

Closed

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"Houses of God, like the houses of men, are erected for convenience, and can be sold, razed, etc. also for reasons of convenience," Father McNamara remarked. "Even though they have served for years and become technically consecrated, or at last hallowed as holy places, they can still be disposed of."

Father McNamara noted that most parishes suppressed in the diocese were chapels in rural settings or ethnic parishes.

Are further closings around the corner? Planning groups have explored the issue during the Pastoral Plan for the New Millennium process, said William Pickett, diocesan director of the Office of Planning.

Yet none of the first groups to complete their proposals in the three-year process opted to close parishes. Groups in southern Cayuga County and northern Steuben County instead chose to form clusters.

Citing these examples, Pickett emphasized the diocese does not expressly seek to close parishes. When a parish does face that possibility, he said, the top priority is to preserve a vibrant faith community.

"To be able to say, 'I go to church with these people' rather than 'I go to church there,' puts us in a better position to deal with the situation," Pickett said.

Vitality factors

Recent church closings in the Rochester Diocese show that financial difficulty, a dwindling or shifting parish population and a declining number of available priests weigh heavily into these decisions.

In Elmira, for instance, Father Connor is the only full-time priest for a three-church cluster that totals about 900 families.

"It's not practical," said Precht, who served on a cluster strategic planning committee that in 1994 resolved to close St. John the Baptist and St. Cecilia. "We can't maintain three churches. Is that our real mission? We have to change with the times. The neighborhood has changed, and we just don't have a need for three churches in the area."

The decision to close St. Theresa's in Rochester resulted from a parish vote four months before the closing Mass in June 1997. The parish cited declining membership and shrinking revenue.

St. Aloysius in Auburn had petitioned Bishop Matthew H. Clark to close the parish following a vote by the parish council. Members pointed to decreasing membership, an aging parish population and revenues not keeping pace with expenses.

Father McNamara noted that such ethnic parishes as St. Theresa's — which served

a Polish population — struggle to survive as the immigration rate has slowed.

"Since they gradually became English-speaking, their original usefulness ran out," Father McNamara pointed out. He added that this trend began to intensify "in the postwar period when the old national neighborhoods broke up."

Among these parishes, he said, were St. Patrick's in Dansville (Irish, closed in 1961); Our Lady of the Assumption in Mount Morris (Italian, closed in 1961); St. Lucy's in Rochester (Italian, closed in 1975); and Holy Redeemer in Rochester (German, closed in 1985).

Auxiliary Bishop Dennis W. Hickey, a native of St. Patrick's in Dansville, recalled that parish's closing.

"There was a great deal of regret, anger, whatnot on the part of the St. Patrick's people," Bishop Hickey said. "(But) it was just unreasonable to have two parishes within two blocks of each other, in a town that never got bigger than 5,000 people."

Jeannie Raisbeck, who grew up in St. Lucy's Parish on Rochester's west side, said that a decreasing Italian population in the St. Lucy's neighborhood forced that church's closing.

"People were moving out, going to their own churches in the 'burbs," she said.

But when the parish was suppressed, Raisbeck added, many people felt that a major part of their lives had vanished.

"You have a sense of history, a sense of belonging. It's like your family," she said.

The same sense of attachment has caused six churches in southern Cayuga County to seek a way to stay open — even with only one full-time priest available after June 1999.

"These are small communities where the churches were built and where the parishioners' lives took root," said Debbie Patrick, planning group chair.

Although suppressing one or more churches was discussed, the southern Cayuga group opted to form a cluster combining St. Patrick's, Aurora; St. Joseph's, Cayuga; Our Lady of the Lake, King Ferry; St. Patrick's, Moravia; St. Bernard's, Scipio Center; and St. Michael's, Union Springs. The group's five-year plan calls for an eventual rotation process with Masses in three church buildings on alternate weekends.

"Certainly, we see the potential for success and happiness," Patrick said. At the same time, she said "there's always the possibility" for churches in the cluster to close.

Bishop Clark hinted at the same consequence in a letter to Patrick confirming the southern Cayuga group's plan. The bishop stressed that this approach must not put a strain on finances and priest personnel, and that worshipers must be willing to attend other churches in the cluster.

"It is essential that the planning group realize that such a rotation cannot be continued if it inhibits the vitality of the worshipping community," Bishop Clark wrote.

