

DIOCESAN NEWS

Elmira cluster moves toward sale of two churches

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

Due to declining attendance and contributions, a cluster parish in Elmira has begun proceedings that will culminate with the sale of two church properties, including two church buildings.

The church and former school at St. Cecilia, 950 Lake St., along with the church and rectory at St. John the Baptist, 325 Lake St., are nearing completion of an appraisal process. According to Father Patrick L. Connor, pastor of Eastside Catholic Parish, these structures will likely be up for sale by the end of this year.

The Eastside cluster's only church to remain open will be Ss. Peter and Paul Church, located at Market and High streets.

Ss. Peter and Paul, founded in 1848, is the oldest of the three cluster churches. St. John the Baptist was founded in 1866, followed by St. Cecilia in 1904. In 1982, St. Cecilia and St. John became the first two diocesan parishes to be served by a single pastoral team. Those churches were joined by Ss. Peter and Paul in 1990 to form the current Eastside configuration.

Father Connor noted that the churches' combined membership totals slightly more than 1,000 families — a huge drop-off from earlier generations.

"The number of our churches reflects a time when the immigrants were coming over and becoming established in our country," Father Connor said.

The great flood of 1972, which damaged or destroyed much of downtown Elmira, also helped to accelerate a decline in parish membership by forcing families to relocate, the priest said.

More recently, Father Connor pointed out, weekly offerings for the cluster averaged \$5,597 in June 1995 — but slipped to \$5,295 this past June.

"With the deaths of very large givers, we're finding that people are not able to continue (the same level of donations)," the pastor said.

The final decision to sell St. Cecilia and St. John was based on recommendations from a strategic planning committee, com-

posed of 12 people from the three churches, that was formed in early 1994. The parish council has since designated an implementation committee to oversee the sale process.

According to Father Kevin E. McKenna, chancellor for the Diocese of Rochester, the following steps are required by canon law when a church is being considered for closure.

- The diocese must be notified of this intent in writing.

- The parish must prepare a resolution signed by the pastor and lay trustees.

- A map of the parish property must be furnished to the bishop, along with the previous year's parish financial statement.

- A copy of parish council minutes, showing that the proposed sale was discussed, must be submitted.

- Appraisals by two separate firms are required.

- Purchase offers are subject to diocesan approval.

- If a sale is approved, a court order is prepared which is then signed by the bishop.

St. Cecilia and St. John were appraised in fall of 1995 by Midland Appraisers of Rochester. A second appraisal was recently completed by Norquest Real Estate of Horseheads.

Father Connor said this week that he is awaiting Norquest's report. Declining to provide specific figures, the pastor said he hopes that a price for St. Cecilia and St. John will be established by fall.

"Some people are anxious for something to be done. It does affect parish morale to have this hanging over us," Father Connor said.

Father Connor stated that the buildings would not be sold to any groups that would use them for "irreligious or profane purposes."

Proceeds from the sale will remain largely within the parish. The only exception, Father McKenna said, would be if a significant number of Eastside parishioners were to begin attending parishes other than Ss. Peter and Paul. In that case, those churches would also get a portion of the funds.

Revenue generated from the sale, Father Connor said, would enable a new parish center to be constructed on property currently occupied by the former Ss. Peter and Paul School.

St. Cecilia and St. John the Baptist will be the first diocesan churches to close since June 1995, when the final Mass at St. Aloysius Church in Auburn was celebrated. Father McKenna added that further church closings in the diocese are likely in the upcoming years.

"This is all one big issue, with the shortage of priests and consolidation," Father McKenna remarked.

Father Connor acknowledged that such moves are not made without a great deal of emotional turmoil.

"It's like losing a member of the family. But hopefully, it's not just a death," said Father Connor, the cluster's pastor since 1992. "Hopefully, we can look into the future and see this as a kind of dying and rising again."



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Parade of Tradition

John Zeppetella of St. Jude the Apostle Parish leads the St. Ann's Procession July 28. The event was hosted by Rochester's Most Precious Blood Parish. Observing his 34th year as parade president, Zeppetella carried the original banner from the April 1939 procession. At left is Angelina Marinaccio and at right, Michellina Marseglia, both of St. John the Evangelist Parish in Spencerport. Above, representing the new generation of parade participants, Marco Fasca pushes Marissa Maenza, the youngest of the approximate 35 paraders. The paraders proceeded to the parish's St. Ann's shrine, and then to the church to celebrate Mass.

