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Changes to come

Planned school closings and staff shakeups in the education department portend profound changes, as the diocese's Catholic schools face systemwide reorganization. See page 3.



With stone and spirit, parishioners build church

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

HAMLIN — When Robert Leutze walks into St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church for Sunday Mass, his eyes focus on the two stone pillars behind the altar. The pillars stand tall and strong, like the friendships Leutze forged with some of the men he met while helping construct the church during the last year and a half.

"I get a warm feeling, a friendly feeling, because you met so many people when you were working there," Leutze said. "We talked quite a bit about hunting. I've gone hunting with a couple of guys since then."

The whole parish has hunted on behalf of the church — hunted for stones in nearby fields to place in the pillars; hunted for railroad ties to construct the altar and lectern; hunted for the money to keep the communal project going.

As Catholic parishes throughout the nation close for lack of bodies to fill their pews, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton accommodates a growing flock of worshipers. Founded seven years ago in a Hamlin barn, and eventually moving to a former railroad depot on the Hojack Line, the parish initially drew its members from the overcrowded parishes of Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Brockport and St. Leo's in Hilton. According to Father William J. Amann, Seton's pastor, young families have continued moving into Hamlin, as harbingers of a healthy future for the pioneer parish.

To walk into the new church is to sense



that pioneering spirit. While many American Catholics attend Mass in churches built by immigrants of earlier eras, more than a few parishioners at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton can spot their own handiwork in the church's walls.

Although an independent contractor completed the majority of work on the church, a substantial portion was done by several hundred volunteers, ranging from toddlers to grandmothers. The church's interior paint job, surrounding landscape, and inside work on several of its rooms were completed either partially or wholly by parishioners working steadily since construction began in late June, 1987.

One of those parishioners was Barb



Parishioners at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton have traveled a long journey from their first Mass in Stanley Pogroszewski's barn to the spacious new church in Hamlin where they gather to worship each Sunday. Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier

Legere, who, like Leutze, sees friendship and community in the stone pillars behind the altar. They attest to something she felt was missing in the suburban Virginia parish where she grew up.

"I'm young," said the 27-year-old Legere. "I wasn't involved in my parish in Virginia. The people here are so different ... so different than any others I've met in my life." The difference lies in the feeling of family closeness between parishioners, she said.

That bond formed in the early days when parishioners sat crowded together on folding chairs for services in the old depot. In his sermons, Father Amann often alluded to the building's former days as a symbol of the parishioners' spiritual life.

"A waiting station," Father Amann called the building. "A temporary dwelling for ourselves and the Lord." The pastor often noted that life is a journey, and when the parish moved into its new location, he commented that "now we are at a higher plateau, proud of what we've accomplished — a home for ourselves and the Lord, till we move on and grow to our eternal home."

Thoughts of that eternal home sometimes occupied the mind of parishioner Cindy Burgio, who spent several week nights helping to gather stones from local farm fields. Sitting in a wagon pulled by a rented tractor, Burgio grew close to her 10-year-old son, Anthony, as they traveled out to the fields before dusk. She said it gave her a great sense of peace to bring stones made by God back to the construction site where she was helping to build God's house.

"A lot of people don't get a chance to be involved in a church's construction," Burgio remarked. "The feeling of being able to construct a church is really special." What was most special, she noted, was "getting to know other people in the parish — how each builds each other's faith, like the stones we added to the wall."

Another parishioner found a different kind of peace when he worked at the construction site. "I don't know that I feel closer to God," Todd Eichas said. "I feel closer to the people of the parish."

One Saturday, in particular, struck Ei-

chas as memorable. Shortly before the church was to be opened, a variety of tasks, ranging from painting to landscaping, needed to be completed. "Over 100 people were there," Eichas said. "We have a saying there that 'Many hands make light work,' and it was evident that day."

The modern-day phenomena of a new parish built by the sweat of its members

Neither brother could understand why their grain bins didn't decrease in size until they met by accident one night and realized why. They embraced each other with great love, and God, looking down on the place where they were, said it would be holy ground forever.

"I likened that to the church where we



echoes the Old Testament story of Solomon's temple, according to Deacon Ramon Datz. In a sermon at Mass last Sunday, Datz remarked that an old Jewish fable purports that God deemed the location of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem to be holy ground because it had been the scene of great love between two brothers. Both were farmers — one single, the other married and the father of eight children.

The single brother was concerned that his married sibling was overburdened with a large family, so he used to slip out into the night with two sacks of grain to place in his brother's storage bin. Meanwhile, his married brother feared that the bachelor brother would go hungry in his old age with no family to care for him. So at night, the married brother would also take two sacks of grain and place it in his brother's storage bin.

were," Datz said. "So this ground's holy for us."

One of the people who worked to create a spot of holy ground in Hamlin was David Burgess, assistant construction coordinator. Sitting in the church whose construction he helped oversee makes Burgess proud. "I feel that I accomplished a great deal for our church community by helping to bring it to this place," he said. "I enjoyed the year and a half of working with the people who helped construct it."

Those who helped construct the church were honored at a banquet on Saturday, Feb. 4, at the Hamlin Firehall. Amid the festivities, Datz noted that one of the musicians in the band hired to perform that evening was overwhelmed by the sense of community she experienced.

"Three times she said to me, 'I've never seen so much love in one place,'" Datz commented.