

Church's spirits still soaring

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Nanakuli's small St. Rita church hopes to keep its community heart as it seeks to renovate and expand its aged facilities

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Volunteer Vangie Isnec sorted clothes to be given to the homeless during St. Rita Catholic Church's monthly potluck for the homeless on Dec. 18 in Nanakuli. The small church, with a congregation of about 400, is ranked 12th out of 65 parishes in the Diocese of Honolulu in individual charities, and the soaring spirit of its community is due in large part to each parishioner's generosity and sense of giving.



Mass is about to start in a few minutes, and the Rev. 'Alapaki Kim is outside under the ancient banyan tree, looking for one of his chickens.

"Spot!" he calls across the yard. Several chickens come running, but not the one he's looking for.

As parishioners gather on the church lanai, a smiling lady sells Spam musubi and butter mochi from a card table. A boy of about 12 wearing a skater T-shirt, shorts and slippers makes his rounds, saying hello to people he calls Auntie and Uncle whether they're relatives he sees every week or visitors from Aulani.



Attendance at Sunday Mass at St. Rita Catholic Church in Nanakuli is usually wall-to-wall, but this day there's a traffic jam along Farrington Highway because a driver hit a fire hydrant and a geyser of water is shooting 40 feet into the air a block away from the church.



"There's Spot!" Kim says. He drops a bit of food on the ground for his favorite chicken.



"The chickens take care of the centipedes, scorpions and roaches around the church. They're very effective. This one used to sit on my shoulder when she was a chick. She had a spot on her tail, but it's not there anymore. I should change her name."

Even as new subdivisions sprout nearby and wealthy visitors crowd into the resorts of Ko Olina five minutes down the road, St. Rita remains a rural parish where there are no strangers and even the chickens have names.

Like other churches, St. Rita celebrated Advent, that season before Christmas marked by preparation and waiting. But for this little church, the waiting took on special significance this year as the congregation of 400 prepares for what could be a huge new chapter in its history.

St. Rita isn't facing closure or a merger or the dwindling of its congregation. It's a more complicated challenge than that: trying to elevate the physical home of this church, with its dingy portable trailers, rat-infested rectory and porous plumbing, so that it can do justice to the soaring spirit of its community.

ST. RITA CATHOLIC CHURCH

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As the head inside the church, some of the parishioners say hello to the cats lurking under the bushes. A litter of kittens found its way to the church yard. On a recent cold night, the orphaned cats huddled under one of the hens for warmth.

That's a metaphor for this parish, a church community that is full of both profound metaphors and simple meaning. It is a place where people have found shelter and comfort for more than 100 years. It's a place where people share whatever they have and take all comers.

The church is a double hand-me-down. It was originally a chapel at Schofield Barracks. In 1930, it was moved to Ewa to serve the Immaculate Conception congregation. When that parish's church was built, the old Schofield chapel was moved again, this time to Nanakuli, where it has stood since 1934.

In 1955, the church was expanded and twin bell towers were added, one on either side of the original structure. Over the years, the parish has done its best to keep the roof from leaking, the walls from buckling and the termites from winning.

There are obvious additions and repairs from across the decades: some '70s-era jalousie windows, some 1980s gold-tone ceiling fans, a late-model air conditioner. The fountain in the little courtyard — a euphemism for the boxy space between the condemned rectory, the portable trailer and the old Quonset hut — looks like the do-it-yourself fountain kits sold at Home Depot.

Inside the church, the congregation gathers on three sides of the altar rather than on either side of a central aisle. It's more like a living room than a stage, and when the church is packed with people, many stand against the walls or sit on the floor. Children loll on the carpet and if a baby starts to fuss, there is no walled-off crying room, only the arms of dozens of volunteer aunties and uncles who offer to carry the baby for a while.

Walter Figueira, who with his wife, Dede, is one of the volunteer church leaders, leans over and whispers. "You see the triplets in the front row? When they were babies, we all used to take turns holding them during Mass."

The triplets are older now, and manage to sit quietly with minimal wiggling. When a baby lets out a howl or a toddler scampers away from her mother and heads straight for the altar, the priest isn't bothered.

"Father told us he used to work at a church in Chicago where there were only old people, no children," Figueira says. "He appreciates hearing the children because they're our future."

It's a congregation so comfortable with one another and so comforting to strangers that when Kim asks if anyone has any special requests for prayers, a voice calls out from a back row:

"Please pray for all the teens and young adults suffering from drug and alcohol addiction and for my son ..." and then the woman unflinchingly says her son's name out loud. She feels safe enough to do that. No shame.

The sermon is not the typical sermon, either. Kim, a Kailua native who certainly has the local-boy charm — correcting himself when calling the footwear of Jesus "slippers" instead of "sandals" — goes into university seminar mode when he addresses his parish. He's likely to ask questions, like, "What is it about this passage in Isaiah that tells us it was written after Christ died?" He expects answers and invites discussion with his followers.

