

## ***Community effort***

Church asks its east-side neighbors what's important, and they say crime  
Grass-roots organizing in Russian Jack

By ROSEMARY SHINOHARA  
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People don't fill a church on a Monday night by accident. They need a purpose. St. Anthony's Catholic Church in Russian Jack gave them one:

Come talk about what matters in your daily life.

The church has taken up grass-roots community organizing, visiting more than 200 parishioners and neighbors in their homes. It turned out the overwhelming concern of these east-side residents was crime, said Father Fred Bugarin.

"We're talking about safety for our youth, families and elders," he said.

Because people are so worried about break-ins, kids with weapons, their own kids in trouble, St. Anthony's set up a forum to address crime in East Anchorage. It brought 400 people to the church Monday night.

Some told stories. The organizers presented what they had learned and asked two Anchorage Assembly members to respond.

Audey Algozo, a UPS worker who lives in the same Fairview building where his parents rent an apartment, said his and his parents' apartments were ransacked, and his mother's jewelry was stolen, early Christmas morning.

He thinks police were slow to come. He waited 45 minutes in the cold. And he was disappointed that they never developed any leads.

Rose Talamaivao said her nephew was shot in front of the Mountain View Boys and Girls Club last August. The bullet grazed the back of his head and while on the ground he was beaten, she said.

Then while he was recuperating, police came and took him to McLaughlin Youth Center, even though he was the victim, Talamaivao said. An attorney helped sort it out, and he was released.

Talamaivao said she spoke on behalf of her family and the Samoan community, wanting a safer place to live, work and raise kids.

She is a member of Turnagain United Methodist Church, but many members of her extended family belong to St. Anthony's.

St. Anthony's rises on a side street near the East Anchorage Costco and draws a large contingent of Samoans, Filipinos and Hispanics from mostly low-income neighborhoods, including Mountain View, Russian Jack, Airport Heights and College Gate, Father Bugarin said.

They call him Father Fred.

He is a Filipino who grew up in Anchorage and graduated from West High School.

The congregation includes about 550 people, he said. Church leaders trained in community organizing interviewed about 200 parishioners between last summer and now and intend to reach everyone in the congregation.

"The main purpose is to establish a relationship," Father Fred said.

The interviewers don't raise issues but ask the residents about their dreams, disappointments and concerns.

Safety topped everything else, he said.

So church leaders did more research and learned that a recent Anchorage Police Department management report said 93 additional police officers are needed.

Some programs such as community-based policing have helped to reduce crime but end after federal grants disappear, the church organizing committee reported.

"We want solutions that are long term and won't fade away when grants end," the committee said in a one-page report.

Some public officials at the Monday meeting said they were impressed.

"I hear the message," said Assemblyman Brian Whittle, who lives a few blocks from St. Anthony's. In fact, he sometimes hears gunshots too.

"We need to stand up and say we're not going to tolerate it."

"The approach is right on," Anchorage Assemblyman Allan Tesche said. "I see a spirit of engagement that's needed and wanted between neighbors and the government."

Here is roughly what Tesche told the crowd, he said later: "If you want to tell me all your wants and needs, I'm outta here. ... But if you guys want to work together, we can start figuring out what we can do as a community."

This is not the first time people in Anchorage have deplored the level of violence, especially among kids. Just a couple of months ago, after two young women, 16 and 22, died from gunfire in November, a crowd turned out for a meeting on how to get guns out of the hands of young people. That meeting was targeted at police, prosecutors, school officials, city officials and other community leaders.

But at St. Anthony's, something a bit different was happening -- the residents themselves raised the issues.

"The number of people and the grass-roots effort there caught my attention," said Anchorage police Lt. Gardner Cobb, in charge of the police-in-schools program. The police department wants to join in, he said.

St. Anthony's community organizing project is the first of nearly a dozen planned by Anchorage churches, all part of a national movement fostered by a group called the Pacific Institute for Community Organization.

It started here after Catholic Archbishop Roger Schwietz called together an interdenominational group of pastors and brought up some people from the Pacific Institute about a year ago, said Angela Liston, director of the archdiocese department of justice and peace.

The goal is to find common concerns and build leadership to deal with them, said Karen Sonray, pastor of Alaska Native Lutheran Church, which will also canvass its congregation. "It's really helping people to sense that they can affect the community and not be isolated."

In her church, where three-fourths of the members are Native, community organizers may find that schools are a big concern, she said, because many Native students do not feel at home in schools.

At Amazing Grace Lutheran Church on the Hillside, the congregation is wealthier than in many parts of town, but worries over youths in trouble come up all the time, pastor Larry Jorgenson said.

"We're not hearing gunshots too much," he said. "We have youth suicides and a lot of different kinds of at-risk behaviors."

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