

CONTINUED...

Convent

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bideau commented.

She said the parish chose to demolish the convent rather than have it become a target for vandalism. No demolition date has been set.

Difficult decisions

According to Father Kevin McKenna, diocesan chancellor, a parish pastor/administrator is required to meet with resident sisters when contemplating changes to a convent. These sisters, in turn, consult with their congregational leadership. Proposed changes must then be submitted for approval to Father McKenna's office.

Factors to consider include impact on the parish if women religious leave the convent; impact on the sisters if the parish wishes to use the building for another purpose; and financial implications for both the parish and religious congregations.

Parishes retain funds from any sale or rental agreement. Father McKenna added that selling a convent is more complicated than is leasing one, due to canon law procedures regarding alienation of property.

Father McKenna added that the pastor — with the approval of diocesan officials — is the final authority regarding use of a convent on his church's property.

"They are parish convents. We do not own them," acknowledged Sister Mary Ann Binsack, RSM, a councilor with the Rochester Sisters of Mercy.

Sister Jeanne Reichart, RSM, archivist for the Rochester Mercy sisters, said members of her order currently occupy 14 parish convents — down from a peak number of 29 convents in 1966.

And Sister Peg Brennan, SSJ, a councilor on the Rochester Sisters of St. Joseph leadership team, noted that her order currently occupies 16 parish convents. Sisters of St. Joseph have lived in 64 convents during their history in Rochester, she added.

Nuns may end up leaving a convent when the parish and religious order deem it's no longer cost-effective, Patchke said.

"A lot of times, older buildings are more expensive to heat, and general maintenance could present a whole plethora of problems," Patchke said.

And closing off parts of a convent is not always a viable option, he observed.

"You would still have to maintain a certain amount of heat," he explained.

Sister Binsack said the Mercy sisters will vacate three convents later this year — St. Patrick's in Owego, St. Louis in Pittsford and Immaculate Conception in Ithaca — due to low numbers of resident sisters in those buildings.

"It's hard having a convent for two people. You begin to look at your per-sister cost," Sister Binsack said.

Sister Brennan said the Rochester Sisters of St. Joseph have left eight convents in the past four years: Our Mother of Sor-



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Sister Lucy Jean, CSC, lived at the St. Francis de Sales convent building since 1986 on Exchange Street, Geneva. The last nun to reside in the building, she moved out in February.

rows, Greece; St. Mary's, Canandaigua; St. Casimir, Elmira; St. John the Evangelist, Spencerport; St. Joseph, Wayland; Holy Rosary, Rochester; St. Francis de Sales, Geneva; and Nativity, Brockport.

"In most cases it's very mutual (between the pastor and congregation). Everybody knows when the handwriting is on the wall," Sister Brennan said.

Such was the case at St. Francis de Sales, where Sister Lucy Jean, CSC, was the last nun in residence as of January. She moved out a month later, and now lives in an apartment in Geneva while continuing to serve as St. Francis' pastoral associate.

"I knew it had to be done, and I have a lot of common sense that you can't keep a big home like that open for one person," she remarked. "I knew this would come one day."

Even so, Sister Jean said it's unusual to live in an apartment after spending her other 47 years of religious life in convents.

Because the idea of displacing nuns is so delicate, Patchke noted, parish communities approach these situations cautiously.

"The perception of saying to a sister, 'You have to leave your home and find a new place to live' — parishes are disinclined to do that. That's a tough call," Patchke said.

Sister Brennan pointed out that the emotion of such a move can sweep throughout the parish.

"It's not so much the sisters," Sister Brennan said. "Very often the parishioners are sad because it will end the presence of the sisters among them. It's part of their heritage."

Creative alternatives

In most cases, convents are put to practical use. One such example is Holy Family, with its mix of lay people and women religious in the 18-room convent. One resident, Doug Snyder, said his living situation may seem unusual to his friends but is fine with him.

"I feel like we're brothers and sisters. We pick on each other fairly regularly," said Snyder, 29.

At St. James Church in Irondequoit, seven nuns share the parish convent with young residents from the Andrew's Center foster-care program. Youngsters in the program have stayed from one night to seven years, according to Sister Kathleen Kolmer, RSM, program director.

Sister Kolmer noted that the program began at the St. Andrew's Church convent and moved to St. James Parish 10 years ago. She observed that some sisters in the St. James convent had initial reservations about living with small children, but that the transition "went better than expected." In fact, the nuns often interact with the children, allowing them to act out their commitment to service without even leaving home, she said.

"The beauty is that the parish is offering a social-justice service when they allow their buildings to be used. Think of how many lives you touch," said Sister Kolmer, who also lives at the convent.

In the same vein, Sister Binsack noted, Mercy sisters who live at Brighton's Our Lady of Lourdes convent share their space with the Mercy Center with the Aging, an agency that specializes in education and advocacy for older adults, and trains caregivers.

Meanwhile, four Sisters of St. Joseph moved out of Rochester's Holy Rosary convent early this year to make way for Melita House, a program for young impoverished mothers and their children.

"If (a convent) can be used for ministry, then that comes first for us," Sister Brennan said.

Among the other convents that house ministries are St. Charles Borromeo in Greece, now home to the Borromeo Prayer Center; Our Lady of Mercy in Greece, now an ARC group home; St. Augustine in Rochester, now the location of

Catholic Family Center's Women's Place; and St. Monica's in Rochester, site of Sojourner House. In addition, such convents as St. John the Evangelist on Rochester's Humboldt Street and St. John the Evangelist in Spencerport have been transformed into office space.

Rectories evolve

The quest to fill unused parish property is not limited to convents. For instance, the rectory building at the former St. Bridget's Church has been used since 1977 for Bethany House, a ministry for homeless women and their children.

And, William Pickett, director of the diocesan Office of Planning, said the diocesanwide parish planning process has frequently focused on rectories.

When clusters have been formed or proposed, he said, plans have generally called for cluster priests to live in one rectory. The vacant rectories are designated as office space and meeting rooms for lay staff.

"There are more and more positions and programs, and they need to be centered somewhere," Pickett said. Otherwise, a priest may not be able to "go downstairs and get a snack without dropping in on a meeting."

Unused rectory space, similar to convent space, is usually slated for some sort of community service effort.

"The preference, in about all cases, is to find a use compatible with church property," Pickett said.

One such example is Rochester's St. Philip Neri Church. Father Timothy Horan, pastor, is seeking a tenant for a four-bedroom facility on the second floor of the rectory, which hasn't had a resident priest since 1996.

The apartment is being offered at a low monthly rate of \$500, preferably to a diocesan employee who "has sacrificed for the diocese" by working for a low wage, Father Horan said. The first floor is currently used as office space.

"It's a help to the parish financially, and it helps to keep a light shining by having somebody live there," said Father Horan, who resides at St. Andrew's Church, where he is also pastor.

In the Southern Tier, Father Patrick Connor, pastor of Eastside Catholic Parish, is sharing his living space for the summer with three players from the Elmira Pioneers Class A baseball team. They live in the rectory on the former St. Cecilia Church's property. In addition, Father Connor said, he and the Elmira Police Department have discussed using the rectory's living room as an outpost station.

Father Connor said he doesn't require rent from the ballplayers, who must get by on slim minor-league salaries. Since he already lives in the building, he explained, the athletes don't significantly add to utility expenses.

"We want to continue to assist the community in whatever way is possible," Father Connor said.

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