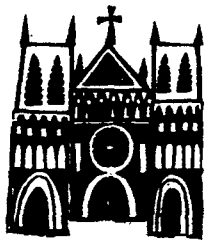


# PARISH FEATURE

## Elmira parish remains distinct, yet not distant

**Parish Profile**  
St. Mary's,  
Elmira



By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

ELMIRA — Ask a Southern Tier resident directions to St. Mary's Church, and you'll be told to be more specific.

Ask somebody the way to St. Mary's "Southside," and the answer will arrive much more quickly.

In fact, just saying "Southside" can often be a sufficient enough clue for the church you seek. The word is tagged on to St. Mary's title for obvious geographical reasons: of the nine Catholic churches located within Elmira's city's limits, this is the only parish located south of the Chemung River.

"There's a sense of very strong identification with the south side, and it goes beyond St. Mary's," observed Father William Donnelly, pastor since 1992.

"The first time I ever heard the bishop (Bishop Matthew H. Clark) say it, he said St. Mary's 'Southside,'" Father Donnelly added. "It was very clear — it wasn't St. Mary's Elmira, it was St. Mary's 'Southside.'"

St. Mary's maintains another distinction among Elmira parishes as well: it is one of only two churches not affected by the clustering process. This is due not only to St. Mary's location, but also to its size — 1,700 families strong.



(From bottom left) Longtime St. Mary's parishioner Hilda Donohue, Holy Family Catholic Schools publicist Joe Kosmicki, St. Mary's priest intern Father Lance Gonyo, parish secretary Maryann Murch and Holy Family Primary School Principal Constance Brady pause for a photo outside the rectory.

S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

The current St. Mary's church building is almost as old as the parish itself, having been completed in 1875 — three years after the founding of St. Mary's in what was then part of the Buffalo diocese. Newspapers from that era reported that St. Mary's was founded primarily because parishioners struggled with the long walk from the south side to Ss. Peter and Paul Church on High Street. (Ss. Peter and Paul is now one of three churches in the Eastside Catholic Parish cluster.)

Not only is St. Mary's Church a long-time Elmira landmark, but so is the school building opened in 1898. Currently, that structure operates as part of

the Holy Family Catholic School System and accommodates 340 primary-school students in pre-kindergarten through grade 3.

Yet despite St. Mary's many distinguishing factors, current parish activities promote an attitude of working with — rather than isolation from — other Elmira churches.

"We're trying to gradually tie in our programs with other parishes," acknowledged Father Lance Gonyo, St. Mary's priest intern since his ordination in 1993.

For example, Father Gonyo said, St. Mary's was one of several Southern Tier parishes to take part in the Adult Lenten

Education Series held the past two years.

Constance Brady saw this inclusive attitude up close after St. Mary's School was converted into Holy Family Primary School — as part of the formation of the three-school Holy Family Catholic School System — beginning in the 1985-86 school year.

The reconfiguration, which brought many students from Elmira's other sections to St. Mary's for the first time, "helped build community spirit throughout the city," said Brady, who has served as school principal for 12 years.

"The people of 'Southside' were very supportive," she added. "The parish staff is wonderful; they facilitate special programs for the school."

In the area of youth ministry, "There's been this cooperative effort among the area churches. We all work well together," remarked Linda Savino, who coordinates the St. Mary parish's youth-ministry program as well as grade 7-12 religious education.

A recent example illustrating such collaboration occurred in the spring, Savino said, when several Chemung County youth groups combined for an inaugural Living Stations service.

Other evolving activities are prevalent within the St. Mary's parish as well. While longstanding traditions such as CYO basketball maintain a strong following, Savino and Father Donnelly also noted a healthy increase of youth participation at weekend Masses through lecturing, eucharistic ministry and involvement in the children's liturgy.

Additional parish programs on the rise at St. Mary's include the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, vacation Bible school, and a social-ministry operation which provides services such as transportation for the elderly and lunches following funeral services.

"It's a parish that is very friendly," commented Hilda Donohue, a St. Mary's parishioner for 36 years who currently fills the role of parish bookkeeper and organist.

"People in the south side are genuine people," Savino observed. "They're very open and accepting. I just think they're very authentic."

### SNAPSHOTS

**St. Mary's Church,**  
224 Franklin St., Elmira  
Phone: 607/734-6254  
Established: 1872  
Current church built: 1875  
Current school built: 1898  
**Ministerial staff:**  
Pastor: **Father William Donnelly**  
Priest Intern: **Father Lance Gonyo**  
Parish Deacon:  
**Deacon Robert Stowell**  
School principal (Holy Family Primary): **Constance Brady**  
Religious Education Director (Grades 1-6): **Donna Bennett**  
Religious Education (7-12)/Youth Minister: **Linda Savino**  
Social Ministry Director: **Sandy Harkness**  
Secretary: **Maryann Murch**  
Bookkeeper: **Hilda Donohue**

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