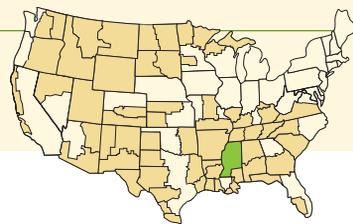


SACRED HEART PARISH

Camden, Mississippi
Diocese of Jackson



AMERICAN JOURNEY

THE *heart* of Camden, Mississippi

This small parish built on its thriving faith and inspired hope in its community thanks to grants from Catholic Extension

BELOW: The Sacred Heart choir leads the congregation in song.

In 2002, Sacred Heart in Camden, Mississippi, was a parish struggling to keep its doors open. Weekly Mass attendance at the church, which is part of the Diocese of Jackson, had dwindled to fewer than 50 parishioners as families had drifted away from the church or begun attending other churches. The average Sunday collection was \$600. Sacred Heart faced the hard reality that it could no longer keep its school open.





LEFT: Fr. Mike Barth addresses the Sacred Heart congregation. **ABOVE:** Jermaine Wair performs a praise dance. Sacred Heart is renowned for its praise dancing, a form of dance based on American Sign Language.

“People now come into Camden from Canton and Jackson because the service is so uplifting. It is just so joyful.”

— DIANE ELDRIDGE, Director, Sacred Heart Family Center

In a small, rural community where 60 percent of the people live below poverty level, only 2 percent are Catholic and the parish school has too few pupils, it would have been easy to let Sacred Heart fade away. But a small group of committed parishioners and church leaders made a different decision.

With an eye toward rebuilding their church, invigorating their community and helping their neighbors, the group decided to derive something positive from their school’s closing by transforming it into a vibrant community center that could serve as a hub of spiritual hope and social outreach for the area’s Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

They created a plan and turned to Catholic Extension for crucial financial support. Since 2004, Catholic Extension has awarded Sacred Heart \$245,000 to help the tenacious parish help itself.

This has included a \$100,000 grant to help replace Sacred Heart’s small, broken-down wooden church with a new church and gathering space.

Catholic Extension’s support has been a wise investment. In just five years, Sacred Heart has been transformed. The number of worshipers at its vibrant weekly Masses has more than tripled. Sacred Heart’s RCIA program has welcomed 75 adults and children into the church. Weekly collections have more than doubled.

The Sacred Heart Family Center has become home to vital community services including meals for seniors and the homebound, a food pantry for families in need, summer and after-school programs for children, housing rehabilitation programs, financial literacy classes, and leadership training and evangelization programs.



Volunteers in the kitchen at the Sacred Heart Family Center prepare 18,000 meals for seniors and the homebound each year.

Today, every dream the initial group of parishioners had for Sacred Heart and its community center has become reality, but the parish and its members aren’t resting on their laurels. Buoyed by success, they are eagerly planning for the future, thinking big about new ways to meet the needs of their region with a perspective always rooted in faith. ■

To learn more about the communities Catholic Extension supports, visit catholicextension.org.

A full-page photograph of a man, Jermaine Wair, with his arms raised in a gesture of joy or praise. He is wearing a brown and orange plaid button-down shirt and blue jeans. He is standing on a wooden pier or dock with several vertical wooden posts. The background shows a clear blue sky and a body of water with some trees in the distance. The overall mood is one of happiness and faith.

“Faith leads us beyond ourselves.”

— POPE JOHN PAUL II

JERMAINE WAIR, a praise dancer at Sacred Heart Parish