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FEELING THE PINCH

Urban parishes battle the odds to preserve mission, ministries

Story by Mike Latona • Photo illustration by Matthew Scott

At a recent weekday Mass at St. Bridget's Church, Father Tony Mugavero offered an intercession for "the hungry, the cold, those who do not have shelter, those who are in trouble."

He was speaking of the population that surrounds the inner-city parish where he is pastor.

Located just north of downtown Rochester, St. Bridget's is characteristic of many city parishes throughout the diocese. They try to help those in trouble — but also have problems of their own.

These parishes are beset with mounting struggles that threaten the quantity and quality of their ministries: poverty in the neighborhoods; old churches in need of repair; limited financial resources; declining attendance; and declining number of available priests. The problems are especially felt in the three communities containing the most churches located within city boundaries: Rochester, with 34 churches; Elmira, 10; and Auburn, seven. (These figures include Eastern Rite Catholic churches.)

In June, St. Bridget's submitted a proposal to the Diocese of Rochester for a massive renovation of its 121-year-old building. According to Eric Patchke, diocesan manager of buildings and properties, the proposal calls for a roof renovation estimated at \$300,000. He added that other renovations included in the master plan could drive the total cost to more than \$1 million.

The proposal remains under consideration by diocesan officials. Although he heads a parish of just 200 families, Father Mugavero is confident that the renovation is well worth the expense.

"We have a special mission, a special reason and a special call to be here," Father Mugavero stated. "Everyone who comes to our door is thought of as a parishioner."

He added that parish membership increased by 25 families in the past year, and that \$150,000 has already been collected toward the renovation.

"A parish that begins to find itself should be allowed to go forth," the pastor said.

Father Lawrence V. Murphy, pastor at Holy Rosary Church in northwest Rochester, noted that the mere presence of a city parish enhances the quality of life in that area.

"It is a witness of stability in the neighborhood in which we live. It is a witness of Christian stability," Father Murphy said. "Our ministry is to the countless number of unchurched people in this neighborhood. A lot of stuff goes on that you don't see statistics on."

"You've got to have one big symbol for every six or seven convenience stores," added Rose Davis, Holy Rosary's pastoral associate.

Yet how do many city parishes minister effectively while waging a simultaneous struggle to keep their heads above water? The combination of practical and emotional factors, Patchke said, create a difficult decision-making process.

"If you're talking about the deterioration or relocation of an office building, those are straightforward economic decisions. However, with historic structures and houses of worship, those are decisions that go beyond economic factors," Patchke remarked.

Patchke is the initial contact person when a parish is evaluating long-term goals for its buildings. The greatest struggles, he noted, exist among city and

rural parishes because their structures are generally older. These parishes often grapple with meeting repair expenses due to financial limitations of their parishioners.

In fact, one rural church and three city structures have accounted for all four church closings in the diocese over the past three years. Holy Angels in Groveland Station, Livingston County, closed in 1994, followed by St. Aloysius in Auburn in 1995. In addition, the properties at St. John the Baptist and St. Cecilia's churches in Elmira are currently up for sale.

Another city church — Holy Redeemer, in 1985 — was the most recent church to close in Monroe County. However, comments from diocesan officials suggest that it won't be another 11 years before further church closings occur in Rochester.

"I think these are the kind of questions we're going to have a greater struggle with in the future," Patchke said.

"Many of the city parishes were built at a time when they were bursting at the seams," said Father Robert P. Ring, diocesan director of priest personnel. He pointed out that a number of Rochester city parishes fill only a small percentage of their pews on weekends.

"You just assemble the heating bills and look at

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St. Bridget's Church, Rochester

Christmas Appeal aids urban residents

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

Proponents of the Catholic Courier/Catholic Charities Christmas Appeal point out that — in spite of the annual campaign's name — the donations it generates actually are used to help people in emergency situations throughout the year.

Even so, most of the appeal funds distributed by parishes in the City of Rochester do find their way into the hands of needy people during the holiday season.

Norm Dunn at Church of the Annunciation, for example, uses the monies his parish receives

to buy food vouchers for Christmas baskets.

"We have a big drive for Thanksgiving baskets that we give out," Dunn explained. But Christmas arrives right on the heels of Thanksgiving, and the parish has a lot of single parents and seniors on fixed incomes.

"That's where we really need the extra help," Dunn said.

Sister Mary Dismas, RSM, likewise uses the bulk of her appeal allocation for Christmas baskets she distributes through the clothing room and used furniture programs at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish.

"I do baskets for people that I have delivered

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