to show people that you want to be invested, and you're willing to do your part to make this work. That's what the word 'covenant' means. God does God's part in the covenant. We need to do our part."

He's also hoping others across the diocese, including parishes, mission groups and youth and young adult groups, can offer assistance by seeing his church and the Hopkins Park area as mission territory. He's also hoping that a new diocesan initiative, Laudato Si' Ministries, will help because the ministry will be creating a Catholic community in Pembroke Township that will seek to transform lives through service-retreat experiences.

"The diocese has not given up on Hopkins," Father Jankowski said. "We can't give up on Hopkins." †

To help out Sacred Heart Mission Church and residents of Hopkins Park, contact Father Jankowski at [pjankowski@yahoo.com](mailto:pjankowski@yahoo.com).