



File photo

St. Patrick's, Corning

Tier parish plans to close church

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

Facing a projected decline in priest availability and mounting repair expenses, All Saints Parish in Corning/Painted Post has recommended the closing of St. Patrick's Church, one of its worship sites.

The diocesan Priests' Council will review the recommendation when it meets Sept. 4; any final decision regarding a church closing must be made by Bishop Matthew H. Clark. Should the recommendation be approved, St. Patrick's will cease operation in the early fall, according to Sister of St. Joseph Joan Cawley, pastoral administrator. She added that the parish will likely organize a closing event to celebrate the church's history.

Sister Cawley said a proposal to close St. Patrick's was presented to the diocese in early August. Prior to that, both the parish's pastoral and finance councils had unanimously approved a recommendation formed by the parish's facility-usage committee.

Sister Cawley sent letters to all registered members of All Saints Parish Aug. 24 and 25 and spoke about the closing at all six weekend Masses.

"Many people, in their heart of hearts, knew it was coming. Many were wondering why it didn't come sooner," Sister Cawley said.

St. Patrick's Parish was founded in 1904, and the current church opened at 274 Denison Parkway in 1932. The church is one of four worship sites in All Saints

Parish; the others are St. Mary's, Corning; St. Vincent de Paul, Corning; and Immaculate Heart of Mary, Painted Post.

All Saints Parish is staffed by two full-time diocesan priests, Fathers Mark Miller and Donald Curtiss; and a retired priest, Father Francis Davis. Sister Cawley said diocesan officials have informed her that the parish will likely have only one full-time priest by 2004. Because canon law restricts a priest to three Sunday Masses, the Mass schedule would have to be reduced from six liturgies to three.

"Therefore, we don't need four worship sites," Sister Cawley said.

Closing St. Patrick's made the most sense, she said, for two reasons: Many parts of the structure are still affected by damage
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Who will fill Protestant robes?

While Catholics lament the ongoing vocation shortage, Protestant seminaries are generally brimming. But no one is bragging.

"We all are working on the same problems, Catholic and Protestant," said the Rev. Robert Kohler, a United Methodist Church executive in Nashville, Tenn.

Mainline Protestant denominations are experiencing clergy shortages in spots, and several officials are bracing for an all-out shortage.

"What we have is a shortage of seminary-trained clergy," particularly for Methodist pastorates, said Rev. Kohler. The irony, he noted, is that while the Methodist denomination has more candidates for ministry than ever, fewer are opting to step into pastor's robes. Instead, they are entering such specialized ministries as pastoral counseling, youth ministry, school administrative positions and chaplaincies.

Enrollment is stable in the 237 institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools, which includes Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox schools of theology. But among students graduating last spring, only 58 percent of men and 54 percent of women anticipated going into in parish ministry, the association found.

Several denominations are noting more and longer pastor vacancies, and retirements outnumbering ordinations.

"Whether there is a crisis now is unclear, but there certainly will be in the future," said Kirk Hadaway, minister for research and evaluation with the United Church of Christ based in Cleveland, Ohio.

The issues

Addressing the belief that ending the requirement of priestly celibacy would alleviate the Catholic clergy shortage, Bishop Matthew H. Clark mentioned similar shortages among Protestant denominations during his address at Planning Group Leadership Day March 31. "Protestant churches with married and female cler-

gy face the same clergy shortage as we do," he said. "The problem is the result of societal shifts and should not be blamed on Roman Catholic policies alone."

Mainline Protestants especially are dealing with such issues as a higher average age of theological students (the mean is 35) and of ordained persons; clerical salaries that can't compete with pay in other fields; and decreasing mobility of the ordained, especially the married ordained.

Some speak of a decline of respect for the ministry.

This translates, respectively, to shorter clergy careers, a movement into other fields, and critical problems for certain geographic areas and, particularly, small churches.

Although he started out in a parish of 48 members, the Rev. Val Fowler currently is pastor of Chili Presbyterian Church, with 310 members.

"It would be very devastating to my family right now" to move to such a smaller parish, attractive as that possibility may be, he testified quite candidly. "I can't afford it. They can't and I can't."

Each Protestant church — regardless of size — is responsible for paying its pastor, although a denominational office occasionally may provide support.

In what it claims to be the largest survey of congregations, representing 90 percent of worshippers, the Hartford Institute for Religion Research found that 50 percent of congregations have fewer than 100 regularly participating adults, and that 25 percent have fewer than 50. The survey represented 41 denominations and faith groups.

And a study on pastoral leadership by Duke University Divinity School's Ormond Center, expected to be published this fall, includes a troubling financial finding, according to the center's John James. The mean salary of graduate-level clergy was \$47,975, while the mean for all others with graduate degrees was a little over \$100,761.

"This is the kind of question we are grappling with," he said, "how
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