

Holy Family Parish, located in the Southwest Virginia counties of Buchanan and Tazewell, was established in 2010 after the Council of Priests voted to combine the parishes of St. Elizabeth's in Pocahontas, VA; St. Mary's in Richlands, VA; St. Theresa's in Tazewell, VA; and St. Joseph's, identified as a mission church, in Grundy, VA. Together, the four churches comprise 400 parishioners -- 100 families. The parish is one church with four worship sites.

When the four sites were combined, the parish was renamed Holy Family Parish. The consolidation also included the decision to move the sacramental records of all four locations to Tazewell. One pastor, one pastoral council and one finance council serve the four church locations. The priest is housed at the rectory located at St. Theresa's. The distance between the four churches is almost 80 miles through rugged mountain terrain. Travel time from Pocahontas to Grundy -- the churches at either end of the territory -- takes an hour and 45 minutes, one-way.

Each of the four church locations have long and storied histories of their own which are a testament to those who worked tirelessly to establish a Catholic faith presence in their communities.

St. Elizabeth's in Pocahontas is the oldest of the four church sites. The beginnings of the Catholic Church there started in the late 1800s when property was deeded from the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company to the Wheeling Diocese, to provide the site for what is now known as St. Elizabeth's Catholic Church.

The early church population was comprised predominantly of Hungarian immigrants, recruited from among newly arrived immigrants on the East Coast to work at the Southwest Virginia Improvement Company in Pocahontas. As the church construction was completed in 1896 under the oversight of Fr. Emil Olivier, who also served as its first pastor, it was named St. Elizabeth's after the patron saint of Hungary. At the time the church was built, there was no rectory or resident priest and Fr. Olivier traveled by horseback from Bluefield one Sunday each month to say Mass.

St. Theresa's in Tazewell had its beginnings in 1842 and was located in what was then called Jeffersonville, now known as Tazewell. The Catholic Church was the second house of worship to be built in the area and followed the construction of a Methodist church. It was built at a time when land around the Tazewell Courthouse was just beginning to develop and as what was then Jeffersonville was becoming an agricultural and legal center for the mountainous region which at that time included portions of what is now West Virginia, as well as what is now all of Buchanan County, VA. Fr. Edward Fox, of Wytheville, traveled on horseback across the mountains on a public trail through Burkes Garden to Jeffersonville to hold Catholic services.

By 1852, construction was underway on Marion Street for a dedicated Catholic Church in Tazewell. In later years, the church on Tazewell Avenue, which is still used today, was constructed.

St. Mary's in Richlands had its beginnings in 1909 as the first Catholic families arrived in that region. Fr. Olivier also served St. Mary's, traveling by horseback and train from Bluefield. Initially, mass was offered in area homes with as many as 15-20 in attendance and later the liturgy was celebrated in a local grocery store. By 1940, a request was made to the Bishop to establish a church, but it was not until 13 years later in 1953 that the request was granted. Land was donated by an area doctor and in November 1953, ground was broken to build the first Catholic Church in Richlands.

St. Joseph's Catholic Church began in Grundy, VA, in 1951, as a handful of local residents began meeting in area homes to practice their Catholic faith. Attendance was based on word of mouth, but three to four families gathered together when a priest was available.

As the number of practicing Catholics grew, a local business allowed its banquet room to serve as one of the first regular locations for Mass celebrated outside of area homes. Mass was celebrated on Saturdays two to three times a year and once at Christmas.

Buchanan Catholics moved to their first church of sorts in May 1959 when a school building at Dry Fork became available and was rented by parishioners of the church for \$15. Being a practicing Catholic became a little easier in 1961 when St. Joseph's was formally named a station of Pocahontas in the Wheeling, WV, Diocese. Its "mission" status followed almost six years later in 1967, just after the first formal church building was constructed and dedicated – the same building used today.

All four churches became part of the Richmond Diocese in 1974.

Since its inception in 2010, Holy Family Parish has been served by five priests. Fr. Gaudencio Pugat was the first priest assigned to the new parish and served until 2011 when Fr. Burt Sare came to serve from 2011-2014. He was followed by Fr. Paul Muyimbwa, 2014-2016; Fr. Felix Amofa, 2016-2017; and in July 2017, Fr. Jugene Espeleta, began serving as pastor. Along the way, additional priests have filled in until diocesan-assigned priests arrived to serve parishioners. Among those were Fr. Francis Musolooza; Fr. Mike Herbert; and surrounding area priests assigned to regional parishes.