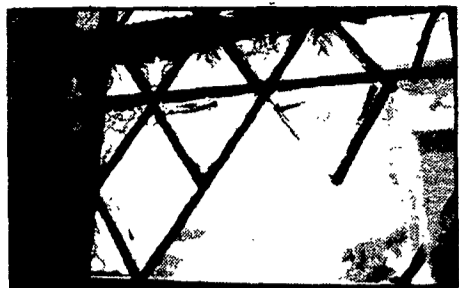


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Many of the windows at St. Bridget's church have suffered heavy damage.

City parishes

Continued from page 1

how much money we're spending on heating empty space," said Father Ring, who also serves on the diocesan configuration team. The group's purpose, he said, is to determine staffing adjustments when a priest leaves a parish.

Father Ring added that the responsibilities of a city pastor have increased at the same time the number of diocesan priests has decreased.

"The priest's role has ended up absorbing a variety of other things — maintenance, fundraising," Father Ring said. "You can't keep all of the buildings open, and have enough people and financial resources, to truly be in the neighborhood and aggressively serve the needs of the people."

Father Robert F. O'Neill, pastor at Church of the Annunciation, said church closings are the only practical solution he sees when all factors are considered.

"I think it's got to be done," Father O'Neill said. "It isn't just a priest shortage — it's a people shortage. I have a strong feeling that there are too many churches."

Although Father O'Neill declined to name the churches that might close, he did acknowledge that his own parish in northeast Rochester is symptomatic of the statistical problems facing other city churches. He noted that an average total of 650 people attend weekend Masses at Annunciation, compared to 2,300 worshippers just 20 years ago.

"I bury 60 people every year and baptize six or seven," Father O'Neill remarked.

If parishes wish to keep their doors open, he continued, they must be willing to share resources with neighboring parishes. He used priest staffing as an example, pointing out that he became sacra-

mental assistant at St. Philip Neri Church after Father Richard J. Shatzel left that parish last June and was not replaced by a resident priest.

Father O'Neill added that most of the parishioners at Annunciation are prepared for further changes.

"I've told them that I might be their last resident pastor," Father O'Neill said. "If they think everything is going to go on the way it always has, they're going to be very hurt."

Holy Family Church, located on the west side of Rochester, is facing a similar dilemma with priest staffing. Its pastor, Father Michael J. Schramel, is leaving the weekend of Nov. 30-Dec. 1 to become pastor at St. Ambrose Church in Irondequoit. He will fill the vacancy left by Father Melvin H. Walczak, who went on a leave of absence this fall.

Father Schramel will not be replaced with a resident priest at Holy Family. Instead, parish administration is being handled on a temporary basis by Deacon Pat Shanley. A permanent pastoral administrator will likely be appointed in June.

Norbert Robach, a Holy Family parishioner for 31 years, said the recent development has caused "a little apprehension" about his parish's future.

"In the next five or 10 years, some city churches are going to close. But right now, I'm not worrying about it (at Holy Family) and I can't say I've heard other parishioners worry about it," Robach said. "You have to have faith. I know the Lord will provide for us one way or another."

Despite some difficult realities, not all talk of the future at city parishes is so ominous in tone. For example, St. Mary's Church in Auburn recently launched a \$1 million renovation project.

Father Robert J. Schrader, pastor, said he had asked St. Mary's members if they'd rather dissolve the parish when he originally announced that an extensive renovation was needed.

"They overwhelmingly said, 'We want to stay here,'" Father Schrader said. He added that the parish has already collected \$350,000 for the project.

With a 2,000-family membership, St. Mary's is the largest parish in the city of Auburn. However, Father Schrader acknowledged that parishioners at smaller Auburn churches have been concerned about their futures following the closing of St. Aloysius.

Father Paul J. Ryan feels that the remaining five Roman Catholic church buildings in the city will remain open in some capacity. He added, though, that such changes as rotating weekend Masses may loom in the near future.

