

PLANNING

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suming this process occurs for all six planning groups mentioned above, six parishes would be formed where there had been a total of 29 — a decrease of 23 parishes.

At the point of reconfiguration, all churches in the Southern Cayuga, Corning-Painted Post and Tioga groups were still used for regular Sunday worship. But even though Pickett said this model gives planning groups a better chance of keeping their buildings open, survival is not guaranteed. Buildings in both southern Cayuga County and Corning-Painted Post have closed as the issue of priest staffing continued to dog local planning groups.

"What we're telling them is, here's the problem and it's not going to go away," Pickett said.

FACING REALITY

The diocesan pastoral-planning process began under the banner Pastoral Planning for the New Millennium in 1997, when 35 groups of faith communities (parishes, campus ministries, prison ministries and hospital chapels) began meeting to plan their collective futures. Working with the diocesan Office of Planning, each group developed a set of final recommendations for a five-year period, subject to approval by Bishop Matthew H. Clark.

Planning groups are currently in their second round of five-year projections. This time, they're also being asked to make 10-year projections based on priest support expected to be available for their area. In keeping with church law, a priest is to celebrate no more than three Sunday Masses per week. Already, there are significantly fewer diocesan priests (129 not counting externs and retirees) than parishes (161), and Pickett noted the number of active priests is projected to drop to 62 by the year 2025.

During the last two decades, the diocese has attempted to address this dilemma through the process of clustering, in which one priest served two or more parishes. Those parishes also combined some staff, programs and events, but each parish maintained its own finances and parish pastoral council.

With one parish and multiple worship sites, all elements are combined. Each church building retains its original name, but the parish once represented by that building is formally dissolved.

More often than not, it appears, this model leaves newly formed parishes with more buildings than



Father Symon Peter Ntaiya, parochial vicar at Blessed Trinity, joins the procession at the beginning of Mass Sept. 14 at Hickories Park in Owego.

it can fully utilize. Case in point: During the last two years in Good Shepherd Catholic Community, St. Joseph's in Cayuga has been put up for sale, while St. Bernard's in Scipio Center and St. Patrick's in Aurora have dropped regular Sunday liturgies. This leaves St. Patrick's in Moravia, Our Lady of the Lake in King Ferry and St. Michael's in Union Springs as the only Good Shepherd worship sites currently offering weekly Sunday Mass.

Tom Collins, who currently chairs Good Shepherd's parish council/planning team, considered it a long shot in 1999 that all six churches would remain open.

"My personal opinion was that was never going to happen. It was hope against hope," Collins said, adding that with a combined Sunday attendance of 400 to 450 at the three current Sunday worship sites, Good Shepherd can't easily justify having more than one priest allocated. Father Donald Curtiss, pastor, is the only priest assigned to the parish.

In Corning-Painted Post, All Saints Parish was formed in 2001 with the sense that maintaining four worship sites might someday become a luxury, Deacon Defendorf said.

"I think it was obvious someplace had to go eventually," said Deacon Defendorf, who served for more than 20 years in the Corning-Painted Post churches. Within months of All Saints' founding, mounting re-



Following the Mass he celebrated for Blessed Trinity Parish, Bishop Matthew H. Clark speaks Sept. 14 with 10-year-old Alexis Hilliker and her 8-year-old sister, Shannon.

pair costs forced the closing of St. Patrick's Church. The parish's three remaining worship sites are St. Mary's and St. Vincent de Paul in Corning, and Immaculate Heart of Mary in Painted Post. All Saints is headed not by a priest, but a pastoral administrator — Sister of St. Joseph Joan Cawley.

Planning groups in other parts of the diocese seem to be preparing to make do with fewer worship sites. Because they are losing one of their two full-time priests, Pickett said

Western Steuben will keep all four of its churches open when it becomes a single parish in 2004, but that only two (St. Ann's, Hornell, and St. Mary's, Rexville) will continue as regular Sunday worship sites. The other two (St. Ignatius Loyola, Hornell, and St. Joachim, Canisteo) will only be used occasionally. And the Northern Steuben/Southern Livingston planning group, which also will combine four parishes in 2004, foresees eliminating two regular worship

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