Bishop has final say

The ultimate decision to close a parish rests with the diocesan bishop, according to Canon 515.2 in the Code of Canon Law.

"The diocesan Bishop alone can establish, suppress or alter parishes. He is not to establish, suppress or noticeably alter them until he has consulted the council of priests."

Yet the steps leading to this point are not so clearly defined, noted Father Kevin McKenna, diocesan chancellor. He said that some bishops may move to close parishes based on their own conclusions, whereas other bishops might allow parishes to perform vitality studies and make their own recommendations.

The Rochester Diocese falls into the latter category, Father McKenna said. When a parish in this diocese does close, "The hope is that the faith community on its own will come to that conclusion," he remarked.

On the other hand, according to published reports, some U.S. archdioceses have recently launched plans for large numbers of church closings: Milwaukee in 1997 called for 40 fewer parishes; a Detroit realignment from 1988 to 1990 caused 35 parishes to close; and Louisville in 1995 targeted 11 parishes for closure.

In the Boston Archdiocese, Cardinal Bernard F. Law said in March 1998 that a new pastoral plan may require the closing of up to 60 parishes in the next decade.

And in the Pittsburgh Diocese, a process begun in 1992 caused 25 to 30 parishes to close immediately, followed by additional closings, noted Father Lawrence DiNardo, diocesan vicar for canonical services.

Father DiNardo told the *Catholic Courier* that the Pittsburgh Diocese has been reduced from "slightly over 300 parishes" in 1992 to its current total of 218. He said that diocesan parishes were asked to do a self-study beginning in 1989, with the understanding that several would have to close.

"We made it clear that it would not be business as usual," said Father DiNardo, who also is president of the Canon Law Society of America.

When a parish is officially slated for suppression, Father McNamara noted that most parish corporations choose to sell the existing building rather than have it razed. Canon law states that buyers are subject to diocesan approval.

In such cases as Rochester's Holy Redeemer and St. Lucy's, the buyer can be a church of a different denomination. St. Theresa's in Rochester, meanwhile, actually sold its building to another Catholic

parish last year, when St. Bridget's Parish acquired the property rather than make costly repairs to its former building.

Father McNamara noted other interesting evolutions for former church buildings: The former St. Fechan's church building in Chili, closed in 1954, is now an exhibit at the Genesee Country Museum in Mumford. And Holy Name Church in Groveland, closed in 1993, was presented as a gift to a nearby day-care center in 1995.

Although buyers for Elmira's St. John the Baptist and St. Cecilia have yet to emerge, Father Connor said that funds from sale of the churches and other buildings on those properties will be put toward construction of a new parish center across the street from Ss. Peter and Paul Church.

Carrying forward

Despite the loss of their churches, Father Connor hopes that the St. John's/St. Cecilia worshipers will continue their affiliation with the Eastside community by attending Mass at Ss. Peter and Paul. Yet he also understands that this change has prompted some difficult decisions.

"We're really trying to respect where people might be with their feelings," Father Connor said.

Walt Rohde of St. John the Baptist said that the new arrangement has proven unacceptable for some people.

"Some people are so upset over it, they chose to go to another church," Rohde said.

Yet Rohde and St. Cecilia's Ann Briggs, both on a planning committee for next month's closing Masses, said they plan to attend Ss. Peter and Paul.

"I'm not going to desert. I'm going to stay," Briggs remarked. "I was born and raised there. I have a tremendous loyalty to the east side."

Raisbeck pointed out that loyalty doesn't have to cease with the closing of a church. More than 20 years after St. Lucy's closed, she noted that reunions every five years attract several hundred people, and former St. Lucy's members have an active men's group and women's group.

Father Conrad Sundholm, former pastor of St. Aloysius, pointed out that a parish's vitality can indeed live on.

"We are St. Aloysius Parish! We live!" he wrote in a program for the parish's closing Mass. "You and I must keep the book open by continuing to live the story of a life of faith that comes to us not so much in a building, as in a heart."

After St. Aloysius' closing, Father Sundholm said, nearly 90 St. Aloysius parishioners registered at Auburn's Holy Family Church, where he is also pastor.

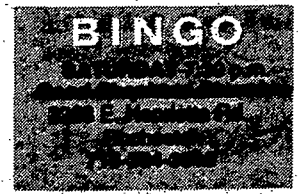
"They moved almost as a body to Holy Family. There was that spirit of (being) a St. Aloysius person, and it was maintained."

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