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Churches share ongoing Lenten ecumenical mission

Zoe Ryan | Feb. 15, 2012

Everything is bigger in Texas, even ecumenical faith and love.

For 42 years, seven churches of different denominations in Beaumont, Texas, have shared an ecumenical Lenten mission with one another, gathering three days in Lent for prayer, reflection and fellowship.

?We?ve established many wonderful friends over the years,? said Msgr. William Manger, pastor of St. Anne Catholic Church for the past 21 years.

Besides St. Anne, the churches (some of which entered the group after it started) involved are St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, Calder Baptist Church, St. Stephen?s Episcopal Church, First Christian Church, Bethlehem Lutheran Church and Trinity United Methodist Church. All are no more than three miles apart.

Harland Merriam has been pastor at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church for 25 years. The series likely started, Merriam said, because of the already existing relationships between members of the different churches and a vision from the pastors.

The pastors ?wanted to experience something that we don?t do regularly,? he said, and they had a ?desire to do something together.?

Each year, a different church hosts. When choosing a speaker, Merriam said, they use the advice: ?Get the best your denomination has in the world.? The only requirement is that the speaker be a good preacher.

The series takes place Sunday, Monday and Tuesday and includes a breakfast for the men, a lunch for the women, and a night of activities for youth. Worship is every night, and it is the worship that is the heart of the series, Merriam said. The speaker talks every night, and the home choir and one or two others band together (on rare occasion all the choirs get together).

Neither he nor Manger has heard of anything in the U.S. with this breadth of ecumenism and that has been going on for this long.
St. Stephen?s hosts this year, and invited Jeanie Miley to speak. She is a writer, columnist and retreat leader.

Last year was St. Anne?s turn. Manger called it the ?golden year? because Bishop Donald Bolen from Saskatoon, Canada, was the guest speaker. Bolen worked in Rome on the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. He has a depth of knowledge in ecumenism, Manger said, and, after visiting, he now knows how to make gumbo.

The churches wish they did more together throughout the year, Merriam and Manger said. In fact, last year Bolen challenged them to do just that.

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