The altar boys are barefoot. One is late, having been delayed by the traffic. The tardy boy hurries to his place and gives the "howzit" handshake to his partner. It's cool.

On the first Sunday of the month, the Mass is performed in Hawaiian. The church sits on Hawaiian Homes land and many members of the congregation are Native Hawaiian.

Sunday services are attended by a very diverse crowd. Everyone is welcome and all are represented.

Most are dressed very casually in T-shirts and slippers, from the elder ladies to the little boys. The teen members of the parish go around during the service with hugs and fresh flower lei to greet visitors.

One girl keeps an eye on the congregation and flits over to help find the correct hymn numbers in the song book if people look lost.

When the time comes for the congregation to give offerings, instead of going row to row with a collection basket, people come up to the altar with their donations: sealed envelopes and folded cash, a case of instant saimin, a family of five with each child carrying a can of Campbell's soup.

On Aloha Sunday, there are doughnuts and coffee outside under the old banyan tree after Mass. This is not a church of obligation where people burn rubber out of the parking lot before the priest even leaves the altar. They hang around. They eat and talk story. The little kids check out the chickens and the kittens. The older kids go to religion class. The church volunteers get busy. There is always something to fix or organize or plan.

Under that banyan tree, which is even older than the old church, Dede Figueira sits with church elders to collect their stories. She has started an online archive to document how people found their way to St. Rita and the work they've done on behalf of the church.

"St. Rita's is so special," she says. "We have to keep these stories before they're gone."

The church grounds are a hodgepodge of portable trailers, storage sheds and surplus buildings.

The sign on the church office door says: "Please knock. Doorbell needs to dry out." The sign looks like it has seen many seasons of rain.

The old Quonset hut is St. Rita's food pantry, where volunteers collect, sort, bag and distribute canned goods for the 300 to 400 homeless people who show up every week. That case of instant saimin and the cans of soup are taken to the pantry right after Mass.

Carlin Kaeo darts around the shelves, counting and storing. Sometimes there's nothing on the shelves. That's when faith really kicks in.

"God provides," Kaeo said. "He has a lot of vessels. We work together and come up with something. I don't ever send people off hungry, because to be hungry, sometimes you get all nuts. I try to give them something."

Sometimes the people who come for assistance aren't homeless. They're families with a roof over their heads and regular jobs who just don't have enough at the end of the month.

"If I know the people, I hide," Kaeo says. "I don't want anybody to feel bad."

Once a month, St. Rita serves a hot meal to the homeless and hungry. The church doesn't have a commercial kitchen, so church members cook at home and bring their pots under the banyan tree.

They feed several hundred people, stretching the chili-and-rice or kalua-pig-and-cabbage meals as far as they will go.

For 15 years of his 17-year tenure at St. Rita, Kim lived in the crumbling rectory, another secondhand building on the church property. The house was in such poor condition, rats would come up from the holes in the floor and crawl over the priest as he slept.

Now, after being unused for two years, the mold growing on the floor is as thick as a bed of coral and no board is straight.

Walter Figueira's brother David looks at the crumbling house and shakes his head at the way their beloved priest had to live.

"But then, a lot of our parishioners live like this," he says.

Several years ago, the church embarked on an ambitious plan to renovate, remediate and expand their facilities. One of the first steps was to buy a rectory for the priest, who now lives 4 miles down the road in a clean, rat-free, mold-free house. The congregation is still working to pay down that mortgage. Next is preparing for the rapidly approaching future.

The Makaiwa Hills project, a housing development planned along the slope before the Kahe Power Plant, will bring 4,100 new homes. It will join other new housing developments being planned or being built in the area.

Of those new residents, the projection is 2,000 new parishioners for St. Rita Church. Right now, there are 350 to 400 who attend Mass regularly, and things get pretty crowded.

"When we redid the parking lot, we made the biggest parking lot we could," David Figueira says.

Next comes building a bigger church. It's tricky, though, because they don't want to give up the little hand-me-down chapel. The plan is to add on to the existing structure, building new wings extending out from the rectangular chapel so that the new church will look like a cross from above.

They'd also like a proper office instead of the old trailers, and a community center to house religion classes, the food pantry and church events. The cost for this part of the project is \$4.5 million.

So they're doing a letter-writing campaign. And car washes. And anything else they can think of. And they're praying that this poor community in the rough part of town will, somehow, have enough.

The bells of St. Rita ring out along the Leeward shoreline, through the scruffy village and along the walls of Nanakuli Valley only twice a year, on Christmas and Easter. Kim isn't sure how old the bells are. They probably came with the original church.

This Christmas, the St. Rita regulars join hands with tourists and the folks they fondly call "twice-a-year Catholics" and pray that their old church can grow big enough to take in all comers but stay small enough so that everyone is still Aunty and Uncle, even if they're no relation.