

## **Churches in area looking to expand**

*New additions planned as attendance increases*

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When Father Gregory R. Salamone came to Charlottesville in 1996 to serve as St. Thomas Aquinas Church's pastor, the church had 740 families attending.

Today, that number is about 1,400, not including University of Virginia students who participate in its campus ministry.

Responding the steady growth in membership, several area churches, including St. Thomas Aquinas, are planning to expand their facilities over the next three years.

Several miles north of St. Thomas Aquinas in Albemarle County, Maple Grove Christian Church's pastor, Russ Barb, has seen his membership more than double in 1996, from 340 to 800 people.

Bethel Baptist Church in Albemarle also is looking to construct a 6,944-square-foot building to encompass a new sanctuary, classrooms and fellowship hall, Pastor Wendell Lamb said.

"When we started the church 10 years ago, we had 30 people coming," Lamb said. "Today, we have more than 130 every Sunday."

The county planning department has approved Bethel Baptist's and Maple Grove's plans and the churches are awaiting approval from the Board of Supervisors to move ahead with the projects.

"We desperately need classrooms," Lamb said, adding that Sunday school is often held outside.

"We are in a growing area, there's a new subdivision being developed near us in Greene," he said. "We've just outgrown our present church."

Lamb said they plan to hold services in the new sanctuary and use the old one for events such as weddings and meetings. The county also uses the church as a voting precinct, he added.

St. Thomas also is in need of more classroom space, Salamone said.

"Right now, we are using Cabell Hall [at the University of Virginia] to run religious education class on Sunday and that presents a lot of inconveniences," Salamone said, adding that the church has more than 500 children in the classes.

“Originally we planned to renovate St. Thomas Hall,” he said. “But we did a space study several years ago, and determined we needed more than just a new student center.”

St. Thomas Aquinas already has undergone one project to cope with the growth of the parish.

In 1995, the church expanded its sanctuary to hold up to 850 people. It originally seated 400.

The new St. Thomas Hall, which will be a 39,000-square-foot building, will include a new student center, a worship chapel, and parish offices.

At Maple Grove, Barb said the church is planning two phases of construction for its additions.

The first phase of construction is a 5000-square-foot fellowship hall, Barb said.

In the second phase, he said the church was to build a gymnasium and preschool education building totaling 23,600 square feet.

“I’ve been talking with the local American Red Cross, because we are trying to get the proposed gym approved as a disaster relief site,” Barb said.

He hopes to have the fellowship hall completed by March and get construction of the gym and the education building, which he estimates will take about nine months, underway by the fall of 2003.

When the construction at the churches finally begins, the three pastors said they have been planning ahead to make sure services are not disrupted.

“We are going to have to look for additional parking space at some points during the construction,” Barb said. “We may have to shuttle parishioners to the church.”

Masses will not be affected during construction at St. Thomas Aquinas but some activities will be held off-site, Salamone said.

Salamone doesn’t expect membership to slow anytime soon and he said the new building will be constructed so a third floor could be added in the future.

“We get two to five new registrations each week, so the size of our parish could double in the next five years.”

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