



Staff photo by Michael Barrett

The Rev. Robert Olivier is now serving the Cathedral of St. Peter in the parish where he grew up.

Serving cathedral stirs 'very emotional feelings'

By ART TOALSTON

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The downtown Cathedral of St. Peter the Apostle stirs some "very powerful emotional feelings" within its rector, the Rev. Robert Olivier.

It's his home parish.

His parents were married in the office where he works daily.

He was an altar boy at the church.

And he was ordained to the priesthood there, just after St. Peter became a co-cathedral for the former Diocese of Natchez-Jackson in 1957.

Because the cathedral serves the downtown area and adjacent neighborhoods, its membership numbers only 342. But many members hail from the "founding families of the Catholic church in Jackson," and they help to provide a "strong foundation" for the parish, the rector said.

Olivier was born in the former Jackson Infirmary, which later became the first St. Dominic Hospital and is now the site of the Baptist Bookstore. He grew up on Griffith Street and went through grade school at the former St. Joseph Academy, where the Holiday Inn Downtown and a city parking lot are now located.

Before returning to the cathedral as rector in 1974, Olivier had pastored Jackson's St. Therese Catholic Church for five years and had been in Catholic high school education the previous 13 years.

The cathedral is known as "the bishop's church," Olivier said.

When Bishop Joseph Brunini is in town, he celebrates the liturgy there at 5:15 p.m. on Saturdays and 8 and 10:30 a.m. on Sundays. Also, Brunini and Auxiliary Bishop William Houck concelebrate a 12:05 p.m. Mass there Monday through Friday when in town. Often, however, Olivier is the celebrant, and the rector also leads a 7:30 a.m. Mass each weekday.

The cathedral also hosts a Spanish Mass at 4 p.m. each Sunday led by the Rev. Paul Madden of Crystal Springs' St. John's Catholic Church and a former missionary to Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church in Saltillo, Mexico.

Faith spectrum

As rector, Olivier has sought to bolster the cathedral's ministry to senior citizens and to Catholic students at Millsaps and Belhaven colleges, Mississippi College's School of Law and the University of Mississippi School of Medicine.

The cathedral's staff now includes Sister Claudia Murphy, who works with senior citizens, and Sister Annette Seymour, the cathedral's campus minister. Olivier and the two nuns share the responsibility for visiting hospitalized parishioners, except for those at the Mississippi Methodist Rehabilitation Center, where Linda Wright is the lay minister.

Olivier said the cathedral is also involved in ministry to the poor, providing financial help to such ecumenical endeavors as the Good Samaritan Center, the Stewpot and Travelers Aid.

The cathedral's St. Vincent de Paul Society, which is named after a French saint known for his ministry to the poor, was instrumental in starting the Good Samaritan Center in 1974.

Lifeline and the Hospital Hospitality House are also aided by the cathedral.

St. Peter shared cathedral status with St. Mary's Cathedral in Natchez from 1957 until 1978, when the former Diocese of Natchez-Jackson was divided into the Diocese of Jackson and the Diocese of Biloxi. The Natchez church had been a cathedral for more than 130 years and it was the second oldest cathedral in constant use when it reverted to parish status five years ago.

St. Peter parishioners first met in a small frame church constructed in 1846 at the corner of President and Court streets. The building was destroyed by fire in the first invasion of Jackson by federal troops in May 1863. Immediately after the Civil War, the congregation built a church where the rectory now is located on West Street. Construction of St. Peter's third and current building was finished in 1900.