

Four Western Maryland churches unite to form Divine Mercy Parish

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The Archdiocese of Baltimore has announced the formation of a new parish in Western Maryland whose name is closely tied to the Holy Year of Mercy.

“Divine Mercy Parish” came into existence Jan. 1, when St. Michael in Frostburg, St. Ann in Grantsville, St. Joseph in Midland and St. Peter in Westernport came together as a single faith community.

The previously independent parishes had been collaborating closely in recent years as the “Mountain Four,” led by a single pastor and sharing resources such as common religious education and youth ministry programs.

Father Edward Hendricks, who became pastor of the Mountain Four in 2012, will continue as pastor of Divine Mercy Parish. In recent years, parish leaders had been moving in the direction of uniting the churches, he said, unanimously agreeing in April to pursue the formation of a single parish.

Parishioners at all four sites were surveyed about what name they wanted for the new parish. Eight suggestions were submitted to Archbishop William E. Lori, who selected “Divine Mercy Parish.”

Archbishop Lori said the name is appropriate since the parish is being formed during the Holy Year of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis and because mercy has been a principal theme of the pontiff’s ministry.

“Mercy is what attracts us to Christ and the church,” Archbishop Lori said, “when we realize the Lord is full of gentleness and we can access him through the church.” Archbishop Lori commended Father Hendricks and the leadership team at the parish for developing a collaborative plan for the future.

Father Hendricks said many people in the pews won’t notice much of a change now that the single parish arrangement has been formalized. All four church buildings will remain open, he said, and the Mass schedules will remain the same. Having the finances under one entity will simplify bookkeeping, he said.



CR graphic /Robert Thompson

Diane Barr, chancellor of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, noted that the new parish’s

mailing address will be in Frostburg, where all previously existing sacramental church records will be held.

Going forward, a new set of sacramental registers will be established for the parish, she said, which will identify Divine Mercy as the parish where the sacraments are administered while also indicating the specific church where they take place.

St. Michael currently has approximately 750 registered families. There are 125 families at St. Ann, 100 at St. Joseph and 300 at St. Peter.

St. Ann is located in Garrett County, with the other churches located in Allegany County.

Father Hendricks said population in the region has declined in recent decades as employment opportunities have diminished. While the new parish has a vibrant youth ministry, it also has a large senior population.

“The people here jump in to do whatever they need to do,” said Father Hendricks, who receives assistance with weekend Masses from Capuchin Franciscan Father Eric Gauchat of Our Lady of the Mountains in Cumberland. “I think they have a comfort level of going to any of the churches in our parish.”

The pastor said parishes of the region have been involved in collaborative planning since 1992. The move to a unified faith community was a gradual one, he said, and doesn’t represent an abrupt change.

“We’ve listened to people’s thoughts and concerns,” he said. “Not every person loves this idea, but the vast majority welcome it.”

Father Hendricks observed that in the past, circuit-riding priests ministered to the people within his parish’s boundaries. That continues today in a different form, he said.

“Now we’re using cars,” he said, noting that he puts more than 20,000 miles on his car annually.

Mary Rita McKinley, a member of the Divine Mercy Parish transition team who served as a parish corporator at St. Joseph, called it an exciting time for Catholics of the area.

“It’s going to present more opportunities,” she said. “We’ll be able to take the best of what each parish brings.”

The new parish is preparing a special celebration of the Feast of Divine Mercy, April 3.

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Erik Zygmunt contributed to this story.