

St. Agnes School remains source of faith-based education

By David Lias

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Leroy and Margaret Bierle purchased a farm near Vermillion in 1965 with one thing foremost in their minds – to provide a good education for their large family.

Of all reasons one could list for choosing the Vermillion area to settle, one factor stood out among the others – the present St. Agnes School, a parochial Roman Catholic institution, had just been constructed only five years earlier, and began offering classes to students in first through sixth grade in 1961.

“Before we came here, we lived in Tabor, and our kids went to the Catholic school there,” Margaret said. “One of the things, when we were making a move, that we were looking for was to find a place that would be able to offer a similar school experience. At that time, we looked at moving to Salem, and to Watertown, so yes, it was important to us.”

Eight of the Bierle’s 12 children attended St. Agnes, meaning the Bierle family stayed heavily involved in the activities and operation of the school beginning in the 1960s.

“When we came, there were still sisters – nuns – that taught classes,” Margaret said. “I don’t know for how many years ... and then the Benedictine didn’t have any more nuns that they sent out to us.”

For approximately five years, a small group of nuns from India served as educators at the school. When they left, the school was staffed entirely with lay teachers. At the time, St. Agnes offered classes in first through eighth grades.

“We were very impressed with the school,” Margaret said. “Since I, myself, had gone through all eight grades in Yankton, I was quite familiar with a Catholic school education. The school here was at the same level of what I had been used to.

“The sisters were wonderful teachers, and there was discipline,” she said. “A lot was expected of you (as a student), and the children were expected to go to morning Mass daily. There was a great emphasis put on religious education, of course – that was what the school was for, but it was also a place where the education that was offered was very good.”

According to a brief history of the school written in 1971, groundbreaking ceremonies for the school building were held at the corner of Lewis and Walker streets in Vermillion on July 24, 1960.

Participants in the ceremony included Father H. K. Wolf, pastor at St. Agnes Parish; Mother Jerome, OSB, head of the Sacred Heart Convent at Yankton; H.O. VandenBerge, Dr. Raymond Schroeder, James O’Connor, Carl Olson, members of the building committee; and Vermillion Mayor Ralph Leer.

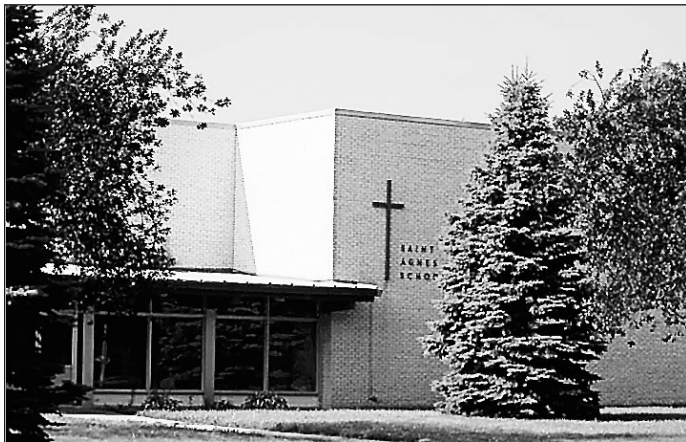
Construction of the new school was completed in the summer of 1961 and operations began that fall with grades first through sixth enrolled. The seventh grade was added in 1962 and the eighth grade followed in 1963.

Other plans for the facility at that time was the future construction of a new parish hall and auditorium to be situated west of the school. The completed auditorium section of the school was dedicated in May 1962.

Participating in those ceremonies was Bishop Lambert A. Hoch of Sioux Falls. The short program was opened with a prayer by Father H.K. Wolf and the singing of the National Anthem, led by F.J. Streim. Mayor Ralph Leer brought greetings from the city and Gordon Smith presented a flag as a gift from the local VFW Post.

A state flag of South Dakota was presented to the school by Major General Lloyd R. Moses, acting commander of the Fifth Army.

In 1971, St. Agnes School was staffed by two nuns of the Order of St. Benedict,



ABOVE: Pictured are students after receiving their first Communion at St. Agnes Catholic Church in 1960. A year later, classes would begin in a new St. Agnes School building.

LEFT: St. Agnes School, a parochial Roman Catholic School in Vermillion, began offering classes in 1961.

(Photos courtesy of St. Agnes School)

Yankton, and five lay teachers. Father Jerome J. Holtzman, pastor of St. Agnes Parish, served as superintendent at that time. Policies of the school were determined by elected members of the school’s board of education.

Forty years ago, there were 156 students enrolled in first through eighth grades. St. Agnes, in conjunction with Vermillion Public Schools, offered a dual enrollment program at the time for grades 6 through 8. Students in these grades take their courses in math and science in their respective public school grades.

A released time religious education program is also part of St. Agnes School’s history, at which time all Catholic children in first through eighth grades attending public school gather at St. Agnes for one hour Wednesday afternoons.

In the school’s early years, the Father Wolf Auditorium at St. Agnes was used daily during basketball season for the public school’s seventh and eighth grade basketball program. The building also continues to accommodate many parish and civic functions.

Today, St. Agnes offers classes through fifth grade. Margaret isn’t sure what year the school decided to no longer offer classes for students in sixth through eighth grades, but she does recall the seamless transition her own children made when they had to leave St. Agnes and attend the public middle school in Vermillion.

“They were fully prepared for that. They came over to middle school with high grades,” she said. “Kids in St. Agnes went through the same thing that the kids in the new middle school went through, and we had kids in the high school, too, at the same time, and there was a period where there was a lot of exploring different ways to teach – even different textbooks and different approaches to math, and I found that to be a very difficult time for our kids.”

The Bierles’ goal of having their large family attend parochial school required a financial sacrifice.

“But it was important to us, and to everyone whose children attended St. Agnes,” Margaret said. “You have to pay a tuition and at that time, we had to buy all of the books, but it was worth it.”

Four of the five children of Lawrence and Rosalie Hubert of Vermillion attended St. Agnes School.

“I think our twins – Dennis and Daniel – were in the first graduating class there,” she said. They began attending St. Agnes as seventh graders in 1962. The Huberts’ other two children, Mary and Joe, also attended and graduated from St. Agnes.

“Right from the start, it was a good school, and we enjoyed having our kids be able to go there,” Rosalie said. “Everything was well-disciplined, and we liked it.

“When St. Agnes first started, all of the teachers were sisters, and the principal was a sister,” she said. “They gradually started getting lay teachers in because the sisters were no longer available.”

St. Agnes was desirable because of its smaller class sizes.

“It was a smaller school than the public schools. I think they were able to give more attention to the kids, and there was better quality teaching as far as I’m concerned,” Rosalie said. “When it came time for our kids to attend public school, they could step right in; they were right in with the other students.”

Predominant among all of the reasons for the Huberts to send their kids to St. Agnes was the religious programs that the school still offers today.

“That’s why they were there – they taught religion along with their other classes,” she said. “We wanted to make sure to send our kids to a school with a spiritual setting. We could have sent them to the public schools but we chose to send them to St. Agnes.”

“One of the things that our kids thought was very fortunate was we used to have cooks that were hired, and they made all of

Timeline of Education in Clay Co.

1966

- The school on Church Street is razed after construction of the new high school on East Main Street.
- Island School No. 57 is destroyed by vandals. It had been closed for four years.

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