

## Tioga County parish marks its 150th year

Reconfiguration of Catholic communities in Tioga County occurred during the same year that one of those worship sites — St. James the Apostle in Waverly — marked the 150th anniversary of its founding.

Observances of this milestone are being spread over a year's time. The kickoff celebration occurred July 27, with a liturgy and cookout at St. James Church. Many former parish leaders attended, and participants spent the day viewing displays of St. James memorabilia and histories as well as playing games.

A final event will take place in the summer of 2004 to coincide with the 150th-anniversary celebration of the village of Waverly, located on the New York-Pennsylvania border.

St. James Parish formed in 1853 due to an influx of Catholics in southwest Tioga County after completion of the Erie Railroad four years earlier. The parish began as a branch of the Owego Mission, and its first church was dedicated that year — at a cost of \$800.

St. James Cemetery, which is still operated by the parish, was acquired in approximately 1860. A new church went up in 1871, and St. James was incorporated as a separate parish from Owego in 1881. The current rectory was built in 1882.

In 1912 a fire completely destroyed the church. It was replaced one year later by the current building, located at 503 Clark St.

The parish opened a new school in 1954, and a nearby house was purchased and converted into a convent for the Sisters of St. Joseph who staffed the school. St. James School closed in 1988, and the convent was subsequently sold. The school building currently houses a daily Mass chapel, religious-education classes, youth-group meetings and several community organizations.

— Mike Latona

‘Who did this to us?’ It’s not a letter from the bishop saying we’re closing the church,” Pickett said. “To this point we have been able to proceed by consensus coming from the local level, and that’s what the bishop wants.”

Yet consensus is rarely the starting point in the process. “I don’t think there’s a turf war anymore. But during the process? Oh yes,” Collins observed of deliberations in the Southern Cayuga region. “People were going to lose their place of worship. My wife was involved in (planning-group meetings) and she used to come home crying.”

Deacon Defendorf said promoting optimism and communication is crucial while moving through these difficult stages. For instance, he noted that the Tioga planning group dubbed itself “Strength of Six” during its planning process. Tioga also began a combined parish bulletin in anticipation of Blessed Trinity Parish’s founding, featuring columns with such titles as “Praying Together,” “Serving Together” and “Growing Together.” In addition, Blessed Trinity drew approximately 1,000 people — including Bishop Clark as celebrant — to observe its founding Mass and picnic in Owego Sept. 14.

Now, Deacon Defendorf said, he’s seeing the same kind of collaboration in the Central Steuben Planning Group. A picnic in Bath Sept. 7 brought together 150 to 175 people representing all five faith communities, and a joint vocations-awareness effort is also under way. In addition, Kelly Howard, a first-year youth minister, is the first staff person to serve the entire planning group.

Central Steuben has one full-time priest, one part-timer and one retired priest for its five churches. Currently there are no plans to reconfigure, but Deacon Defendorf said that day is sure to come.

“When we’re told there’s going to be one priest in 2010, obviously you’ve got to do something. The more we can work together in this region, the better it’s going to go,” he said. “Those turf issues take a long time, but they have to be broken down.”

Collins, for one, feels this has already occurred in Good Shepherd Catholic Community.

“I am definitely a positive person. I would not have volunteered for the (parish) council if I thought it was going to be as bad as before,” he said.



Parishioners of the five-parish Central Steuben Planning Group join hands in prayer during a Sept. 7 Mass at Mossy Bank Park in Bath.

sites over the ensuing five years.

Decreasing use of churches is occurring in other ways as well. In Livonia and Conesus, St. Joseph and St. William are being merged into St. Matthew Parish. Both existing church buildings are closing, and will be replaced by a single new church that is under construction and projected to open by early 2004. And in the city of Rochester, St. Philip Neri — part of the City East planning group — this year closed both its parish and its church building. The final Mass at St. Philip took place in August.

### LOCAL INPUT IS VITAL

Pickett said all diocesan parishes eventually will feel the effect of the priest shortage and should gauge their futures accordingly. For now, he said, the biggest areas of con-

cern are rural parishes, which have small and scattered populations; and urban parishes, where planners must contend with sparse populations as well as the challenges posed by aging buildings, limited finances, crime and the need to address racial diversity.

Decisions will continue to be made at the planning-group level, as group officials work in conjunction with Pickett and his department’s two liaisons, Casey Lopata and Karen Rinefierd.

“The way we’ve done it is important. The issue does not become,

Daily & Sunday Scripture readings now appear on page 3.