

Friendship Fostering SVD

As the lives of SVDs weave in and out, around the world and over the years, they intersect at places like Divine Word College. In wonderful ways, these intersections reveal the respect and friendship fostered by their religious order.

When Father Sam Cunningham, SVD, arrived last fall to join the faculty and do formation work, he reconnected with several men he knew as seminarians at the Theologate in Chicago nearly two decades ago. In fact, two were members of a formation group he led. Today, Fr. Thang Hoang, SVD, is rector of the college SVD community, and Fr. Nick Hien Nguyen, SVD, is the college coordinator of spiritual life.

“This is fun because we’re colleagues,” Fr. Sam said.

As rector, Fr. Thang is the authority figure among the SVDs.

“Fr. Sam didn’t come here and say, ‘Oh, you were my student, you better behave,’” the rector said with his usual grin. “This is what SVDs are all about, not so much as ‘superior’ and ‘members,’

but as brothers who take turns stepping into leadership of the community.”

In the 1980s, Fr. Sam worked as a vocation director and actually recruited Fr. Nick to enter the SVD minor seminary at East Troy, Wisconsin. They reunited in Chicago 15 years later.



Fr. Nick Hien Nguyen, SVD, (l) and Fr. Thang Hoang, SVD, (r) bracket their former formator, Fr. Sam Cunningham, SVD.

“The formation program at the Theologate is very good, there’s no rank, everybody is the same,” Fr. Nick said. “Even the rector and dean of students, they are one of us. I rarely saw them as someone above me, so when Fr. Sam was there, I just saw him as another SVD, and I considered myself to be SVD even then.”

For Fr. Sam, there is a point of pride in seeing the young men he knew grow so much and do so well.

“It’s fascinating to watch the development of people,” he said. “The closest would be that if your son or daughter had children, watching them taking on the role of parent.”

Divine Providence, Ministries and Methodists

The Good Lord works in mysterious ways.

Fr. Long Phi Nguyen, SVD, assistant dean of students, coordinates the ministry outreach program for students at DWC. Last fall, while searching for new ministry opportunities, he walked into the Epworth United Methodist Church and met Shelly Rollins, who operates its after-school program for children age 2 through 6th grade.

“Shelly said, ‘You wouldn’t believe it Father, I was about to call Divine Word College to see if there was any possibility of sending students here to help us,’” Fr. Long Phi recalled. “I believe that is the Will of God right there that brought us together.”

On Wednesdays this past semester, students helped with the program, which offered children an afternoon snack, times to pray and play, and wrapped up with an evening meal.

“They help with homework, too,” Fr. Long said. “They also help with the set up and the cleanup, prepare meals, eat with the children, and have fun with them.” That led to DWC students also assisting the church with a community meal it hosts on Fridays, which attracts residents from

Epworth and surrounding communities. Any time from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., students help prepare the meal, serve it and clean up afterward. Students also work with area elderly and mentally disabled, help at parishes in Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, Davenport and Rock Island, and serve at food pantries at the First Congregation United Church of Christ and Hope House in Dubuque.



Fr. Long Phi Nguyen, SVD

The variety of ministry experiences are an important part of the missionary education students receive at Divine Word College. Students learn how to meet, interact with and serve people of different ages and economic conditions. What made the new connection with the Epworth United Methodist Church so special is the way it all happened.

“It really was a blessing that brought us together,” Fr. Long Phi said. “They are very friendly, they welcome us and they’re very happy to have our students there to help out. I am very happy too.”