Consultants counsel diocese in gauging parishes' viability

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

Consultants from six dioceses are helping the Diocese of Rochester create a five-year strategy.

Their aim is to help parishes follow through on goals that emerged from the diocese's seventh Synod and to prepare for decreasing numbers of priests in the diocese.

All six work with the Florida-based Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development.

Diocesan officials say the plan will consider how parishes should be configured and staffed, and how the pastoral center should respond to the parishes. It will also assist parishes in applying the four synod goals — lifelong faith formation, consistent life ethic, women in church and society, and small Christian communities.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark this month is expected to name two teams, on parish configuration and pastoral center responsiveness, which will create vision statements. The four synod goal teams will also provide such statements. Up to 30 people will be invited to a November retreat to actually draft the plan.

Father John M. Mulligan, vicar general, said the process will help individual parishes and the diocese each plan, and then "get the two perspectives together to say how can we accommodate each other."

"Right from the beginning it's a col-

laborative approach," among parishes, diocesan officials and outside consultants, he said.

It will help parishes to face hard questions, Father Mulligan said.

"I don't think it (the strategic plan) will set a target for how many parishes there are going to be," Father Mulligan said. "I think a big question will be, 'Are you a vibrant parish; do you have the minimal wherewithal to be a parish?'"

The bishop's Stewardship Council had suggested developing procedures for staffing, support, and configuring of parishes in light of the increasing role of lay ministers and the declining numbers of priests, according to Father Mulligan. It also suggested exploring collaborative planning and networking.

In late June the diocese contracted with the planning conference, which taps 105 dioceses for expertise. Last fall, that planning organization presented the National Conference of Catholic Bishops with a study of 46 dioceses. Among the trends it revealed are greater interparish collaboration, sharing of resources and funding of positions, establishing of new lay ministries, and use of nonclerical leaders to run day-to-day parish operations.

Dioceses such as Fargo, N.D., and New Ulm, Minn., have faced restructuring for 20 and 15 years, respectively, according to Arthur X. Deegan, executive director of the organization, based in Clearwater,

Fla. "People have to understand that what is taking place is not because of some crisis the (Rochester) diocese is in," Deegan said. "It is not something to be afraid of."

He added that Second Vatican Council documents advised churches "to read the sign of the times and come up with appropriate actions to effectively respond to those signs of the times."

One of the organization's consultants, Franciscan Sister Catherine Schneider of Indianapolis, met July 19 with an ad hoc diocesan committee at the pastoral center to discuss vision statements and types of people to involve in the planning. Meanwhile, Father-Bud Sheets of the Archdiocese of New York met at the center with other committee members to work on projections of data, including parish finances.

The ad hoc committee members are Fathers James Schwartz and Joseph A. Hart, Dr. William Pickett (former St. John Fisher College president), Sister Mary Ann Binsack (director of diocesan Faith Development Ministry), Kathleen Cannon (coordinator of the diocesan Office of the Synod), James Rinefierd (diocesan chief financial officer), Joan Zaia (director of diocesan Information Services), and Father Mulligan.

Each parish will review and respond to the

draft to be developed in November. February is the target for putting the plan into effect, Father Mulligan said.

An overall plan was suggested by not only the Stewardship Council, but also a recent Center for Governmental Research report, Father Mulligan noted, saying questions were raised about parish reconfigurations having been more "hit and miss."

The fact that the diocese accepted the consultants' proposal for such a plan "says a lot of good things about the overall tenor of the diocese," Sister Schneider said. "To me, this speaks very highly of the efforts the diocese is making to promote collaboration and working together."

The growing shortage of priests, population shifts in the country, financial problems resulting from those movements and an increasing need to consider cultural backgrounds, have brought the need for such planning to a head, according to Deegan.

"While there is some thinking this may not have happened if a shortage of clergy hadn't developed," he said, "our own belief is that it wasn't the shortage of clergy, but an awakening of laypeople to their responsibility to their baptismal call."