"We don't want to close anything, but we might not be able to use every building every weekend," said Father Ryan, pastor of the Cayuga Team Ministry cluster.

Father Ryan also heads the consolidation committee for Cayuga County churches. He said that the most vital part of any major change is fostering a mood of communication and cooperation.

"We're ahead of the game in that we're discussing these issues with our people," Father Ryan said.

"If it's explained realistically to them, they have a head on their shoulders and they can understand," Father Schrader said.

On the other hand, Father Ring maintained that parishioners at a former two-church cluster on Rochester's west side — St. Anthony of Padua and Holy Apostles — did not give their partnership a sufficient chance to flourish. The cluster, begun in 1993, was dissolved this past June.

"If you're using a two- or three-year time frame to judge if something is going to be successful, you're not being fair," Father Ring said.

Father Murphy at Holy Rosary agreed that it's difficult to get the laity to respond to necessary changes.

"We have elderly that are tired, and young that are not interested. Here, you have a tough time getting leadership," Father Murphy said.

Father Ring pointed out that many city parishes are supported by longtime parishioners who have moved to the suburbs. Yet these supporters' resistance to change can have permanently damaging effects.

"There's an intense desire of the people who grew up in a city parish to preserve the buildings, programs and worship exactly as they've always known it," Father Ring said. "This so compromises the parish's ability to adapt and change to the needs of the neighborhood that the parish's very future is jeopardized."

In a limited number of cases, struggling city parishes can turn to the diocese for financial assistance, according to Kathleen Cannon, director of diocesan Parish Support Ministries. She said that the diocesan Urban Services department — which operates under the umbrella of Parish Support Ministries — provided \$92,000 last year in Thanks Giving Appeal monies to fund ministry programs in urban parishes.

But the diocese can only go so far in guaranteeing a solid future for these

parishes, Cannon said.

"It is the responsibility of the local church, urban or otherwise, to articulate a vision of a vibrant, vital faith community and to identify the existing and potential resources," Cannon stated. "Once the local church has determined how it might best ensure a vital presence of the church, it is up to the diocese to determine how and to what degree it can best support the vision and model articulated by the local church."

James Rinefierd, the diocese's chief financial officer, said parishes should not pin hopes for their survival on the diocese.

"The diocese has a limited number of financial and personnel resources," Rinefierd said. He added that it would be difficult for the diocese "to ensure that each parish could be saved, or to commit that all parishes wouldn't change."

One option that seems to be taking hold is for city parishes to form stronger working relationships with suburban parishes. Earlier this month, social-ministry committees from 42 urban and suburban parishes in Monroe County met to discuss how they can better share their resources and talents.

This may come as hopeful news to Ross Lanzafame, parish council president at St. Philip Neri. He pointed out that city parishes such as his simply can't support themselves without some kind of outside help. Lanzafame went on to suggest that suburban parishes, with greater financial resources, continue to keep their minds open to the plight of city parishes.

"Maybe this is a prime opportunity to take some of the excess from suburban parishes and put it into subsidies for city parishes and help keep them open. That should be a part of what we are as church," Lanzafame stated. "Then maybe we wouldn't have to have people in our neighborhood coming in and spending what little money they have on bingo."

Father James E. Boyle, pastor at Perinton's St. John of Rochester Church, noted that his parish assists Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church — located on Rochester's east side — through food and clothing donations. However, he added that suburban parishioners, while recognizing the importance of keeping city parishes open, must also be convinced their financial support will be worth the sacrifice.

"We have over 200 eucharistic ministers, and there are a number of (city) churches that don't even have that many people coming," Father Boyle said. "People in the suburbs say, 'Why are they keeping their doors open?'"

But Father Mugavero pointed out that the value of his city parish cannot be measured by the number of people in the pews and dollars in the collection basket.

"As I go from the parking lot to the front door, I can have five people interact with me about different needs. And that's never going to be tallied," Father Mugavero said.

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