

Tioga churches restructure plan

Five parishes merging; sixth delayed by suits

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

With one alteration to its original plan, a group of several parishes in the diocese's southeast corner expect to merge by July 2003.

St. James in Waverly, St. Pius X in Van Etten, St. John the Evangelist in Newark Valley, St. Francis in Catatonk and St. Margaret Mary in Apalachin will become a single canonical parish and adopt a new name. That name is scheduled to be announced during Easter Sunday liturgies April 19-20.

St. Patrick in Owego, the sixth member of the Tioga Planning Group, is also intended to become a part of the new configuration. However, St. Patrick will remain a separate parish until sexual-abuse lawsuits involving a former St. Patrick co-pastor are settled. After those cases are resolved, St. Patrick also will be blended into the new parish.

Several lawsuits naming St. Patrick Parish and the Diocese of Rochester as defendants have been filed since late 2002. The suits detail allegations of sexual abuse by Albert H. Cason, who served as St. Patrick's co-pastor for 12 years before being removed from priestly ministry in 1985.

According to Father William Moorby, diocesan officials advised the planning group not to include St. Patrick in the new configuration until the lawsuits are resolved. He said

he does not know how long that process will take.

Father Moorby is currently the pastor at St. Patrick as well as St. John the Evangelist in Newark Valley and St. Francis in Catatonk. He will become pastor of the newly formed parish this summer while also remaining pastor at St. Patrick.

Karen Rinefierd, diocesan planning liaison for the Tioga parishes, said St. Patrick is being kept separate "to ensure that the assets of the other five parishes are protected." Although many staff positions are being blended, Rinefierd noted that the financial records of the new parish will, for now, remain separate from St. Patrick.

Otherwise, Rinefierd said, there should be very little visible deviation from the Tioga Planning Group's original goal of transforming six parishes into one canonical parish with six church buildings termed "worship sites."

Father Moorby acknowledged that the lawsuits have taken their toll on the planning group, not only scrambling plans for the new parish but also hurting St. Patrick parishioners in particular. The negative news, he said, has "stirred up issues people had" related to Cason's tenure in Owego.

"It surfaced the pain for many of the people involved; they had to relive those situations," Father Moorby said.

In order to address parishioners' feelings, Bishop Matthew H. Clark visited St. Patrick Church in March, as did Barbara Pedeville from the diocesan Office of Human Resources. Father Moorby said that despite these tough times, "the faith of the people and their willingness to work together has given us confi-



Reuters/CNS

Praying for Congo's dead

A nun prays over the grave of a massacre victim in Bunia, Congo, April 8. Up to 350 people were killed by tribal militias wielding guns and machetes in villages in northeast Congo.

dence to go forward."

Reconfiguration plans for St. Patrick and the other five Tioga-area parishes (St. Pius X is actually located in Chemung County) have grown out of the pastoral-planning process begun among the parishes in the late 1990s.

The concept of creating single parishes with multiple worship sites involves the blending of parish staffs and financial resources. It allows parish administrators to better cope with the reality of having more churches than priests in a geographic area.

"It's a way of maintaining, of keeping churches open and functioning," said William Pickett, diocesan director of planning. Whereas three priests — Father Moorby and two parochial vicars — will staff the six Tioga worship sites as of this summer, Pickett noted that diocesan projections indicate that only two priests will be available five to 10 years from now.

A similar process is being exam-

ined by planning groups in northern and western Steuben County. This approach has already been instituted in recent years by groups in southern Cayuga County and the Corning-Painted Post area of Steuben County.

Yet Pickett acknowledged that this type of reorganization does not always guarantee that all the worship sites will remain open. Three of the six original sites in southern Cayuga are no longer used, as is the case with one of the four sites in Corning-Painted Post.

Pickett attributed the Corning-Painted Post situation to expensive projected repairs in the former St. Patrick Church. In rural southern Cayuga, he said, the Catholic population was ultimately not large enough to warrant keeping all six worship sites open.

"In Tioga you have five times as many people as southern Cayuga. So I don't know that you could automatically say some of these (Tioga) churches are going to close," he said.

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